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"I Told Them I Want to Speak Chinese!" The Struggle of UK Students to Negotiate Language Identities While Studying Chinese in China

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ABSTRACT: *This article leverages interview data from students of Chinese who enrolled at a UK university but pursued a period of study abroad in China, aiming to delve into their negotiation of language identities during their overseas experience. By employing Block's structural model in our discourse analysis, this research reveals the dynamic interplay between agency and structure, shedding light on the intricate process of language learning and identity formation. The findings underscore that structural contexts are integral to shaping students' agency, highlighting specific structural spheres that pose challenges to their development of Chinese language and multilingual identities. These spheres encompass the linguistic and cultural dominance of English as well as Chinese hospitality practices. Rooted in their habitus, participants' preconceived notions of the Chinese language and cultural aspects influence their journey, yielding either positive or negative impacts. Furthermore, participants' backgrounds and prior language learning experiences significantly contribute to their identity development. In advocating for a comprehensive approach, this study emphasises the integration of both agency and structural contexts as necessary to fully comprehend the intricate process of identity development.*

Keywords: Mandarin Chinese, language identity, study abroad, structure and agency, multilingual identity

1. INTRODUCTION

This article delves into the intricate realm of language identity negotiation among students enrolled in a UK university's undergraduate programme, studying Mandarin Chinese while abroad in China. The investigation not only scrutinises the process of identity negotiation but also examines the underlying factors that shape this complex process.

The study aligns with Block's (2021) contention, which highlights a prevalent focus on agency within language and identity research while disregarding the role of structural elements in shaping identity development. Agency pertains to an individual's ability to act within a given context, while structure encompasses broader societal patterns framing this context (Block, 2021). By leveraging Block's (2014, 2021) discussions on structure and agency in second language identity, the study aims to decipher students' narratives about their study abroad experiences. Specifically, it delves into how structural aspects influence the formation of participants' language identities and examines their agency in navigating diverse structural contexts.

Block (2021) provides a comprehensive model of structures encompassing spheres that intricately shape our lives: Time, environmental, physical/spatial, neurobiological, deep-level social, institutional, sociocultural, embodied/psycho-cognitive, and multimodal communicative event spheres (further elaborated in Section 4). Among these, time emerges as a pivotal structuring element significantly influencing various spheres. The interactions among these spheres collectively form a complex web (Block, 2021). The study thus aims to unravel the intricate interplay of structural elements as students navigate their Chinese language or multilingual identities, ultimately shaping their identity and agency. By considering the broader 'physical, spatial, temporal, social, interactional, institutional, political, and historical circumstances' (Young and Astarita, 2013, p. 177) of the study abroad context, the study aspires to contribute to the existing understanding of language identities.

Furthermore, this study is motivated by the relative paucity of research on Anglophone or European students studying Chinese in China, despite an abundance of study abroad research focusing on English language learners (e.g., Benson *et al.*, 2012; Jackson, 2008; Jang, 2020; Matsumura, 2022; McKay and Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000; Sung, 2019). The global dynamics of international student flows partially explain this dearth. For instance, Börjesson (2017) analysis of international student data in 2010 identifies three main poles within the global landscape: the Pacific pole characterised by market logic and English dominance, the Central European pole marked by proximity logic and shared German and Slavic languages, and the French/Iberian pole governed by colonial logic and shared French, Spanish, and Portuguese languages due to historical colonial affiliations. Notably, China, with a higher count of outgoing students than incoming, dominates the East Asian region, sending a substantial number of students abroad (Börjesson, 2017). However, China's emergence as a prime choice for international students due to its distinct linguistic attributes, elevated university rankings, and economic advancement (Ahmad and Shah, 2018) underscores the need for a close examination of students' learning experiences in the Chinese context. In 2018, mainland China accommodated 492,185 international students from 196 countries across 1,004 higher education institutions; however, by 2022, the number decreased to 444,716, primarily due to the

impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (MOE, 2019, 2022). While research on student mobilities to China is expanding, studies like (e.g., Dervin *et al.*, 2018; Du, 2015, 2018; Jin, 2017, 2020; Jin and Dervin, 2017; Song and Xia, 2021) have explored the identity development of students by reflecting their experiences of studying in China, highlighting their interactions with linguacultural resources. While acknowledging the contextual influence, these studies have not explicitly delved into the impact of structural elements on participants' identity development. The present study addresses this gap by applying Block's (2021) model of structure to a relatively unexplored group: students of Chinese studying in China in relation to their language identity.

2. STUDYING CHINESE IN UK UNIVERSITIES

This study delves into the experiences of students enrolled in a UK university programme that focuses on studying Chinese and includes a year abroad component. Historically, the study of China and Chinese language in the UK, Europe, and the US emerged within the broader context of 'Orientalism' (Said, 1978). Universities began offering courses in 'Oriental studies,' encompassing countries and cultures ranging from the eastern Mediterranean to China and Japan. Casas-Tost and Rovira-Esteva (2009) identified the creation of an orientalist image surrounding the Chinese language, characterised by myths and misconceptions. These misconceptions included ideas of an 'absence of grammar', a monosyllabic nature (involving a one-to-one correspondence between word, character, and syllable), language universality (the notion of written Chinese characters serving as a universal means of communication both in and beyond China), and an essentially 'ideographic' character. Xiang (2018, p. 23) further argued that 'knowledge about the orient was necessary in order to subjugate it, not because its traditions were worth knowing for their own sake', highlighting the foundational orientalising sentiment within the post-war Anglophone academy's development of Sinology. Nonetheless, the perception and significance of Chinese studies have undergone a substantial transformation. Mandarin has firmly established itself as a pivotal language within UK higher education and schools, alongside languages like French, Spanish, German, and Arabic (Tinsley, 2019; UCML, 2018). This rise suggests a significant cultural shift, with the Chinese language evolving from being viewed as esoteric and marginal to becoming mainstream and significant. Corresponding to this growing interest in Mandarin, many UK universities now offer Chinese language courses as comprehensive degree programmes or elective modules (Polisca *et al*., 2019). These courses, typically spanning around four years, include a year of study in China. This study aims to explore how Chinese language students negotiate their language identities in relation to their experiences during their year abroad.

3. SECOND LANGUAGE IDENTITY AND MULTILINGUAL IDENTITY

The pivotal role of sociolinguistic competence in second language acquisition is increasingly recognised, particularly in shaping linguistic identity and social engagement (Regan *et al.*, 2009). However, the exploration of 'language identity' within the context of study abroad remains relatively limited (Cots *et al.*, 2021). Benson *et al.* (2013, p. 28) describe second language identity as, 'any facet of an individual's identity linked to their proficiency or application of a second language.' Based on their interviews with Hong Kong students studying abroad, they categorise second language identity into three facets:

(1) **Identity-related aspects of second language competence**: This involves the development of socio-pragmatic competence, enabling individuals to function adeptly in socio-linguistically contexts and project intended identities.
(2) **Linguistic self-concept**: This encompasses students' self-perceptions as language learners and users, including beliefs about language learning and competence, affiliations to languages, and general language ideologies.
(3) **Second-language-mediated aspects of personal competence**: This captures students' sense of self-reliance and agency, factoring in their intercultural competence in intercultural encounters.

These elements of language identity are intertwined and evolve as students progress in their language learning journey.

Simultaneously, there's a growing emphasis on a 'multilingual turn' in language learning (Fielding, 2021; Fisher *et al.*, 2020; May, 2014), highlighting students' multilingual capabilities and evolving linguistic identities. According to Fisher *et al.* (2020), learners with multilingual identities perceive language learning as a means to comprehend their own multilingual capabilities and others' perceptions of them. Developing a multilingual identity can also positively influence learners' learning of additional languages, motivating them to enhance their proficiency in these languages (Henry, 2017). Fielding (2021) advocates a multilingual identity approach, where learners view themselves as emerging multilinguals, with language teaching and learning to facilitate better mutual understanding. Distinguishing between 'plurilingual' and 'multilingual', Soulé *et al.* (2023) argue that plurilingual identity emphasises an individual's dynamic ability to merge or draw from various linguistic origins. In our study, the primary focus centres on participants' identities as users and learners of Chinese, along with their willingness to nurture the development of multilingual skills. It is important to note that students' linguistic choices are often influenced by a prevailing monolingual ideology that perceives languages as separate entities. Nevertheless, this traditional perspective contrasts sharply with

'translanguaging' practices observed in everyday scenarios, where individuals seamlessly blend languages, symbols, and modalities to communicate coherently (Zhu and Gao, 2021).

4. IDENTITY CHALLENGES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING DURING STUDY ABROAD

Study abroad experiences offer a range of influences on students' identity development, as these experiences inherently exhibit heterogeneity. Various factors – such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and socioeconomic status – contribute to shaping students' self-perceptions, particularly within diverse linguistic contexts (Iino, 2006; Kubota, 2016). While some studies (e.g., Mitchell *et al*., 2017) emphasise students' agency in their language interactions, others delve into broader dimensions of their identities. Aveni (2005), for instance, underscores learner-internal factors such as self-attitudes, attitudes towards the second language, and the language-learning milieu, alongside anticipation of communicative outcomes. Moreover, Aveni integrates factors from the social-environmental context, focusing on behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics of interlocutors. Similarly, Mitchell and Güvendir (2021) refer to the language affiliations that remain flexible and influenced by personal factors, cultural values, relationships, and the practical significance of globally recognised languages. A crucial consideration is the attitude of the host culture, which can either hinder or enhance positive interactions. Dervin and Layne (2013) discovered that in the Finnish higher education landscape, international and exchange students were often 'othered' by entrenched Finnish conventions, leaving little room for dialogue or negotiation. Genuine, unconditional hospitality (Derrida, 2000) is unattainable because hosts inherently retain some power and control. The result is conditional hospitality and an underlying sense of otherness that emphasises the foreigner's outsider status.

When contextualising the study abroad experience, it is pivotal to perceive it as a multifaceted construct, encompassing a broad spectrum of economic structures and specific international dynamics embedded in social practices. Within this framework, the social structure takes on various forms, presenting itself as an active entity with which students must engage to realise their objectives. Block (2021) delves deeper into this intricate tapestry, illustrating how various structural forces converge in the complex process of identity formation, a subject that is explored more extensively in the subsequent section.

5. STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN (SECOND) LANGUAGE IDENTITY

The intricate relationship between structure and agency plays a pivotal role in language learning. Although agency exists within a structural context, individuals navigate this framework, with their actions shaped by the inherent

opportunities and constraints. Norton (2013) highlights this dynamic interaction between agency and structural conditions, underscoring that neither exclusively dominates.

Language learners, leveraging their agency, possess the potential to overcome initial challenges, reshape interactions, and subsequently redefine their identities. This allows them not only to surmount barriers but also position themselves with empowering perspectives, enhancing their communication. Over time, agency has gained prominence as a foundational concept within second language acquisition, with its interconnectedness with identity becoming increasingly evident. Such a viewpoint champions the active role of language learners, recognising their capacity to make decisions, exert influence, resist or adapt, even in the face of potential societal constraints (Duff, 2012). Norton's (2013) conceptualisation of 'investment' elucidates this, suggesting that learners' engagements with the target language – whether personal or social – reflect their aspirations and motives. Consequently, an investment in language acquisition parallels an investment in the learner's language identity.

However, a discernible trend in applied linguistics research is the tendency to magnify the significance of agency, sometimes at the expense of structural considerations (Block, 2014, 2021; Cots *et al.*, 2021). Illustrative of this are studies by Benson *et al.* (2013) and Mitchell *et al.* (2017). Soulé *et al.* (2023) critique Benson *et al.*'s (2013), arguing that the research insufficiently accentuates societal constraints, learning more towards learner-centric perspectives. Similarly, while Mitchell *et al.* (2017) acknowledge the societal milieu influencing language engagement, they predominantly perceive students as the architects of their linguistic pursuits.

To redress this imbalance, Block (2021) introduced a model outlining various structuring spheres that collectively shape individual identity and agency. This model delineates eight 'structuring spheres', expanding on Block's (2014) prior conceptualisation of five areas of structures, elucidating how they interplay to mold individual identity. Block (2021) emphasised that time is a significant structuring element in our lives, identifying it as a constant that affects all structures:

(1) **Environmental Sphere**: Immediate physical surroundings and contexts that influence individuals.
(2) **Physical/Spatial Sphere**: Spatial dimensions and arrangements impacting behavior and identity.
(3) **Neurobiological Sphere**: Biological factors influencing cognitive and psychological processes that affect identity formation.
(4) **Deep-Level Social Sphere**: Underlying social structures and systems shaping identities at a profound level.
(5) **Institutional Sphere**: Formal institutions and systems exerting influence on individuals' identity development.

(6) **Sociocultural Sphere**: Cultural norms, values, and practices contributing to the shaping of identity.

(7) **Embodied/Psycho-Cognitive Sphere**: The interaction between physical embodiment and cognitive processes influencing identity.

(8) **Multimodal Communicative Event Sphere**: Role of communication and interaction shaping identity within specific events.

Block (2021) underscores that the model does not diminish the importance of agency but aims to rectify the imbalance by giving structure its due consideration. With these spheres being interdependent and reciprocally influential, Block's framework offers holistic insights into the multifaceted process of identity formation. Soulé *et al*.'s (2023) research, anchored in Block's (2014) earlier model, investigates plurilingual identity's contextual factors by analysing narratives of students studying abroad, emphasising the symbiosis of agency and structure. By adopting Block's (2021) more comprehensive model in our discourse data analysis, our study pioneers a geographical shift in focus. Specifically, we concentrate on Mandarin Chinese learners studying in China and address the following questions:

(1) How did students of Mandarin Chinese navigate their language identities during their studies in China?

(2) What are the underlying factors that influenced this negotiation process, either positively or negatively?

6. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Participants

This study is based on a research project conducted among students of Mandarin ($n = 8$) who were enrolled in British universities and had engaged in a one-year study abroad period in China as part of their studies. Neither author was involved in delivering the participants' programmes. This article draws upon interview data collected by the first author from eight students who had visited China previously. The participants included five females (two British, three European Union) and three males (two British, one European Union). As noted by Mitchell *et al.* (2017), European students often have more diverse multilingual family backgrounds and complex language education histories compared to Anglophone students. In our study, this classification also encompasses British participants whose nationality originates from various ethnicities. For instance, one of the British participants identified with a BAME ethnicity. More details about the participants are presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographics of the 8 student interviewees

Student	Personal information			Language learning information		
	Age/ Gender	Nationality	First/home language	Courses/ programmes	One-year study abroad	Status of Chinese and other languages acquired
1 Henry	21/M	British	English	BA Chinese and another language (year 3)	Beijing (Year 2) (homestay); vising Xinjiang	Mandarin(L4); French, German, Tibetan, Uyghur
2 Oscar	21/M	Spanish Bolivian	Spanish	BA Chinese and Law (year 3)	Beijing (Year 2) (University accommodation)	Mandarin(L4); English, French
3 Murielle	21/F	Belgian Maltese	French	BA Chinese (graduated)	Beijing (Year 2) (University accommodation); one summer in Beijing and another in Guangzhou	Mandarin(L3); English, Japanese
4 Angela	20/F	British	English	BA Chinese (year 3)	Beijing (Year 2) (University accommodation); a holiday in Taiwan (year 4)	Mandarin(L4); German, French, Cantonese
5 Carla	25/F	Dutch German	Dutch/German	BA Chinese and history (graduated)	Beijing (Year 2) (University accommodation)	Mandarin(L5); English, Turkish
6 Sushmita	22/F	British Pakistani	English	BA Chinese and Economic (year 2)	Taipei (year 2) (University accommodation (One week in Beijing)	Mandarin(L3); Spanish
7 Tania	24/F	Italian	Italian	BA Chinese (graduated); MA Sinology; PhD	Beijing (Year 2) (University accommodation)	Mandarin(L5); English, Japanese, classical Greek, Latin
8 Richard	22/M	British	English	BA Chinese and anthropology (year 4)	Beijing (Year 2) (University accommodation	Mandarin(L4); French, Spanish

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in the UK after participants completed their study abroad experiences. The interviews were based on convenience sampling. Participants were recruited through personal contacts and none were previously known to the authors. The cumulative interview duration amounted to 12 hours and 7 minutes in total. Each interview was conducted in English and lasted between 60 to 160 minutes. During the interviews, participants were asked to provide examples of their sojourning experiences and share stories about their intercultural encounters in China. They were also questioned about their perceptions of Chinese language in comparison to other languages they knew. The interview questions can be found in the Appendix. Data was collected in order to capture study-abroad experiences contributing to the formation and shaping of the participants' identities. All participants' names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Analysis

Data was coded and analysed using thematic analysis to explore participants' expressions about their Chinese language identity. Additionally, discourse analysis was employed to understand the connection between participants' perspectives and their real-world experiences. As researchers, we perceive ourselves as co-constructors in the data collection, actively contributing to the construction of knowledge through the interview process. We therefore accept the situatedness of the knowledge gained and our role as researchers in constituting this, but at the same moment also adhering to the critical realist view that 'such knowledge as we actually possess always consists in historically specific social forms' (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 11). Society precedes us because 'all activity presupposes the prior existence of social forms' (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 34).

The study adhered to the stages of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). These stages encompassed becoming familiar with the data, initial coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and creating the final report. At the start, during the initial coding process, the focus was on developing broad categories. We had already generated potential themes guided by our research questions, and we incorporated these alongside newly emerging codes when analysing the interview data. Subsequently, these codes underwent refinement and reconfiguration through either merging with other codes or becoming subcodes under new categories. For instance, the theme 'the participants' perspectives on themselves as language learners and users' emerged from the amalgamation of subcodes such as 'homestay experiences' and 'attitudes towards foreigner identity/positioning.' Furthermore, we enriched and selected themes by drawing upon the existing literature on language identities. Themes selected through this approach included participants' perspectives on themselves as language learners and users, their conceptions of language

competence, their affiliations with the languages they were able to speak, and their intercultural awareness (cf. Benson *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, our examination of multicultural identity literature facilitated the review of these themes. For instance, the theme 'participants' affiliations with languages' emerged from the synthesis of participants' descriptions of how they acquired cultural knowledge through the analysis of Chinese characters, coupled with their attitudes towards Chinese and other languages.

Additionally, discourse analysis was employed to explore students' personal accounts of their experiences in relation to their backgrounds and the real world, utilising Block's (2021) model of structures. In our study, the concept of time within Block's model is reflected through the historical context of participants' Chinese language studies and their personal trajectories. The environmental sphere encompasses various locations mentioned by participants, including the countryside in Guangzhou, other cities in China, and a metro station. These locations also illustrate the physical/spatial sphere, further represented by homestay arrangements and family dinners mentioned by some participants. However, the data do not directly reveal a link to the neurobiological sphere, as it is challenging to manifest the neurobiological sphere through interview data. The deep-level social sphere encompasses economic and political systems influencing the role of global English and broader societal patterns that position Chinese as a crucial language in the global landscape, stimulating interest in the study of the Chinese language and its cultures. Furthermore, the institutional sphere primarily pertains to participants' education and the policies and procedures within specific organisations, such as a metro station. The sociocultural sphere encompasses cultural and societal norms, including the prevailing trend that prioritises English learning, the hospitality and politeness embedded within local cultures, as well as cultural affinities, understandings, and motivations related to learning the Chinese language. Moreover, the embodied/psychocognitive sphere delves into cognitive understandings and habitus developed through participants' personal trajectories, including their multilingual and family backgrounds, as well as their language learning journeys. Finally, the multimodal communicative event sphere encompasses interactions experienced by participants in China, such as interactions with host families, individuals in the countryside in Guangzhou, and the ticket office attendant, as mentioned by some participants.

7. THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' LANGUAGE IDENTITIES

The Language-Learner/User Identity

The narratives shared by Henry, Oscar, Murielle, and Carla provide a comprehensive exploration of the intricate relationship between agency and various structural spheres that shape their experiences as Chinese language learners and users. The analysis below delves into each student's story,

highlighting the interplay between agency and structural elements across different spheres. Ultimately, this contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in language learning and identity formation. These students' stories illuminate the intersection of individual proactive choices with broader societal patterns, cultural norms, and institutional contexts, collectively shaping their identities and interactions with the Chinese language.

Henry, a British national, illustrates the complex interplay between agency and structural influences on students' experiences as Chinese language users or learners through his narrative about his homestay in China.

> The homestay family with whom I stayed spoke no English. ... There was only the little boy. Because I stayed there for free for the whole year, they gave me free food, but just like that, I taught him [the little boy] an hour of English every day from Monday to Friday ... I was their tenth foreigner, so they kind of had quite a lot foreigners. So his spoken English was really good. His English grammar and writing were not that good, so I was trying to help him with his writing as well as his speaking. So that's the sort of deal that we had. But then the two grandparents, the two parents, they all spoke no English.

Despite his host family's limited English-speaking proficiency, Henry actively taught the child English in exchange for accommodation and meals, showcasing his proactive approach to shaping his linguistic environment. Several structural spheres emerge as either positive or negative factors for Henry's journey to present himself as a Chinese language user or learner. The physical/spatial and multimodal communicative event spheres are interconnected, with living in a Chinese-speaking family immersing him in a monolingual environment, necessitating his engagement with Chinese. Repeated interactions with the family members and teaching the child English contributed to a multifaceted linguistic experience that both enhanced his Chinese proficiency and situated him as a language instructor. However, the deep-level social and sociocultural spheres present challenges to Henry's Chinese language learner identity. The hegemonic status of English in China, combined with his perceived value as a 'foreign,' 'White,' and 'Western' individual, led to his primary role as an English teacher rather than a Chinese language learner. This circumstance underscores the structural patterns prioritising English learning within the societal context. The positive influence of time and the institutional sphere on Henry's language journey is evident through his prior experiences studying Chinese, including Mandarin classes in a UK complementary school and at his regular school, and a school trip to China as mentioned in his interview. These experiences along with a year in China during his undergraduate studies collectively underscore the positive contribution of accumulated experiences across time and within formal institutions contributed to his identity as a Chinese language learner, ultimately leading him to pursue a master's degree in China.

Moving to Oscar, a Spanish native, he provides a nuanced exploration of agency as Chinese language learner within the context of a host family's expectations. Simultaneously, it reveals the influence of various structural spheres that facilitate or hinder his identity formation as a Chinese language.

> ... the second host family wanted me to speak English every day, [laughter] so I actually negotiated. Do you know I'm in China? I told them I want to speak Chinese, and we decided on one day English and one day Chinese. That's the conflict, at first, yeah, first week!

He was then asked whether or not this plan worked well. He responded:

> ... in the end, it was ok, yeah. [laughter] But it was a bit like, you know, they wanted to me to speak English, but I told them 'English is not my mother tongue'. Five years ago, it was my first time I went to China. My English was just, it was OK, but wasn't as good as now [laughter]. So I didn't want to speak English, but then 来就是我们就是协妥 (*xietuo*) [妥协]，妥协 (*tuoxie*) [later we just compromised (*sic* in Chinese), just compromise] [laughter] 一天说英语一天说汉语 [one day speak English, one day speak Chinese] that was the conflict at the beginning – but it went well.

Oscar initially mistook the word order for 'compromise', saying xietuo 协妥 instead of tuoxie 妥协. His evident agency comes from actively negotiating language use with his host family, incorporating both English and Chinese. This negotiation gains significance due to English's privileged position in China. Time and institution sphere, embedded in Oscar's language learning history, emerges as positive factors for his Chinese language identity. While studying Chinese at high school for two years in Spain he had completed a scholarship-based language exchange programme in Nanjing and another short course in Harbin. These experiences underscore his commitment to learning Chinese and position him as an active learner, reinforcing his agency in shaping his Chinese language identity.

However, the negative impact of the sociocultural and deep-level social spheres on Oscar's Chinese language identity becomes apparent. The host family's preference for English reflects China's broader sociocultural trend, where English is often associated with modernity and socio-economic advancement. This preference hindered Oscar's agency to present himself primarily as a Chinese language learner, leading to a conflict resolved through compromise. Oscar's embodied/psycho-cognitive sphere interacts with the broader societal context. As a native Spanish speaker with a multicultural background, he was attuned to the potential overshadowing of his Hispanic identity by the dominance of English. This awareness acted as a catalyst for his agency to negotiate language usage and preserve his linguistic and cultural diversity.

Murielle' narrative further exemplifies the interplay between agency and structural factors across different spheres molding her presentation as a Chinese language user and learner.

> I was walking in the countryside in Guangzhou. Everyone was staring at me, everyone, and they would ... say 'hi' from very far away, and would try to come to speak to me. You know, I'm French, I consider myself to be French. I speak French at home ... they don't take that into consideration at all, that I could not actually speak English [as a first language] ... I could actually speak just Chinese and French, or just, you know, Chinese and Russian, like my friend. ... They are not aware ... it's really difficult to just accept it ... In China, there are a lot things you have to just accept, and make do with, otherwise it becomes impossible to live there. And living in Guangzhou and the countryside was very difficult.

Murielle's encounters in the Guangzhou countryside highlight dual aspects within the multimodal communicative event sphere. Locals' attempts to communicate and say 'hi' from a distance display positive engagement, indicating communication openness. However, this positivity contrasts with the assumption that Murielle, due to her appearance, is an English native. This belief stems from sociocultural and physical/spatial spheres, where local cultural norms and expectations, and physical surroundings intertwine with her physical presence and shape her identity presentation. Her assertion of being French and frustration at not being recognised for her multilingual abilities demonstrate her active resistance to being pigeonholed into a specific linguistic identity. The deep-level social sphere also comes into play, as her encounter with the assumption of English proficiency due to her appearance reflects underlying social structures influencing identity perceptions. Institutional and embodied/psycho-cognitive spheres, combined with time, contribute positively to Murielle's identity development as a Chinese language user and learner. Hailing from a Maltese and Belgian background, her international exposure and studies abroad underline institutional support and opportunities that bolster her multilingual identity. The fact that she studied Chinese in a high school in France and spent time in both Beijing and Guangzhou indicate a substantial investment in her language learning journey.

Carla's perspectives offer insight into the interplay between agency and structural elements across spheres influencing her presentation as a Chinese language learner and user. She described her experience of being treated like a superstar in China: 'you are Madonna' and said that this was especially the case in small cities, as a White person, and as a non-Chinese person speaking Chinese. She added that, 'I just think they should make you feel less special ... get rid of the superstar model'.

Within the sociocultural sphere, her encounters with Chinese people treating her as a 'superstar' due to her non-Chinese appearance and ability to speak Chinese, though seemingly positive, lead to a sense of discomfort and othering. This suggests a complex dynamic within the embodied/psycho-cognitive sphere, where her multilingual identity as someone of Dutch and German heritage intersects with the local Chinese cultural norm, causing her to navigate perceptions of foreignness and uniqueness. The environmental sphere, manifested through different cities, adds nuance to her identity presentation.

The fact that this experience was more pronounced in small cities highlights the spatial dimension of identity construction, where local demographics impact how she is perceived. The institutional sphere and time are also at play, as her educational background and prior experiences in China shape her language identity positively. Carla travelled to China before starting her undergraduate study. These experiences and time spent in Beijing during her study abroad, and the formal education contribute to her Chinese language proficiency and confidence. Despite this, Carla's call for a shift from the 'superstar model' indicates a desire for a more normalised experience. This sentiment intersects with the deep-level social sphere, reflecting underlying societal norms. Her assertion implies that structural shifts towards multiculturalism in China would lead to a more authentic presentation of her Chinese language learner identity.

The narratives of Henry, Oscar, Murielle, and Carla collectively illuminate the intricate interplay between agency and various structural spheres that influence their experiences as Chinese language learners and users. Henry's proactive approach to teaching English in exchange for lodging and food, Oscar's negotiation of language usage with host families, Murielle's resistance against assumptions, and Carla's call for a normalised experience all showcase the active roles these individuals play in shaping their language identities. Simultaneously, broader influences within sociocultural norms, institutional support, physical surroundings, and historical context exert a significant impact on participants' agency. Recognising these intersections deepens our understanding of language learning and identity formation, emphasising the need for a holistic approach.

Identity Issues About Student Conceptions of Language Competence

Navigating the complexities of language identity and competence within a new cultural context presents formidable challenges for individuals undertaking studies abroad. Angela and Tania's experiences vividly express the interplay between personal agency and societal structures. Angela's time in Beijing reveals her desire for nuanced feedback amidst cultural norms, while Tania's encounters showcase clashes between personal agency and societal expectations. These instances uncover the complex relationship between self-concept, agency, and societal dynamics in shaping language identity.

Certain students, including Angela, struggled to transcend their learner identity abroad due to self-conceptions of language competence. Angela, from Britain, shares mixed feelings about receiving polite compliments on her Chinese skills. She shared her Beijing experience, where she inadvertently used 'English' (英文) instead of 'Chinese' (中文):

> It's a very, very strange experience. When you first get there, you really struggle to communicate, because when anyone hears your Chinese … and the

first day, second day, 'oh 你的英文*(sic)*真好' [Your English is so good], and then the day you leave: '你的英文*(sic)*真好' [Your English is so good]. It's exactly the same compliments, with, you know, you have improved, but exactly the same words come out. ... you've got no concept of just how good or bad my Chinese is.

Angela, in a subsequent interview, openly discusses feeling self-conscious when communicating in Chinese. She seeks qualitative affirmation to assess her proficiency, stating: 'clearly the comments of the person you need to know, as you have no idea what good Chinese is, whether it's improved, or it's still the same status, that's a bit irritating'. Angela's challenge lies in accepting that people are hesitant to provide anything beyond courteous and formal validation of her skills. She cites an example of their reluctance to delve into details, such as inquiring about her years of learning. She explains: 'because there is no kind of how long you have been learning Chinese or your Chinese is really good for that period time ... They didn't know even you have learned for a year ... if there's been a context ... the complement would be more valuated'.

Angela's narrative offers a window into the interplay between agency and structural components across various spheres, influencing her perception of her Chinese proficiency. Her Beijing experiences expose the intricate interplay within the sociocultural and embodied/psycho-cognitive spheres. Interactions where she's complimented for 'good English' while working on her Chinese highlight this blend. The sociocultural sphere manifests through cultural norms and values that lead individuals to offer polite and formal affirmations, avoiding passing judgment on her Chinese language skills. This structural pattern hampers Angela's agency to gauge the extent of her progress in learning Chinese. Her desire for more nuanced feedback indicates her proactive engagement in her learning journey. Furthermore, the multimodal communicative event sphere comes to the fore in her interactions. Angela's struggle to gauge her advancement is rooted in her proactive approach as a language learner, seeking feedback that transcends mere pleasantries. Her agency to navigate and interpret these exchanges is influenced by the structural elements within the communicative context. This interplay highlights how her agency to seek meaningful feedback is both enabled and constrained by the communicative patterns within the societal structure. Beyond her Beijing year during, Angela also spent a holiday in Taiwan during her fourth year. Her institutional experiences continue to shape her Chinese language identity. This underscores how time and institutional factors persistently shape her perceptions of language proficiency and identity.

Tania echoes the sentiment that many Chinese individuals don't expect foreigners to speak Chinese. She recounts an incident when purchasing a metro ticket. She 'was going to speak Chinese' to the ticket office attendant, but the attendant promptly redirected her to another queue 'without even speaking'. The attendant 'was scared of having to communicate with me, because she thought I could only speak English'. Tania

also shares another experience where her Chinese friend invited her to a family dinner. She describes the hostess as 'really, really polite to me, really nice, but it took her a while to understand that ... I could actually communicate with her ... she was so tense, I guess'. Tania notes that the hostess directed her questions to Tania's friend instead of addressing her directly. Moreover, the hostess exhibited concern about whether Tania could drink cocoa.

Tania's narrative vividly illustrates the interplay of agency and structural spheres across two distinct contexts: purchasing a metro station ticket and participating a family dinner. Her attempt to converse in Chinese at the ticket office underscores her agency in leveraging her language skills. However, the attendant's silent redirection to another queue undermines Tania's agency to interact in Chinese. This episode reflects the convergence of environmental, physical/spatial, multimodal communicative event and institutional spheres. These elements underscore the influence of physical surroundings, spatial arrangements, and the station's policies and procedures on Tania's agency and her negotiation of identity challenge. Similarly, during the family dinner, Tania's interaction with the hostess demonstrates the interplay of sociocultural, physical/spatial, embodied/psycho-cognitive and multimodal communicative event spheres. Tania's description of the hostess as initially 'really, really polite' but gradually realizing Tania's ability to communicate hints at the dynamics within these structural realms. The hostess's hesitancy to directly interact with Tania and her reliance on Tania's friend for communication highlight the intricate dance between structural norms and individual agency. The sociocultural sphere is evident in the hostess's cautious approach, possibly influenced by societal expectations of communication with foreigners. Simultaneously, Tania's proactive stance as a language learner and her ability to navigate these interactions showcase the interplay of the embodied/psycho-cognitive and multimodal communicative event spheres.

Tania's background adds another layer to the analysis. Originally from Italy, Tania, embarked on her studies in Beijing during her second year of her undergraduate studies. She completed her Bachelor's degree in Chinese studies and subsequently pursued a Master's degree in Sinology. This academic trajectory culminated in a Ph.D. programme in a related field, forming the backdrop for her interviews. It is worth noting that Tania also participated in evening courses at a cultural organisation in Italy at the age of 16. Her educational journey, intertwined with both the time and institutional spheres, has likely bolstered her Chinese language skills and informed her agency in utilising them. Tania's attempts to assert her language abilities encounter varying levels of receptiveness, often influenced by the prevailing norms and contexts. These scenarios underscore the importance of recognising the interplay between individual agency and broader forces of structure in shaping language competence and identity.

Angela and Tania's narratives capture the interplay of individual agency and structural contexts when grappling with language competence and identity. Angela's pursuit of meaningful acknowledgment showcases her proactive approach, often stymied by societal tendencies towards polite rather than constructive, affirmation. Conversely, Tania's encounters underline the societal inclination to predefined language roles, constraining her linguistic agency despite her proficiency. As these narratives intertwine with the temporal and institutional realms, the enduring influence of past experiences becomes evident. Angela's prior exposure to languages and Tania's diverse educational journey enrich their encounters abroad, shaping their language identities. Ultimately, the intricate relationship between personal agency and societal norms weaves the tapestry of language competence and identity within the academic landscape.

Identity Issues About Student Affiliations to Languages

The development of a multilingual identity among language learners is a multifaceted process, characterised by the intricate interplay of agency and structural influences. A prerequisite for this process is the acquisition of sociolinguistic knowledge, empowering learners to navigate linguistic repertoires and affiliations effectively. This concept aligns with Fisher *et al.*'s (2020) assertion that a foundation in sociolinguistic knowledge is important for comprehending one's linguistic repertoire and shaping a multilingual identity. This study explores the perspectives of students learning Chinese, delving into the complexities that underlie their language comprehension, sociolinguistic awareness, and cultural affiliations. By analysing individual participants' insights, this study illuminates how their language affiliations and perceptions are informed by their interactions with various structural spheres, highlighting the intricate process of language acquisition and identity formation.

Sushmita's reflections provide a deep insight into her perception of the distinctions between Chinese and English, echoing the broader notion of divergence between the Occident and the Orient:

> I like anything that I haven't seen before. There is very little similarity between Mandarin and English. … like you conjugate verbs, things like that. … an alphabet. You do not have [anything] like that in Chinese at all and the Chinese thought process is completely different from the Western thought processes. You can see that from the language.

> So, like, a lot of our words in English are derived from Latin or borrowed from other countries, like French. Chinese, you don't. You just put the meanings together.

> So, you put a character with another character to make meanings of the word. So, like, for example, 口香糖, that means mouth feels good sweet [laughter]. While in

> English, it's *chewing gum*. It's chew, and it's gum from tree. Do you get the difference? … Like family would be *familia* from Latin in English, while in Chinese 家人, which means house people. So, the thought process is different. It's quite logical, actually, like the family is people who live in the house.

> I just, you learned it from the meaning of the characters. As they tell what the characters' meanings are and in English, and then you can compare.

Sushmita, having acquired certain aspects of Chinese language and gained exposure to China, holds the perspective that 'the Chinese thought process is completely different from the Western thought processes'. This perspective aligns with the motivation she expressed for learning Mandarin: ' I was always interested in the East.' Sushmita's decision to study Mandarin was further shaped by a friend's unfavourable account of his experiences in Beijing. As a result, she opted to spend her year abroad in Taipei instead.

   Sushmita's engagement with the linguistic disparities is informed by the embodied/psycho-cognitive sphere, where cognitive processes dissect linguistic nuances, particularly those related to grammar and word formation. Her analysis draws from her existing knowledge, thereby exemplifying her agency in understanding linguistic variations. Furthermore, the sociocultural and deep-level social spheres become apparent as Sushmita delves into the roots of languages and their cultural implications. By juxtaposing English words with Latin origins and Chinese characters with distinct meanings, she illustrates her awareness of the cultural contexts that underpin language development. This showcases the influence of the sociocultural sphere on her perception of linguistic structures and their alignment with wider societal norms. The interplay of the embodied/psycho-cognitive, sociocultural, and deep-level social spheres is evident in her assertion that 'the Chinese thought process is completely different from the Western thought processes.' This encapsulates her agency in seeking language experiences that resonate with her cultural interests, a sentiment that aligns with her long-standing fascination with the 'East'. Additionally, the institutional and time spheres contribute to Sushmita's language journey, as her Pakistani heritage and upbringing in the UK shape her multilingual identity. Her decision to study Mandarin and her study abroad choice of Taipei over mainland China underscore the intricate interplay between her personal background and educational context.

   In contrast, Richard, who studied in Beijing in his Year 2, holds a perspective on the Chinese language that differs significantly from Sushmita's:

> For example, to trace back from Chinese and compare with English, it would be quite interesting. I am sure there will be a lot of similarities … I think the endless intertwining of the language and culture is so interesting.

Richard highlighted his extensive international experiences, including spending three months in South America to enhance his Spanish language skills, six

months in Australia, and six weeks in India. He emphasised his aim to 'exposure to the wider world, exposure to something outside of Europe'.

Richard contemplates the prospect of tracing back from Chinese to English and anticipates similarities, showcasing his active cognitive involvement in cross-linguistic comparisons. His approach embodies the convergence of the embodied/psycho-cognitive and sociocultural spheres, emphasising his distinctive outlook on language acquisition and his connection to diverse cultures. His acknowledgment of the interwoven relationship between language and culture exemplifies his agency in seeking a profound comprehension of linguistic mechanics. Richard's enrolment in a Social Anthropology course also reveals the influence of the institutional sphere on his language journey. Richard studied Chinese with Anthropology, which likely shapes his empathy for cultural diversity, enriching his engagement with Chinese language studies. The symbiotic interplay of the embodied/psycho-cognitive and institutional spheres is evident in his pluralistic approach, fostering an appreciation for diversity in language learning. Furthermore, Richard's extensive travel and educational exposure underscore the impact of the time and institutional spheres. His experiences in various regions, including South America, Australia, and India, highlight his proactive agency in immersing himself in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. These experiences have likely contributed to his multilingual identity and affiliations with the languages he encountered. His conscious effort to step outside of Europe showcases the impact of both the time and institutional spheres on his language choices and affiliations.

As we explore participants' motivations and attitudes toward learning Chinese, the interconnectedness of the sociocultural, deep-level social, and embodied/psycho-cognitive spheres becomes evident. Participants emphasise the value of studying Chinese due to its modernity, relevance, and economic significance, echoing the societal pattern that situates Chinese as a pivotal global language. The sociocultural sphere also plays a crucial role as participants express a genuine interest in Chinese, driven by both linguistic curiosity and cultural affinity, thereby embodying their agency in seeking cross-cultural experiences. Interestingly, the interplay between the deep-level social and embodied/psycho-cognitive spheres becomes more pronounced as participants like Murielle, Carla, and Sushmita voice reservations about economic motivations behind learning Chinese. This interaction between structural influences and individual agency reflects the broader societal discourse concerning the economic utility of languages, a factor that shapes participants' perceptions and motivations. Henry's passion for Chinese culture and his decision to pursue further studies in Xinjiang manifest his agency in seeking a deeper, more culturally immersive experience beyond economic considerations. Additionally, participants' reflections on their multilingual identities, influenced by previous language learning experiences, suggest the pivotal role of the embodied/psycho-cognitive sphere. Their capacity to draw on prior linguistic

knowledge signifies the cognitive processes underpinning their language affiliations and their adeptness in navigating diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes.

This comprehensive analysis of students' language learning journeys underscores the intricate dance between individual agency and diverse structural spheres. The embodied/psycho-cognitive sphere highlights the role of cognitive processes in deciphering linguistic variations, while the sociocultural sphere shapes cultural affinities and linguistic motivations. The deep-level social sphere resonates through participants' recognition of linguistic relevance and economic implications. Moreover, the institutional and time spheres leave an indelible imprint on language trajectories, with personal backgrounds and educational contexts directing their choices. This analysis ultimately underscores the symbiotic and dynamic relationship between agency and structure. Participants' perceptions of language, their affiliations, and their motivations emerge as both products of and contributors to broader societal patterns. The exploration of their experiences encapsulates the delicate interplay of structural influences and individual agency, thereby shedding light on the intricate process of language acquisition and identity formation.

8. DISCUSSION

This article addresses the complexities associated with Chinese language learning in the context of studying abroad in China. It highlights how participants grapple with negotiating their language identities both as learners and users of Chinese while residing in China, compounded by their status as multilingual individuals. The emergence of identity instability varies from person to person, becoming more discernible as students reflect on their experiences in China and analyse their encounters through the lenses of agency and structure. This phenomenon is intricately linked to practical language learning and usage, particularly within the setting of living with Chinese families through homestay arrangements and engaging with various Chinese social and transactional situations. Utilising Block's (2021) spheres of structure, we gain insight into participants' agency in learning Chinese within the broader structural contexts. This approach sheds light on the interplay between different structural spheres, forming connections between individual-level occurrences and broader processes such as global trends.

Regarding the first research question concerning participants' navigation of their language identities during their time in China, our study demonstrates that participants exhibit agency in both upholding and molding their Chinese language identity and broader multilingual identity. A tangible illustration of this lies in the participants' commitment to language learning, as evidenced by their investment in language acquisition (Norton, 2013). This investment is particularly evident in their prior experiences of studying

abroad, showcasing their recognition of the manifold advantages associated with embracing multilingualism. The influence of agency is intricately interwoven with various structural spheres, which encompass dimensions such as time, environment, physical/spatial elements, deep-level social dynamics, institutional factors, sociocultural components, embodied/psycho-cognitive attributes, and the domain of multimodal communicative events. These nuanced findings stem from the wealth of data gathered through participant interviews, thereby underscoring the complex interplay between individual agency and the broader context of structural influences. This interplay is instrumental in shaping participants' journey of language acquisition, significantly contributing to the refinement of their Chinese language proficiency and the enrichment of their multilingual identity. In resonance with Soulé *et al.*'s (2023) findings, it becomes evident that the role of structural factors, spanning diverse dimensions, holds the capacity to either impede agency under certain circumstances or invigorate it under different contexts.

Turning to the second research question on underlying factors impacting identity negotiation, participants' agency plays a pivotal role in the maintenance and development of their language identities. However, certain structures emerge as also influential, either positively or negatively.

A significant factor influencing identity development revolves around the discourse surrounding English as the predominant global language. Within this context, the sociocultural, deep-level social, and multimodal communicative event spheres collectively pose challenges to the construction of Chinese language identities. The prevalence of English's linguistic and cultural hegemony creates obstacles for participants' Chinese language identities, stemming from how local Chinese individuals perceive and interact with the English language. In contrast, the findings from Mitchell and Güvendir's (2021) study reveal that numerous students participating in short-term Erasmus+ programs across Europe exhibited a distinct preference for the English language, yet they may have lacked the impetus to acquire languages that hold significance within local contexts. In our study, participants assert their agency by actively choosing to learn and utilise Chinese during their time in China, despite the pervasive influence of English. Notably, instances such as the challenges faced by Carla, Angela, Oscar, and Murielle in engaging in Chinese conversations due to the Chinese individuals' preference to converse in English with native speakers underscore the intricate complexities that arise when navigating these linguistic dynamics.

The dynamics of student exchange, wherein Chinese hosts often assume that students are native English speakers, reflect the influential status of the English language's hegemony. This circumstance is further fortified by the historical prevalence of English within the Chinese education system, being closely linked with modernity and cultural capital (O'Regan, 2021; Pan, 2014). This

phenomenon is also illuminated in Song and Xia's (2021) study, which high-lights how English becomes a sought-after medium of communication among international students in China and their Chinese peers. This dynamic leads to a situation where language exchange partners naturally engage in tandem language learning by conversing in each other's languages during interactions. Participants' interactions with local Chinese individuals underscore the tension between their own linguistic and ethnic diversities and the local expectations. For instance, participants like Murielle, who possess a Belgian-Maltese heritage, encounter difficulties in being truly understood for their authentic identities.

Hospitality emerges as a key factor impacting the study abroad experience, occasionally limiting learning opportunities for students who must navigate feelings of otherness. Sociocultural and multimodal communicative event spheres play a significant role in these dynamics. Tania's experience during a family dinner illustrates the 'defeat of hospitality' (Dervin and Layne, 2013), leaving no room for her to engage in Chinese conversation. This example underscores the influence of hospitality dynamics on identity and language competence, highlighting power dynamics. The frustration expressed by Murielle is indicative of the disempowering impact of the cultural context in which she finds herself.

Scholarly works like MacDonald and O'Regan (2012) underscore the intri-cate interplay between power dynamics, historical context, and discursive forces in the realm of intercultural communication, illuminating the multifaceted challenges students encounter. For example, while Henry and Oscar success-fully negotiated a mutual arrangement or compromise that somewhat equalized the power dynamics, Murielle felt constrained by a lack of options, leading to her sense of disempowerment during her stay in China. Angela's experiences also reveal instances where she felt a loss of control and influence within certain localities. The exploration of foreigner positioning and power dynamics in local language practices, as observed by Iino (2006), further accentuates the complex-ity inherent in these interactions. However, Du's (2015) findings present a different perspective, revealing that students of Chinese may perceive their 'foreigner identity' positively, using it to their advantage in local contexts. In our study, the majority of students viewed the 'foreigner identity' and the corresponding hospitality they received as detrimental to their Chinese language identity.

Preconceived notions of the Chinese language and culture, rooted in participants' habitus, also shape their learning experiences. These concep-tualizations, if shaped by myths and misconceptions about the Chinese language, have the potential to impede their engagement with the language. Casas-Tost and Rovira-Esteva (2009) have identified the emergence of an Orientalist image of the Chinese language, fueled by myths and miscon-ceptions such as the belief in an 'absence of grammar' in Chinese. These preconceived   notions,   deeply   internalized,   influence   participants'

perception of their learning journey and create obstacles. For instance, Sushmita's recollections underscore a latent Orientalist comparison between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident', evident when she discusses the differences between the Chinese and English languages, as well as her fascination with the 'East'. These discourses sometimes foster a sense of distance and disparity during the Chinese learning process, illustrating the challenge of reconciling expectations with realities. Nevertheless, participants' perspectives are also shaped by growing public discourses that emphasize the relevance and utility of learning Chinese. Certain individuals, like Richard, approach their studies with an open-mindedness, embracing both the cultural and linguistic distinctions. Richard's approach to learning resonates with the humanistic pluralism advocated by Xiang (2018) as an alternative to 'Orientalism'. Xiang's notion suggests that through humanistic learning, individuals transcend their provincialism, embracing a certain universality that grants freedom and upholds human dignity (Xiang, 2018, p. 23).

The positive influence of time and the institutional sphere on identity formation is evident in the narratives of participants. Their prior language learning experiences and formal education significantly contribute to shaping their identities as learners of the Chinese language. Within the scope of our study, participants hail from diverse backgrounds and enroll at a UK university, collectively representing a spectrum of ethnicities. As a result, their individual experiences offer a rich tapestry of a multifaceted multilingual identity, arising from their various relationships and interactions. This aligns closely with Jin's (2017) call for an approach to Mandarin teaching and learning that is deeply rooted in biographical, social, and intercultural frameworks of understanding identity. Of particular significance are instances of multilingual individuals like Murielle, who holds a deep connection to her French heritage. These instances underscore the potential for distinct ideal selves to manifest within both native and additional languages, and this dynamic can sometimes lead to conflicts or the development of integrated multilingual identities that transcend language-specific boundaries (Henry, 2017). This highlights an opportunity to foster greater awareness among Chinese language students about their own multilingual identities. Furthermore, if the participants in this study are emblematic of the broader cohort enrolling in Chinese language courses in the UK, it becomes increasingly evident that their aspirations for extended intercultural engagement could encounter significant challenges. These challenges arise from the perceptions of local Chinese hosts, who often categorize them as 'Western' and anglophone. This predicament is exacerbated by the expectation among Chinese hosts that participants, even those originating from other European countries like Spain or Belgium, possess English proficiency.

9. Conclusion

In this article, interview data from students of Chinese enrolled at a UK university and who have studied abroad in China have been presented and analysed. Our focus on Chinese language and multilingual identity, using Block's (2021) structure model, illuminates the interplay between agency and structure. Examining individual narratives within structural spheres underscores the multi-faceted nature of language acquisition and identity formation, emphasising the complex interplay of agency and structural influences in shaping participants' language identities. Block's (2021) model comprehensively covers various structural spheres influencing participants' agency and identity development. However, real world's complexity leads to varying effects on individuals, and these structural elements often interact rather than being clearly delineated.

Key themes emerge, shedding light on intricate interplay between socio-cultural and deep-level social spheres, and multimodal communicative events. These dynamics are characterised by the challenges associated with navigating the English dominance and the nuances of hospitality dynamics while simultaneously learning Chinese. The influence of physical/spatial and multimodal communicative event spheres surfaces through participants' interactions in diverse locations, showing positive engagement and challenges. The synergy between the time, institutional, and embodied/psycho-cognitive spheres becomes apparent as participants' backgrounds and language learning experiences come to shape their agency and their language identities. The participants' preconceived conceptualisations of the Chinese language and cultural aspects, ingrained within their habitus, can lead to either positive or negative impacts on their learning Chinese journey.

This study advocates a comprehensive approach, integrating agency and structural contexts to understand identity development among Chinese language students. It underscores the significance of raising students' awareness about their language identities and the unique challenges tied to studying in China. Nevertheless, the study illuminates various challenges that merit further exploration. Additional interdisciplinary research can delve deeper into how structural contexts, particularly the neurobiological sphere in Block's model, influence language identities. In practice, the extent to which Chinese language courses in UK universities and their partner institutions in China understand the impact of the structural contexts on students agency and identity development in order to better equip students for their overseas experiences remains an open question. Equally important is the exploration of how these structural influences can be adeptly managed and strategically harnessed to enhance the overall language learning experience.

10. Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What are your purposes for learning Mandarin? Why are you interested in learning Mandarin?
- What do you expect to learn from the course? Do you think what you have learned is useful? What have you learned from the course that will help you if/when you go to China?
- How do you learn Mandarin outside of classrooms/do you learn by yourself?
- How do you see Chinese/Mandarin? What are your feelings when you speak Chinese/when you are in China? Could you give me an example?
- Compare Mandarin with your own language/English/other languages: what are the differences?
- How does the language you learned impact on your attitudes towards Chinese? Are there any differences compared with before learning Mandarin and after?
- What about your experiences of communicating with Chinese people, especially your experiences in China? Tell a story about 'intercultural encounters', what lessons do you learn from them?
- Could you describe a trip in China that you have taken?

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