



Comparative Analysis of Self-Formation Processes
between Mainland China-Educated and UK-Educated
Chinese Undergraduates in UK Master's Studies

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My time pursuing graduate studies at Oxford passed in the blink of an eye. From the very first day of matriculation, I knew I would be reluctant to leave even before my journey had truly begun. Over this year, I not only broadened my academic horizons and had the privilege of being guided by some of the most esteemed scholars in the field, but I also made wonderful friends.

Choosing higher education as my field of study means that I explore my own experiences as both a participant and a researcher. This makes everything I read feel deeply personal. In class, professors provide us with a macro perspective to understand global higher education systems, the flow of knowledge worldwide, and the historical development of higher education in different countries. At the same time, we, as individuals, interact with these macro policies and social structures while seeking a delicate balance in our quest for knowledge, self-exploration, and employability. This dual perspective—of inward personal exploration and detached observation—has been a fascinating part of my year-long learning journey. It has provided me with a deeply immersive learning experience. I am immensely grateful to the professors and teachers in the Department of Education for their guidance, effort, and wisdom throughout this year, and to my supervisor for their gentle guidance and inspiration.

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I will continue to passionately focus on people and their experiences, approaching them with the utmost humility and understanding, just as all educational scholars do. I will leave Oxford, but a part of me will stay here, and a part of Oxford will stay with me.

ABSTRACT

Chinese international students, as one of the largest groups of transnational students in the world, are often subjects of cross-cultural research. These students face not only the common challenges encountered by international students but also specific cultural difficulties and challenges, and they also endure generalized understandings or prejudices. This dissertation aims to explore the diversity of experiences within the Chinese international student group by comparing two subgroups: those who completed their undergraduate studies in China (CMU) and those who completed their undergraduate studies in the UK (UKU). The study observes their self-formation experiences during their master's studies in the UK, attempting to identify their similarities, differences, and unique individual experiences. This study employs a qualitative research approach, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with 14 Chinese international students. Using Marginson's (2024) five main components of self-formation as the analytical framework, thematic analysis was used to summarize the similarities and differences between the two groups under each component.

The study finds that the self-formation paths of the two groups are indeed influenced by their past educational experiences. The impact of educational background on the self-formation of the two groups primarily manifests in differences in adaptability to the UK education system, the transferability of study skills, language proficiency in academic and social contexts, and cultural adaptability. Under the influence of negative conditions such as stress, anxiety, and lack of confidence, some students are unable to fully utilize the resources of higher education for self-growth. Therefore, the impact of past educational experiences on self-formation during the master's period is not direct; it affects psychological states through different degrees of adaptation to life and study. This, in turn, leads to varying levels of knowledge immersion and acquisition, resulting in different self-development trajectories for each individual.

Keywords: higher education, international student, self-formation, educational background.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	Phrase
Participant	P
UKU	Chinese who completed their undergraduate studies in China
CMU	Chinese who completed their undergraduate studies in the UK

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study and statement of the problem

Chinese international students are considered as a highly influential group in international education. According to data from the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), China is one of the largest sources of international students in the UK. Universities UK International (UUKi) reported in 2017 that Chinese students are particularly significant in promoting the UK economy in terms of their tuition fees, accommodation costs, and living expenses. Beyond economic contributions, Chinese international students also play an important role in campus cultural diversity and academia. Bodycott (2012) pointed out the diligence and hard work of Chinese students, their enrichment of campus cultural diversity and the new research perspectives and methods they brought to academia, especially in STEM fields.

Despite their influential presence, Chinese international students face significant adaptation challenges. These include language barriers, differences in teaching systems, and difficulties in daily life, culture, and social interactions. Social isolation and a lack of local friends further exacerbate their adaptation difficulties, significantly impacting their mental health. Additionally, they face negative stereotypes and prejudices, such as being perceived as passive learners (Li & Campbell, 2008; Wang & Byram, 2011) and always sticking together (Henze & Zhu, 2012; Montgomery, 2010). Cultural misunderstandings add to the challenges they face during their adaptation process. Considering the importance of Chinese international students and the predicament of their experience being overly generalized and misunderstood, the experiences of Chinese master's students deserve further research and attention.

In recent years, an increasing number of Chinese undergraduates have chosen the UK as their destination for postgraduate studies. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show a yearly increase in the number of Chinese students enrolled in UK higher

education, with a notable rise in the proportion of postgraduate students. These CMU students, along with the UKU, experience the master's stage together.

The rationale for choosing UKU and CMU as target groups are due to their research value of unique difference and their similarity.

Firstly, the Chinese educational system has long been criticized for its test-oriented teaching methods and lack of support for students' individualized development. Chinese students entering university can be said to have escaped the most intense phase of exam-oriented education in high school. However, the pressure to advance in higher education and the fierce competition in the job market leave them overwhelmed, sacrificing self-exploration time for endless employable skill training. Under the current social structure and educational system in China, students lack structural support for self-exploration and suffer from a sense of emptiness due to relentless social competition. Consequently, many students who come to study in the UK see this year as a window for self-exploration, hoping to reflect on the subjectivity that was not adequately developed in their past decade within a different societal and educational context.

UKU students and CMU students come from the same cultural and ethnical background, yet they experience a totally different higher education system for 3-4 years as an adult. Differences in this process may lead to significant differences in their self-formation and impact their subsequent lives.

Therefore, I chose to study Chinese students who completed their undergraduate studies in mainland China (CMU) and those who did so in the UK (UKU) to see how different undergraduate educational systems affect their experiences and personal growth during their master's studies.

The reason for focusing on self-formation processes is due to the importance of self-formation of students in the context of higher education. Self-formation helps facilitate an individual's subjectification, which is the process where a person becomes mentally independent and conscious of who they are and what they want to be, with an understanding of the external factors such as social structure and power relation and their impact on shaping their behaviour and thoughts. This process of subjectification is important for a human being to become independent and live a life that suits one's own beliefs. This is specifically

important for students who are engaged in higher education because the context of higher education provides powerful and sufficient self-exploring tools: academic knowledge and unique campus life. The stage of higher education can be regarded as a rare opportunity for students to Self-exploration and self-awakening. Compared to merely studying students' experiences, examining how students from different cultural backgrounds achieve personal growth is meaningful in many ways. It can help us understand the diverse paths through which students from different backgrounds achieve personal development and inspire policymakers to build more comprehensive and personalized support systems, thereby promoting the realization of higher education's goal of fostering personal growth.

Given the uniqueness of each individual's experience, this study aims to explore whether CMU exhibits different self-formation processes during their master's studies compared with the UKU, thereby enriching the higher education community's understanding of the diversity within the Chinese student population. It also aims to highlight the difficulties faced by Chinese international students, providing scholars with a deeper understanding of their real experiences.

1.2 Research questions and hypothesizes

This research aims to address the following questions:

1. Is the self-formation process different in CMU and UKU students?
2. If differences exist, what causes these differences?
3. How are these differences linked with their undergraduate educational background, if at all?

This study hypothesizes that:

1. UKU students will have stronger subjectivity compared to CMU students.
2. UKU students will encounter fewer obstacles in the self-formation process compared to CMU students

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will begin by examining relevant empirical studies on Chinese international students. Next, I will look into the five components of self-formation. Then, I will then introduce self-formation as the conceptual framework for this study. In the final part, I will point out the research gap in current research.

2.1 Studies on Chinese International Students

Research in this area mainly focuses on their motivations for studying abroad, the challenges they encounter, and the ways they cope with these challenges.

Regarding their motivations for studying abroad, current research indicates that Chinese international students have various motivations for studying abroad, including seeking to improve their employability, gain an international perspective, and escape domestic educational pressure.

Among these reasons, many research finds that utilitarian factors dominate the decision-making process. Zhai & Cao (2022) found that Chinese students' motivation to study in a specific country, the United Kingdom, was derived from the various choices provided by the British entrance system to disperse the study pressure, and one-year programs give them early entry into the workforce. Mankowska (2018) analyzed the comments of Chinese students on online forums and found that they expected studying abroad to bring them utilitarian returns, such as enhanced competitiveness in the job market and higher salaries. However, the driving factor of studying abroad is not only investment in the future, according to the research of Cebolla-Boado, Hu, and Soysal (2018), student's yearning for local cultural experience is also a major reason.

Research done on the challenges faced by Chinese international students mainly adopts a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on their problems in acculturation (Yan & Berliner, 2011) adjustment (Ching, Renes, McMorrow, Simpson, & Strange, 2017), complex identity negotiations (Hsieh, 2006), cultural shock (Xia, 2020), academic anxiety (Yan & Berliner, 2009) and social stress. (Lin & Betz, 2009). Further, current research reveals that the most common personal challenges are the language barrier, financial stress and mental health

issues. (Andrade, 2006; Chen, 1999; Gu & Maley, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Additionally, the historical context also brings special challenges. Lyu (2023) found that the media's stigmatization of China during the epidemic period affected the mental health of Chinese students in the UK.

Previous studies also focused on Chinese students' coping strategies in international education, among them their strategies can be divided into positive coping strategies and negative coping strategies. Positive coping strategies include seeking internal and external support. Liu, Li, and Zhang (2022) mentioned that during the epidemic, Chinese students gained emotional support, a sense of identity and a sense of belonging through communication with Chinese people. Li and Zhang (2022), by observing five Chinese international students, the researchers found that they used academic writing sessions in pre-semester courses to help themselves cope with academic writing and listening challenges, and used small class tutoring to seek one-to-one answers from doctoral students or professors.

In addition to these positive coping measures, Chinese students also take a negative approach to the challenges they face. Through interviews with 5 Chinese students in Malaysia, Hor and Jusoh (2021) found that Chinese students have three psychological defense mechanisms in the face of language barriers: denying that they have problems with their English ability; Assume that other people will encounter their own difficulties; Imitate the spoken language of some local languages as a social tool to protect their self-esteem and relieve social pressure.

2.2 Self-formation

In this section, I will begin by introducing the definition, purpose, and relevant theories of self-formation. I will then conduct a literature review on the five important aspects of self-formation, summarizing previous research on each aspect and the factors influencing them. Finally, I will outline the theoretical framework of self-formation used in this paper.

2.2.1 Definition

The concept of self-formation was introduced by Marginson as a response to the utilitarianism of the goal of higher education. As mentioned by Gert Biesta(2009), there are three functions of higher education: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. The chart

below summarises the education content and what can these content help students according to Biesta (2009)'s understanding of the above three functions.

Function of Education	What can education provide students with	How can HE help students
Qualification	knowledge, skills, and diplomas (credentials).	Equip them with the ability to engage in specific professions or tasks.
Socialisation	Education on social norms, values, and behaviour pattern.	Cultivate them to become part of society.
Subjectification	Education on individual's self-development and independence.	Help them become autonomous individuals capable of independent thinking and action.

Table1. Summarization of Biesta (2009)'s education's three function

Self-formation was raised as a paradigm for higher education's function of subjectification, which higher education can help students become self-directive individuals with consciousness of what they think is important for their own, instead of being. It emphasizes reflexive agency, wherein students continuously and consciously monitor and develop themselves (Marginson, 2024).

Several factors influence self-formation, including the degree of immersion in higher education, the scope of the agentic initiative, personal resources and support, educational arrangements, and existential challenges (Marginson, 2024). Transitions between cultures and countries can also accelerate self-reflection and transformation (Marginson, 2024).

Marginson (2014) illustrated self-formation theory in an international context, rejecting the adaptation perspective by emphasizing international students' self-responsibility. He argued that higher education should focus on helping students become independent, self-directive adults, rather than merely producing graduates with specific qualifications. This process is

never complete and occurs unevenly among students; some may never experience it (Marginson, 2024).

2.3 Research on the five components of self-formation

As mentioned above Marginson (2024) regards five aspects as important in the process of self-formation. This essay will use these five components as the theoretical framework to design the interview questions and guide data analysis. In this part, I will review the past literature about the five components of self-formation and the research gap in this area.

2.3.1 Autonomy

The first component is autonomy. Marginson (2024) defines it as being self-conscious about who they are and what they want to be, and the ability to self-direct the course of one's life free from external constraints.

In previous literature, autonomy is considered as the ability and attitude of learners to engage in learning actively. Holec defines learner autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981, p.3). Autonomy is also understood as an attitude of taking responsibility for decisions related to one's own learning (Dickinson, 1993). Dickinson (1993) proposes five characteristics of autonomous learners: (1) Identifying the content and objectives of learning and recognizing the importance of the learning material, (2) Choosing appropriate learning strategies, (3) Monitoring their use of learning strategies, (4) Identifying ineffective strategies, (5) Having the confidence to abandon ineffective strategies and try new ones.

In conclusion, autonomy in the concept of self-formation refers to one's self-awareness of their likes, dislikes and developing direction. In the context of learning, autonomy will enable student's proactive learning attitude and capability.

2.3.2 Reflexive Agency and Student Agency

The second component is reflexive agency. There is sufficient past research on the concept of agency. Generally, agency is understood as the ability of an individual to make decisions and initiate change in self and the world. Martin (2004,p.135) defines it as "the capability of

individual human beings to make choices and act on these choices in a way that makes a difference in their lives”. It emphasizes that the agency functions in a way that not only makes decisions but also makes efforts accordingly. Chambon, Filevich, & Haggard (2014, p.321) stress the subjects of the initiated change are not only in “their own state”, but also “in the state of the outside world.”

Reflexive agency refers to the agency that is reflexive. Reflexivity is thus important to be understood in comprehending what is “reflexive” about “reflexive agency”. Reflexivity can be understood as the ability to look back on one’s past experience critically make sense of it and learn from it. Mead (1928) motioned that as one reflect on their experiences, they also bring social processes into their past experiences by distancing themselves from their own experiences and examining them from the perspective of others.

As for reflexive agency, as previously stated, is a capability. Therefore, this concept introduces reflexivity into action, which means it not only contains the meaning of a process of reflexivity but also the ability of action based on the product of reflection.

In higher education, the object of agency is students. In this field, student agency as a concept has been studied widely. OECD (2019, p. 2) defines the concept of student agency as ‘the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change’. In with the context of education, research on student agencies is often connected with the factors affecting the realization of reflexive agency, and multiple aspects have been examined on this topic. Five important factors are found to affect the activation of student agency: the opportunity to apply the knowledge learnt into use and self-evaluate the acquired knowledge (Nieminen and Tuohilamp, 2020), clear, accurate and negotiable learning feedback (Francis, Millington, & Cederlöf, 2019), level of involvement in knowledge production such as course design (Gimenez, 2020) and self-efficacy (Hayes and Mansour, 2017).

In conclusion, reflexive agency refers to one’s capability to look back on their experience and generate understanding which can be used to direct future decision.

2.3.3. The will to learn

To define the meaning of the will to learn, here we will first distinguish it from “motivation”. People tend to use “motivation” to understand the “will” to learn. However, these two

concepts cannot be equated simply; will can be understood as the autonomous type of motivation. According to the self-determination theory, Deci and Ryan (2000) discuss the distinction between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Though both types of motivation contain intrinsic and extrinsic factors, autonomous motivation refers to the energy and will to take action based on intrinsic beliefs or the recognition of an extrinsic activity's value. In comparison, controlled motivation is driven by internal factors such as avoiding psychological threats (for example, shame) or pursuing self-esteem, and ego, or by external factors such as reward and punishment or approval from others. These are factors unrelated to the meaning and value of this matter. The will to learn in the context of self-formation relates to autonomous motivation. It can be understood as a proactive approach to learning, enthusiasm and curiosity for exploring the content rather than being driven by deadlines, assignments or the feeling of grade-A privilege.

Secondly, upon the meaning of being autonomously motivated, the will to learn also means an altitude of perseverance and courage towards challenges of learning. As mentioned by Barnett (2007), willingness to learn, as a key concept in higher education, emphasizes students' perseverance in learning despite facing uncertainty and challenges. This indicated that this concept is not simply "I have an interest in learning it", but also "I dare to act on this interest despite difficulties". Additionally, it is undeniable that in the context of education, students' learning cannot solely aim to satisfy personal interests; obtaining grades and graduating are equally important. Trifonas (2018) points out the importance of balancing the "duty to know" and "debt to know", to refer to humanity's responsibility and willingness to explore knowledge just for the sake of learning itself, and the obligation and indebtedness in acquiring knowledge as a way to solidify one's social status in a material society

In terms of the factors related to the realization of the will to learn, to conclude, there are two main categories of research have been done: personal factors and environmental factors. A high level of self-efficacy (Bandura,1997), adequate institutional resources(Vygotsky,1978) and supportive social relations (Tinto, 1993) are found to effectively activate students' will to learn.

To summarize, the will to learn refers to the motivation to learn which originates from one's acknowledgement of a certain activity's value, and it contains an altitude of perseverance and courage towards challenges of learning. To activate the will to learn, one's belief in their capability of accomplishing the task (self-efficacy) and the support from others are important.

2.3.4 The immersion in knowledge

Regarding this concept, although there is no general definition, many studies explore related concepts such as flow experience, deep learning, and student engagement. It all leads to a state of students where they show full engagement and concentration during the learning process. This goes beyond a mere interest in knowledge and refers to the student's ability to maintain high levels of focus, deep thinking, and active exploration during learning activities.

The research on this concept focuses on its function and factors affecting the realisation of it.

Regarding its function, Marginson (2023) mentioned how this immersion promotes students' self-formation in three ways. Firstly, it enhances the intellectual resources and tools for self-formation by expanding knowledge and skills. Secondly, the acquired knowledge can foster self-reflection. Finally, knowledge can facilitate social interaction, becoming part of the dialogue.

Previous research also explores the factors that influence the extent of students' immersion in knowledge during higher education. In summary, current researches find out factors such as the learner's interest, self-efficacy, the clarity and feasibility of learning tasks, feedback on learning outcomes, and a supportive learning environment contribute to achieving a sense of learning immersion.

Firstly, intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy are important personal factors affecting students' immersion in knowledge. Ryan and Deci (2000) indicate that student's interest and enthusiasm for learning significantly affect their level of engagement. Similarly, Bandura (1997) emphasizes that self-efficacy, or students' confidence in their ability to succeed in learning, also has a crucial impact on their immersion in knowledge.

Additionally, research related to flow can also be used to understand immersion in knowledge. The concept of flow, proposed by Csikszentmihalyi, refers to a state of complete absorption, selflessness, and enjoyment in what one is doing. This state not only provides an extremely pleasurable experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) but also promotes mental growth (Clarke & Haworth, 1994). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) proposed that achieving flow requires several conditions: clear goals, achievable tasks, and immediate feedback. When these conditions are met, people often enter a selfless state, becoming immersed in and enjoying what they are doing.

In addition to the factors mentioned earlier, many studies focus on supportive environments and their impact on immersion in knowledge. Current research analyzes how to create an environment conducive to knowledge immersion from perspectives such as teachers, technology, and teacher-student relationships. Biggs and Tang (2011) focus on the effect of teaching methods and found that student-centred teaching methods (such as group discussions and project-based learning) can enhance student engagement and immersion in knowledge. Additionally, there are also researches on the effect of educational technologies. Wu & Huang (2007) found that technologies such as virtual reality and simulation experiments effectively improve students' learning experiences and sense of immersion. Also, in this field, many researchers pay attention to the teacher's role in immersive learning. Vygotsky (1978), in his theory of social constructivism, emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the learning process, positing that students can reach their potential development level with the guidance and assistance of more knowledgeable others.

Here, we distinguish between the will to learn and immersion in knowledge. Both are categorized in the literature review by personal and environmental factors, and many similar factors, such as self-efficacy and a supportive environment, can impact their realization. However, there are significant differences between these two concepts, which manifest in two aspects: first, their meanings differ, and second, the extent to which they are influenced by internal and external factors varies.

Firstly, the will to learn emphasizes the willpower and enthusiasm for learning, involving students' passion for actively exploring. In contrast, immersion in knowledge refers to the state of perseverance and focus during the learning process.

Secondly, the will to learn is more influenced by internal factors, such as one's interest in knowledge, whereas immersion in knowledge requires adequate environmental support to be achieved. To attain immersion in knowledge, a strong desire to learn must be accompanied by sufficient external support. For example, a person may have a strong desire to explore knowledge, but if they are not provided with any resources, are in an environment unsuitable for learning, or lack guidance and help from those with more knowledge, achieving a good state of immersion is very challenging.

To conclude, immersion in knowledge refers to one's highly focused study state and active interaction with knowledge over a long period of time. This state can be more easily realized

if one is intrinsically motivated and confident, as well as being supported with achievable and clear goals, in-time feedback and resources needed.

2.3.5 Relational Experience

Marginson briefly mentioned this concept after the four sections above, positing that "...the relational experiences of students beyond the classroom... for some students are as profoundly formative as discipline-based learning."(2024.p.750) This sentence emphasizes that extracurricular relationship experiences can provide students with significant personal growth and development, just like the knowledge learned in the classroom.

In the field of higher education, the research on the relational experience focuses on different types of relations: friendship, relationships with peers and relations with teachers and faculty members. There is also a large quantity of research on relational experience's impact on students' academic performance and their overall well-being.

Friendship can be regarded as one of the most important relationships for students in higher education. Newcomb and Bagwell (1995) posit that friendship features mutual-beneficial and intimacy. Despite research on its positive impact on student's mental health (Fischer,2007; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010), academic performance (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997) and social skills (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995), there is also research reviling the complexity of it, including how competition, social status and gender affect the establishment of friendship (Brooks, 2007).

The teacher-student relationship is also a significant type of interaction outside the classroom. In higher education, research on out-of-class interactions with teachers focuses on the impact of these interactions on students. Generally, positive contact with teachers outside the classroom helps alleviate students' psychological stress (Schreiner, Noel, & Cantwell, 2011), improves academic performance (Cox & Orehovec, 2007), and aids in career planning (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004).

In general, relational experience in self-formation is formative yet complex. The relation with peer and teacher are two typical types in the context of higher education. Positive relation contributes to student's psucholohical well-being and academic performance.

2.4 Theoretical framework

This research will use these five factors as the framework for analysis. Self-formation in higher education is characterized by immersion in disciplinary knowledge and extracurricular activities, as well as the relational experiences of students beyond the classroom. Marginson (2023) identified five essential aspects of self-formation in higher education: learner autonomy, reflexive agency, the will to learn, and immersion in disciplinary knowledge and relational experiences

Components	Definition
Autonomy	One's self-awareness of their likes, dislikes and developing direction; the ability to self-direct the course of one's life free from external constraints.
Reflexive Agency	One's capability to look back on their experience and generate understanding which can be used to direct future decision
The will to learn	The motivation to learn originates from one's acknowledgement of a certain activity's value, and it contains an altitude of perseverance and courage towards challenges of learning
Immersion in Knowledge	One's highly focused study state and active interaction with knowledge over a long period of time.
Relational experience	Friendships, romantic relationships, relations with teachers and faculty members and so on.

Table2. Five components of Marginson 's (2024) self-formation as the theoretical framework

2.5 Research gap

Existing research has gaps in two areas. Firstly, Current research on self-formation lacks comprehensive studies examining the impact of students' educational backgrounds on their adaptation and coping strategies. Previous studies have typically emphasized the differences between local and international students. Mullins, Quintrell, and Hancock (1995) found that international fee-paying and local students shared similar issues of academic pressure, financial issues lack of motivation, etc. However, there exists a neglect of a significant cohort:

individuals from similar cultural backgrounds who have varying undergraduate education. These students share comparable cultural traditions and values, yet their experiences in shaping their identities and personal growth might diverge due to the differing lengths of time spent studying overseas, different levels of adaptability and so on. Secondly, existing research on Chinese students tends to focus primarily on their study abroad experiences, while lacking in-depth exploration of their inner growth and the process of becoming autonomous individuals. Although there is a substantial body of literature acknowledging the many challenges they face while studying abroad, much of this research primarily analyzes issues related to cross-cultural adaptation, such as the conflict between collectivist and individualist cultures and language barriers. These studies often aim to explain the reasons behind these difficulties, but they fall short of addressing the inner reflection and personal growth of Chinese students as they navigate these challenges.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its focus on the impact of prior educational backgrounds on Chinese students, a factor that has often been overlooked in previous research. Our research aims to address these gaps in the literature by delving into the unique developmental trajectories of these specific groups during their pursuit of master's degrees, with a special focus on the development of their inner world. By comparing these cohorts, we seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of how different educational background influences the self-formation processes of students with same ethnicity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research aims to explore the experience of Chinese international students from different undergraduate educational backgrounds. Following this purpose, in this part I will therefore introduce the philosophical stance, research paradigm and approach I adopt to facilitate the realization of this goal.

3.1 Philosophical position

Starting from the research question, I started thinking about selecting a philosophical position to guide me in finding out what kind of knowledge I can attain through my research. Considering that this study explores how international students make sense of the knowledge they obtained and their opinions about reality by investigating their cross-cultural life

experience and comparing whether previous environments have caused any difference in their sense-making, I adopt social constructivism as its philosophical position.

In this position, the epistemological and ontological beliefs are that knowledge and understanding are generated in human social interaction (Muniyappan and Sivakumar, 2018) and that reality is “constructed through human activity” (Kim, 2001, p3).

This philosophical position is well-suited for this research for two main reasons. Firstly, it provides a specific way of understanding knowledge and reality, providing me with a method to probe deeper into the research aim and decide to explore how my candidates construct their knowledge and reality in their international education experience. Secondly, by emphasising the role of social interaction and negotiation in the construction of knowledge and reality, social constructivism provides a valuable perspective for understanding human experience (Prawat & Floden, 1994), guides me to focus more on how their interactions with society and others have affected them in their experiences.

3.2 Paradigm

Having identified an appropriate worldview to understand the knowledge I seek to obtain through my research, I began to think about concrete research design and approach to conducting my research, and here I decided to use the interpretative paradigm in qualitative research as the research paradigm.

The interpretive paradigm is one of the three most important types of research paradigms in qualitative research. (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). It is best used to understand human experience and how humans construct meaning for their experiences. (Phothongsunan, 2010). This paradigm emphasizes the interactive relationship between researchers and participants where researchers act as the research instrument in data collection and data interpretation (Fossey et al., 2002). Through interaction with participants, they together achieve a deep understanding of the research phenomena.

In this study, applying interpretive paradigms suits this research. Firstly, the naturalism of the interpretative paradigm includes the high density of natural human interaction between the researcher and participant (Phothongsunan, 2010), this can help immerse the researcher in the

research content to interpret their statements as close to their feelings as possible. Secondly, this paradigm as opposed to the positivistic one, believes that reality is multi-layered (Cohen et al, 2002) and the understanding of the social world cannot be simplified into equation-alike law or theorem (Phothongsunan, 2010). This flexibility is well-suited for this study because the variables of the research subjects are difficult to control. Their previous experiences, education, personality, and the influence of those around them all impact their self-formation. Therefore, using the flexibility of this framework to understand the self-formation process of this group allows for an honest approach to the complexity of each individual's experiences and attempts to understand their perspectives shaped by their own experiences, without being overly concerned about the correlation between variables A and B.

However, the interpretative paradigm has some disadvantages, mainly reflected in the interference of the researcher's subjectivity, overly dependent and shadow interpretation, and limited generalizability.

Firstly, research under the interpretative paradigm highly relies on researchers' interpretation of the data, which will inevitably introduce subjectivity into the findings and results. This risk runs throughout the entire research process, starting from the research design. Researchers may design a study according to their own biases, aiming to confirm those biases. During the data collection and analysis stages, they might only gather the information they want or use data that supports their biases for analysis, without considering the original context of the data.

Secondly, this paradigm requires researchers to listen and feel genuinely in the interaction with participants, to see and understand the world in the participant's eyes, which may lead researchers to overly trust their statements and interpret them superficially. Phothongsunan (2010) use "false consciousness" to describe this phenomenon, referring to participants' misinterpretation of their situation. For example, oppressed individuals claim they are not oppressed, while structurally they are indeed being oppressed. Therefore, researchers bear the responsibility to explore deeper structural issues within their statements instead of settling down on what they said without further exploration.

Thirdly, due to the uniqueness of the human experience and the small sample, the finding bears little possibility of generalization. However, researchers have come to an agreement that the initial purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize the findings from the

sample to a larger population, rather, it aims to better understand the unique experience of a group of people in a specific circumstance (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020). Thus, even knowing the limitation of generalizability, the research under this framework is still valuable and meaningful.

3.3 Positionality

In the aforementioned research paradigm, researchers need to be highly involved in the research process and data analysis. This requires researchers to continually reflect on their own positionality to minimize the influence of their subjectivity on the research.

Positionality refers to the researcher's gender, ethnicity, background, age and other features which can be used as his/her identity (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). Being a member of the Chinese international student community will affect the design of the research data collection and analysis of the data. To clarify my positionality and proactively reflect on the effect of my positionality will not only positively contribute to the rigour of my research design, but also limit the interference of my subjectivity in the data collection and interpretation.

I would like to reflect on my positionality from the perspective of research interests and the preconceived notion. My identity as a Chinese international student doing a master's degree in the UK inspires me to explore this topic. This curiosity originates from my rather difficult experience of fitting into the academic and social life in the UK compared with those UKU. Back then, I assumed the reason for their comparably easier adaptation was because their undergraduate took place in the UK. Therefore, I developed the first version of the research question: "Why does UKU fit in better than CMU in UK post-graduate studies?" However, upon reflection, I realized that this question contained a preconceived notion that all UKS fit in better than CMU which ignored the unique difficulty of UKU by default. To understand the uniqueness of all human experiences, I modified my research question to make the educational background a focus of observation rather than a default attribution, changing it to: "What is the self-formation process of the UKU and CMU in their postgraduate studies in the UK?".

At the same time, I also reflected on my own positionality throughout the research process. Following the approach to reflexivity outlined by Soedirgo and Glas (2020), I identified both my perceived position and what I assumed to be the interviewee's position before collecting

data. After each interview, I reviewed the interaction to assess how these positions played out in practice. For instance, prior to interviewing a student majoring in English linguistics, I assumed that they might be better adapted to cultural shock. As a result, I remained cautious not to subconsciously steer the conversation to confirm this assumption. This preparation and reflection led me to ask, "How do you think your undergraduate studies influenced your ability to adapt to new cultures?" rather than, "Do you think your undergraduate studies helped you adapt to new cultures?"

While analyzing the data, I consistently reflected on whether my interpretation accurately represented the interviewees' true intentions. I ensured that the meaning of their statements was confirmed by considering the context and the overall information from the interviews, rather than imposing my own ideas onto the analysis or attempting to use the data to validate my hypotheses. For example, although my research hypothesis included an assumption about the superior adaptability of UKU students, I made a conscious effort not to let this assumption influence my analysis. When examining the statements from UKU students, I paid particular attention to their descriptions of the difficulties they faced, giving equal consideration to these challenges as I did to similar accounts from CMU students.

3. 4 Interview as the research method

In this research, semi-structured interviews have been utilized as the research method. In this section, I will discuss why this method fits into my research, how it relates to the philosophical position of research and the paradigm of research, and its possible drawbacks.

The semi-structured interview has a lot of advantages. Firstly, it is a kind of interview that combines the advantages of the structured interview and unstructured interview. Pre-set questions provide a framework for the interview to ensure that information related to the key topic of the research can be obtained. On the other hand, further questions can be asked in the interview based on the interviewee's answers to dig for more in-depth information (Dickinson, 1993). Secondly, considering the difference in participants' majors, backgrounds, ages and majors, a semi-structured interview is suitable to explore the diversity of their experience.

Semi-structured interviews are consistent with the philosophical stance of social constructivism and the interpretivism paradigm. Considering the philosophical position, by providing a space where participants can share their understanding of reality, the data

collected through this approach is suitable for exploring how individuals construct meaning through their backgrounds, experiences, and social interactions. Considering the interpretivism paradigm, this approach requires the interpretation from the researcher, under the interpretative paradigm, research methods need to be able to deeply understand individual experience and the process of meaning construction. Semi-structured interviews are therefore an appropriate approach as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the respondent's reflections and social interactions.

3.5 Constructing the interview questions

I designed the questions according to the five important aspects of self-formation in higher education by Marginson: “the autonomy of the learner, reflexive agency, the will to learn, immersion in knowledge” and “relational experience”. (Marginson, 2024) While designing, I found that it was challenging to directly formulate questions regarding reflexive agency. Therefore, I developed two sections on cultural adaptation and personal growth, and combined their reflection in these areas with their academic reflection to observe their reflexive agency.

To make the interview question more rigorously designed, I conducted a pilot interview with a classmate who also qualifies for being the research candidate. We decided to carry out this interview in person. In this pilot interview, I discovered a problem with the interview questions the original question on the “immersion in knowledge” aspect is vague and hard to answer. The original question is “To what level do you think you are immersed in the knowledge you are learning in your master’s studies?”. During the interview, my participant found this question difficult to answer. So I changed this to “Can you list some unforgettable knowledge you’ve learned and why” and “What do you think is the most inspiring knowledge you’ve learnt so far”. Through these two more specific questions, I get to explore their interaction with knowledge to indirectly see their immersion in knowledge.

Detailed interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

3.6 Participant Selection and Recruitment

In this section, I will introduce the inclusion criteria of participants, the recruiting method and the process.

3.6.1 Inclusion criteria

The participant should qualify for the following criteria: 1. Chinese; 2. Currently pursuing a master's degree in the UK; 3. Graduated from either a UK or Chinese undergraduate university. See Appendix D for more information.

The reason for requirement 2 is for those who are currently in their master's programme, their memories of the experience are still fresh, which will enable a comparably adequate and authentic storytelling process. In addition, for those who already graduated from their master's programme, their experience may vary vastly due to the social context, resulting in significant differences. Further, these differences might not be unique to them individually but rather reflect the collective memory of people during that period. For instance, those pursuing their master's degrees during the pandemic faced unique challenges. Since we are currently beyond the pandemic's impact, we have chosen to interview students who are still enrolled to control for such variables.

3.6.2 Recruitment

In terms of recruiting the participants, I adopted three methods to recruit participants: an in-person approach, social media, and snowball sampling. The reasons to adopt these methods is due to the unique advantage of each method.

Firstly, the in-person approach stands in its efficiency because students in the Department of Education generally have a high enthusiasm for educational research, coupled with our friendships and their understanding of the recruitment process, they are a group that is more easily recruited by me. However, this method has its fatal disadvantages of poor representativity and transferability (Johnson et al., 2020). In this research, it might lead to a more homogeneous group of participants, all from the same university and the same major. As a result, their experiences may be similar, which is not conducive to obtaining more representative data.

The social media approach has a broad reach, which improves the chance of gaining a diversified sample group instead of just focusing on the students in Oxford. However, due to the mixed nature of people online, it takes a longer time to screen them, verify their identities, and confirm their willingness to participate.

The snowball sampling compensates for the shortcomings of methods 1 and 2, by asking acquaintances to help me find suitable candidates, I have the opportunity to reach students from diverse backgrounds through their varied social networks. Additionally, their identities are already verified within these networks, reducing the time and effort required for communication and confirmation. However, this method might cause some inconvenience for my friends. Therefore, I have thanked each of the students who assisted me and expressed my willingness to reciprocate by helping with their research in the future.

During the actual recruiting process, I first contact the classmates around me, briefly explain to them the topic of my research, and the inclusion criteria of the candidates and confirm their interest in taking part. Most of them were friendly and willing to support me, and one of them offered to help me do a pilot interview. Three participants were gained through this approach. Secondly, I translated the recruitment material and participant information form (See Appendix D and C) into Chinese and posted it on Chinese social media Xiao Hong Shu. Approximately 10 people contacted me to express their interests. However, upon confirming their qualification for this research, some are excluded because they are not currently studying but already graduated, or have busy schedules. I end up gaining 0 people through this platform. Later I tried to send the poster to the online social media WeChat to my friends who may qualify with a lot of Q&A to help them know better about this research. I gained 4 participants through this method. Thirdly, I asked my WeChat friend to help me post the recruitment material or directly contact those who qualify to see if they have interests or not. I gained 7 participants through this way.

Through this process, I successfully recruited 14 participants. This number can be regarded as enough for the following reasons. Firstly, full data saturation in qualitative research is unrealistic (Johnson et al., 2020). On the one hand, it is difficult to reach all the individuals who qualify for the inclusion criteria, especially when considering the size of this eligible group changes over time. On the other hand, the time and resources available for completing a research project are often limited, compelling researchers to recruit as many participants as possible within these constraints. Secondly, in this research, I increased the diversity of the sample by recruiting students from different academic backgrounds and different universities, making the study meaningful and representative with a sample size of 14.

Here is the basic information of my participants, their majors include art, mathematics, education, and linguistics, with a higher number of students having a background in education. Additionally, half of the students are from Oxford, while the other half are from other universities in the UK.

Demographics	Description	Quantity
Location of Undergraduate University	UK	7
	China	7
Undergraduate University	Oxford	7
	Non-Oxford	7
Major/Programme in Master	Education Studies	6
	Tesol	2
	Linguistics	2
	Statistics	1
	Music	1
	Management	1
	Internet	1
Change Major in Master	Yes	7
	No	7

Table 3. Participant Demographics

3.7 Data Collection

During the data collection phase, I conducted interviews using a combination of online and in-person methods. After recruiting participants, I arranged to meet them either online via Microsoft Teams or in person. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes to one hour.

For the online interviews, I used the recording feature in Microsoft Teams to ensure that all conversations were accurately captured. For the in-person interviews, I used a mobile phone to record the discussions.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese. After completing the interviews, the meeting records were automatically generated and saved in the meeting chat after the meeting. I transcribed all the recordings to create a comprehensive dataset. Since I needed to present quotes in English for the thesis, I translated the useful sentences into English for data analysis.

3.8 Data Analysis

This paper employs thematic analysis for data analysis. I strictly followed the five steps of thematic analysis proposed by Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun (2017): familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, organizing codes into themes, reviewing themes and their relationships, defining and naming themes, and generating the report.

During the coding process, I categorized each participant's transcripts according to the theoretical framework. Each part summarized keywords that highlighted the characteristics of that segment of the interview, future information can be seen in Appendix A. Then, I analyzed each person's experiences according to the five dimensions of the theoretical framework. Subsequently, I summarized different themes under each category, resulting in a thematic analysis report distinguished by the theoretical framework.

3.9 Ethics

This research has passed the ethics review of the Central University Research Ethics Committee. However, it may still bear a slight ethical risk in three aspects: Privacy, intrusive questions, and lengthy interviews. In this part, I will introduce why these ethical problems exist in my research and how they are properly dealt with.

Firstly, due to the research topic, most of the research questions focus on the participants' undergraduate and postgraduate experiences. This inevitably involves asking about many personal details, such as their schools, majors, and ages. To ensure strict protection of their privacy, I will adhere to the requirements set by the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee, not disclosing any information that could reveal their identities, and keeping them informed about my commitment to their privacy.

Secondly, since the research explores their personal development, some interview questions might lead them to recall unpleasant memories. For example, asking about moments of academic pressure during their postgraduate studies or challenges faced in their daily lives might evoke painful memories. To address this issue, I ensure that I approach my participants with a high level of empathy and compassion, not forcing them to discuss memories they are unwilling to share. I also provide strong emotional support during the process, acknowledging their past hardships and praising their efforts to overcome difficulties. If a participant shows signs of distress, I will immediately pause the interview and allow them to

rest and recover. Fortunately, all participants remained emotionally stable during the interviews.

Thirdly, since I inquire about their personal experiences from social, academic, and cultural perspectives, and need to explore how they achieve self-formation during their study abroad, as well as the connection between these changes and their undergraduate education, my interviews tend to be lengthy, often lasting around one hour. To mitigate potential fatigue and stress, I check in with participants at the 30-minute and 45-minute mark to see if they need a break. Luckily, all participants have indicated that they do not require a break.

3.9.1 Informed Consent

To make sure all participants are aware of the research requirements, I wrote a participant consent form consisting of information such as the timeline to withdraw, the need to audio record etc. With options listed in this form, I protected the rights of all my participants to participate in this research in the way they feel comfortable with.

After gaining their contact, I sent the form to them, and informed them of the expected return date and the places where they should sign an electronic signature. Eventually, I gained all my participants' consent to take part in this research with their agreement on being directly quoted, being audio recorded and no one asked to withdraw during this research.

For details on participant consent form see Appendix G.

3.9.2 Data Management and Confidentiality

I will use Nexus365 OneDrive for Business file storage service to store all the data (consent forms, interview recordings and transcripts) which is approved by the University of Oxford for research data storage.

During my research, audio recordings and other necessary data will be downloaded and saved to my laptop, which will be permanently deleted after the submission of my dissertation.

I will anonymize all participants' names and personal information, referring to them only by CMU, UKU, and identification numbers. All the downloaded data will be moved from the

file folder to the wastebasket application of my Mac laptop and cleared at the same time. No directly identifiable personal information will be collected or used in the research.

Summary

This chapter discusses the methodology of this research. Starting by introducing the philosophical stance, I stated the reason why my research question reflects this philosophy. Followed by the research paradigm, and qualitative research paradigm and reflected on my positionality. Then, I discussed the reasons for choosing semi-structured interviews as the research approach, along with their advantages and disadvantages. Following that, I outlined the design rationale behind my interview questions. In the subsequent section, I detailed the recruitment process of interviewees, their basic demographics, the process of obtaining informed consent, the measures taken in this study to protect privacy, and considerations and responses to ethical issues.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The current data situation includes interviews with 14 Chinese international students, 7 from undergraduate programs in the UK, and 7 from undergraduate programs in mainland China. The following findings are divided into five aspects according to the theoretical framework: autonomy, reflexive agency, the will to learn, immersion in knowledge and relational experience. CMU will be used to refer to Chinese students who are China mainland undergraduates and UKU will be used to refer to those who are UK undergraduates. Numbers attached to CMU and UKU are indicators for participants ranging from 1 to 14.

In sum, the self-formation paths of the two groups are indeed influenced by their past educational experiences, particularly in terms of the will to learn. This is mainly due to their varying levels of adaptation to living and studying abroad. Under the influence of negative conditions such as stress, anxiety, and lack of confidence, some students are unable to fully utilize the resources of higher education for self-growth. Therefore, the impact of past educational experiences on self-formation during the master's period is not direct; it affects psychological states by influencing the degree of adaptation to life and study. This, in turn, leads to varying levels of knowledge immersion and acquisition, resulting in different self-development trajectories for each individual.

4.1 Findings in Autonomy and Reflexive Agency

Autonomy, as one of the important components of self-formation, involves recognizing oneself as the primary person responsible for one's own development, and understanding what one wants and who one wants to become. Reflexive agency refers to a person's capability to reflect on their experience, learn from it and take action.

In analysing the interview data, I found it challenging to separate autonomy and reflexivity. When making decisions, individuals consider both their understanding of what they want and their reflections on past experiences. These two aspects jointly influence decision-making. Therefore, this section will combine both parts to examine the similarities and differences between the two groups.

During their master's experiences as international students, there are two significant moments when they need to make major decisions: 1. deciding to pursue a master's degree and 2. making choices about their future after completing the master's degree. Additionally, their behaviors in coping with stress and challenges also involve these two factors.

To make it clear how their autonomy and agency are expressed, I will add parentheses in their quotes to indicate where the language demonstrates their reflexive agency or active autonomy. For example: "I feel that I really enjoy this subject, and I want to continue studying it (demonstration of autonomy). Reflecting on my past experiences, I realized that I am very good at this subject (reflection on past experience), so I decided to pursue a master's degree (action prompted by reflective agency)."

4.1.1 Why pursue a master's degree

In deciding to study abroad, both groups observed the role of their reflexive agency. They reflected on their past experiences, learned from them, and made decisions based on these reflections. Simultaneously, there was an expression of autonomy, as they both considered what they wanted and what they aspired to become during this process. In this regard, there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of autonomy and reflexive agency.

In the data, autonomy was expressed in two forms:

1. Understanding what they want: wanting to continue research, seeking higher employment competitiveness, exploring themselves, and experiencing foreign cultures.
2. Understanding what they do not want: not wanting to work immediately after graduation.

Reflexive agency here mainly manifested through reviewing their past university experiences and recognizing their academic passion, abilities, or suitable programme.

For some students, their decisions were primarily driven by their passion for their subjects. For example, P2 from CMU mentioned that her undergraduate thesis experience sparked her interest in the application of disease imaging in medicine. She felt she was good at it (reflection on past experience 1) and realized her undergraduate studies were too theoretical (reflection on past experience 2). She wanted to learn more applied knowledge during her master's (demonstration of autonomy), which led to her decision to pursue a master's degree (action prompted by reflective agency). A similar situation occurred with UKU students, such as P12, who, when deciding to pursue a master's, thought about her passion for exploring her subject during her undergraduate years (reflection on past experience), realizing she wanted to continue researching this field (expression of autonomy), thus deciding to pursue a master's degree (action prompted by reflective agency).

Other students made decisions more based on future career considerations, but this process also showed clear reflexive agency and autonomy. For instance, P8 (CMU) mentioned that his reason for wanting to pursue a master's was not due to an interest in the subject (expression of autonomy 1) but to improve his employment competitiveness (expression of autonomy 2). By reviewing his undergraduate studies and master's programs (reflection on past experiences), he found that the current program was the most suitable for him, leading him to start his master's here (action prompted by autonomy and reflective agency).

In making this decision, some students indicated that the decision process involved multiple factors, including "*wanting to experience life and education abroad*" (P3, CMU), "*not*

knowing what job I would like after graduation" (P9, UKU), and *"parents' career planning"* (P4, CMU).

Overall, in making this decision, both groups combined their past experiences, based on insights and ideas gained from these experiences, to make decisions that aligned with their intentions.

4.1.2: Variations regarding the change in plan

Regarding their decisions about future choices after completing their master's degrees, both groups also exhibited autonomy and reflexive agency, but they attribute this change differently. In both groups, some individuals felt the difficulty of master-level research during their master's studies and decided not to pursue a PhD. However, UKU students, having experienced both undergraduate and master's education within the UK system, can clearly perceive the increase in academic difficulty. On the other hand, CMU students, transitioning from the Chinese education system to the UK system, lack the continuity that provides a reference for academic difficulty. As a result, they tend to attribute their struggles to their own lack of ability rather than recognizing the inherent challenges of master-level research. This retrospective conclusion contains stress response, fully attributing their performance under immense pressure to their abilities or academic potential.

It is worth noting that before coming to the UK for her master's degree, CMU5 had already obtained a master's degree in her home country, making this her second master's degree. In her reflection, she mentioned that after completing her first master's degree, she felt confident about pursuing a PhD. However, upon arriving here, she lost the courage to continue to a PhD due to the immense academic pressure.

She said: *"Previously, I wanted to pursue a PhD (expression of autonomy). But now I'm in the UK, pursuing my second master's, I feel I definitely can't pursue a Ph.D. It's not a change in academic passion or interest; it's the pressure of this academic environment (a reflexive action) that makes me feel I can't do it anymore."*

UKU10: *" When I was an undergraduate, although I got a pretty high score on my thesis, I know how much effort it took me to write it (a reflexive action). Similarly, this year, every*

course has been incredibly difficult for me when it comes to writing (a reflexive action). I often feel extremely emotional and cry almost every day. So, I think that pursuing a PhD, which might take three four, or even five years, this stress probably not suitable for me. I feel that I am more suited to interacting with people, and it made me happy. (expression of autonomy)"

UKU 13 also showed more reflection on her undergraduate experience when deciding her future. She told me she had a lot of chances to practice what she had learnt in her undergraduate and master's studies and she really enjoyed these practical experiences. *"When I was younger, I wanted to pursue a PhD because I wanted others to think I was impressive. However, now considering a PhD means writing papers for three to five years, I feel I prefer a job where I can have more practical experience like before (expression of autonomy).*

These phenomena can be related to external pressure interfering with decision-making. Comparing CMU2 and CMU5 with UKU10 and UKU13, it's clear that the UK group demonstrate a deeper reflection on their past educational experiences. They both relate to their previous educational experience in their self-reflection. UKU10's struggle in writing a thesis during her undergraduate studies and UKU13's adherence to past practical experience is the experience they obtained from three years as undergraduates with deep involvement in the British educational system. This provides continuity in their experiences before they enter the master's program. Thus, in their reflections, even with the similar reason of "academic stress", P5 (CMU) 's presentation appears to resemble a short-term stress response, while P10 (UKU) deeply reflects on whether she can endure this pressure based on her past experiences.

Between these two groups, their agency is activated in decision-making as they mention how they change their minds in their self-reflection. However, the CMU group's lack of adaptive experience amplifies the influence of external challenges, leading them to incorporate avoidance strategies into their future decisions. The UKU group has already navigated challenges in this educational system, so their decisions reflect their independent consciousness with fewer external factors effect.

Through the above comparison, it can be concluded that despite both individuals reflecting on their master's experiences and their self-awareness in this decision, their reflections are influenced by stress factors—different levels of adaptability result in varying psychological

resilience when facing pressure. Those who lack adaptability, have a stress response when confronted with intense pressure, influencing their future decisions. If they realized that their performance fell short of expectations due to factors such as lack of experience, difficulties in adapting to life, and changes in the academic environment, they might form a different retrospective conclusion. In contrast, some UKUs have already gained a rather high level of adaptability from their previous educational system regarding similar challenges, hence their decisions reflect greater independence from external factors.

4.2 Findings in the will to learn

The will to learn, under self-formation, emphasizes an awareness of autonomous learning and the courage to overcome difficulties. In analyzing the data, I concentrated on the definition of the will to learn within the theoretical framework, comparing the two groups based on two main aspects: their interest in the subject and their perseverance and courage in facing learning challenges.

In terms of the will to learn, both groups of students expressed a certain interest in their subjects, the main distinction lies in the latter, psychological resilience to continue learning despite difficulties.

Firstly, UKU students have generally already gone through this adjustment phase and face fewer obstacles adapting to the educational system during their master's studies. However, many CMU students find it challenging to adapt to the UK's grading system and essay tests. They often feel that the heavy reliance on final coursework assessments makes the grading system a 'one-shot deal', this makes them very uncomfortable, especially for those who came from a comprehensive grading system

Like CM7:

“In undergrad, we had many smaller assignments or quizzes. If you messed up one, the others could make up for it.”

This causes huge psychological stress for them. As mentioned by CMU4: "Six essays decide your fate. It doesn't matter if you attend classes as long as you write good essays. I sometimes wonder if this is reasonable because the final pressure is immense."

Another frequently mentioned source of stress is the format of the exams. CMU5 mentioned that she is very uncomfortable with essay exams, finding it extremely difficult to write 3,000 words in English within an hour.

“Three hours and 3,000 words, which is impossible for me. Indeed, you need to write an essay—not just any essay, but one where you have to present an argument, support it with evidence, include theoretical concepts, and apply critical thinking. It's quite challenging, the standards are too high here.”

Despite the uncomfortable and anxiety brought by the assessment, many of them express they face significant challenges in English listening, writing, and speaking.

CMU4: “The amount of reading is very large. I might just get through it haphazardly and have a half-baked understanding. Then, during class, native speakers have very smooth interactions with the teacher, and I don't get much opportunity to speak. Seeing this, I always feel that I haven't done very well.”

CMU2: “After arriving, I realize that language is the biggest issue. Teachers talk super fast in a single class, compressing a lot of material into one session.”

CMU5: “The academic pressure is super intense, so intense that it makes you want to die. During my entire first term, I could hardly understand anything. There is a lot you need to learn on your own, and I feel like I can never finish learning everything like I will never be able to catch up.”

Overall, the educational background makes CMU face more challenges during their master's studies than UKU, increasing the difficulty of academic success. They first need to mobilize their motivation under intense pressure, and the new educational system hinders the reference value of past achievements.

Therefore, studying with insufficient intrinsic motivation makes it difficult to meet expectations with academic feedback, which in turn leads to a further lack of willingness to learn.

In contrast, UKU students did not experience significant discomfort with the language, because they have spent their undergraduate years meticulously studying and summarizing their own experiences. During their master's studies, they often continue to apply the effective patterns they developed during their undergraduate years.

UKU 10: *“During my first year in undergraduate, the pressure was quite intense, especially with reading. I remember at the beginning; I could spend a whole day and still not finish reading one article. I spent entire days sitting in a chair reading literature. After a semester, though, I started to pick out what I considered important sections or those that interested me the most. Eventually, I gradually adapted to it.”*

UKU12: *“In my freshman year, I found myself wanting to remember everything from the literature I read, but I couldn't. For the first week of school, I resorted to the old-fashioned method of copying large sections of content, but I soon realized it was highly inefficient. I started following study bloggers to learn from their experiences and tried to mimic their methods. By my sophomore year, I had developed my own system for writing papers and organizing my reading notes and class preparations. It was a system I gradually developed, figuring out what methods suited me best, and I've stuck with it ever since.”*

The transferability of past study skills for UKU students minimizes obstacles in immersive learning, helping them absorb knowledge more efficiently. In contrast, CMU students need to invest more effort in learning methods and habits that suit them, encountering relatively more obstacles to immersion in their studies.

On the other hand, academic pressure is not only felt by CMU students; UKU students also experience it. Instead of finding it difficult to adapt to the assessment system, UKU students are more likely to mention their challenges due to the deepening and increased difficulty of the course content.

UKU7: *“In undergrad, my essays felt like Author A says this is right, Author B says this is wrong, and Author C says there are both right and wrong aspects, and I agree with Author C. In my master's, it feels like the background of the problem needs to be based on a theoretical foundation, and the issue needs to be closely linked to that theory, which is quite difficult.”*

UKU10: "In undergrad, most essays were argumentative. Now, they are more empirical, and there are more critical reviews. The word count has also increased dramatically—from about 2,500 to 3,000 words in undergrad to 5,000 words for each assignment now, which adds a lot of pressure."

Overall, both groups experienced academic pressure during their master's studies. However, CMU students not only had to adapt to a higher-risk grading system but also had to face the difficulty of the study content itself. The lack of reduced transferability of past study skills and the reduced reference of past achievements due to the incoherence of the education system influences CMU's self-efficacy which harms their will to learn.

4.3 Findings in the Immersion in Knowledge

According to the definition of immersion in knowledge, achieving this state requires not only an interest in the subject but also a flow experience during learning. Although immersion can occur passively such as being forced to immerse under pressure of DDL, it is often accompanied by discomfort and anxiety. For self-formation, such a painful state contrasts with the positive motivation advocated by *the will to learn*, making it a form of passive knowledge immersion that is detrimental to self-development.

Marginson (2023), when explaining immersion in knowledge, emphasizes the outcome of this immersion: acquiring substantial knowledge through immersion is a crucial collective asset for self-exploration and personal development. However, he does not recognize the contribution of passive immersion to self-formation. In *the will to learn*, Marginson's perspective is that true learning occurs only when driven by intrinsic motivation. The process of self-formation cannot be simplified to merely acquiring knowledge through rote methods; it requires internalizing the knowledge.

Therefore, when understanding students' immersion in knowledge, it is important to consider whether they are driven by intrinsic motivation and whether they engage in long-term exploration and pursuit of knowledge. In this regard, there is no significant difference between the two groups. Although it was previously mentioned that UKU students face fewer adaptation challenges, this only indicates an advantage in the tools for knowledge exploration due to prior experience. Knowledge exploration is inherently arduous and challenging for the

majority of students in both groups. The difficulty of challenges, future career plans, and academic requirements lead many students to lack sufficient motivation for prolonged immersion in knowledge. Additionally, they often perceive that such immersion does not benefit them, especially when their goal is employment and the theoretical knowledge they acquire does not directly help in their job search.

CMU5: "I just feel like I can't finish learning the demanded material. No matter how hard I try, I can't reach my goals. Right now, I'm very resistant to learning; I just don't feel like learning anything at all."

CMU6: "Those who want to do a PhD after this program might need to invest more time and energy into studies, but since I don't have that plan, during my studies, I've been more passive, about 70% passively motivated by DDL and assignments and 30% actively motivated by my interest."

CMU7: "It would be even better if there were more practical components included in our studies. Initially, I had this expectation when I came, but actually, there aren't many opportunities for practical experience."

CMU8: "I'm quite realistic about this; I'm studying to get a job and make money in the future, and not considering pursuing a PhD. My study attitude has been passive. For the first 10 weeks of the 12-week course, I didn't feel any pressure. I just attended the classes and did my own things at home. However, as the time to write the final assignment approached, I had to review the previous 12 weeks of classes, and the pressure built up."

However, among these two groups, there are a few individual cases where students demonstrate a long-term immersion in knowledge. These students exhibit two main characteristics: (1) Career connection: Their current immersion in knowledge is related to their career plans, as they intend to pursue a PhD and see academia as their career path. Therefore, they can see a connection between their extensive current study and their future goals. (2). Real-world application: Their immersion in knowledge is related to real-world application, meaning they can use what they've learned to understand society better or make a positive impact on it. This is also proved by previous research. Kuh (2008) emphasizes that the relevance of course content to real-life and career contexts can increase students' learning engagement and sense of immersion. In the meantime, those who showed a higher immersive

level in knowledge corroborate Marginson's (2024) view on the role of immersion in knowledge for self-formation. As their knowledge deepened, many of them expressed that they gained more insights to understand and develop themselves.

P10 (UKU), through bilingual research, understood the phenomenon of mixing Chinese and English in speech among international students:

“Since we are also international students, we tend to mix Chinese and English. Some of my former classmates in China saw this as a negative phenomenon, but I think it’s quite natural. Reading these articles made me find it interesting that I can use professional theoretical concepts to explain this phenomenon in myself.”

P11(UKU), while studying psychology, learned about the concept of rumination and used it to understand her relationship with her past negative memories:

“When working on my thesis, I explored the idea of suppressing unwanted memories. Given my own similar experiences, I linked these psychological concepts to my personal situation, hypothesizing how various factors affect this process.”

P9 (UKU), through practical experience, became aware of the difficulties faced by students with disabilities, inspiring her to think about accessibility:

“My undergraduate thesis compared disability models in China and Canada. In primary and middle school, I had classmates with albinism. Although there were only a few such students, they became well-known in school, and viewed through a lens of curiosity or bias. Children couldn't always distinguish between kindness and malice in their interactions with them.”

Overall, the impact of past educational background on the level of academic immersion is not significant. Instead, the degree of immersion and persistence in long-term exploration of a particular subject is more closely related to how close the knowledge is related to application and the connection between this persistence and future goals. However, despite the less significant role of previous education, we can clearly see how immersion in knowledge facilitate one’s self-formation.

4.4 Findings in the Relational Experience

Although Marginson does not explicitly address how relational experiences contribute to self-formation, this aspect is still considered important and formative. The data reveals that friendships and romantic relationships are the primary types of relationships mentioned, while teacher-student relationships is barely cited by any students in extraarticular context.

This part reveals that both groups tend to rely on previously established deep relationship networks. Most students find that friends made during their master's studies are often shallow and temporary relationships, and difficulties in forming friendships with foreigners are commonly reported.

Additionally, CMU students distinctly experience a broadened perspective on life choices by observing peers from different social backgrounds in higher education. UKU students mention this less frequently, but this does not necessarily indicate a difference due to educational background. It can be understood that UKU students have already adapted to the individualistic culture, whereas students from mainland China are transitioning from a collectivist to an individualist cultural environment, involving an adaptation process to this non-conforming, individualistic culture.

Relational experiences can promote self-formation not only through immersion in relationships but also through rejecting connections and going through conflicts. Some students build deeper relationships with diverse individuals, gaining new worldviews and values through these interactions. Others mature by understanding their needs through relationship conflicts and challenges, even if these relationships ultimately break down or fail to develop deeply. In these instances of distance and reflection, personal growth is also achieved.

Overall, no significant differences are observed between the two groups regarding the impact of relationships on self-formation. Although it was initially hypothesized that UKU students might receive more social support compared to CMU students, given their three years of undergraduate study in the UK, there is case go against this hypothesis.

4.4.1 language abilities and cultural adaptability in social with foreigners

In this aspect, the difference between these two groups lies in the varying social confidence influenced by language abilities and cultural adaptability, Yet, this difference has not led to variations in their self-formation.

Some CMU students experienced a certain degree of culture shock when they first arrived in the UK, including the local emphasis on privacy, the prevalence of small talk, and the frequent use of "sorry" in social interactions. Additionally, many CMU reported that their conversations with foreigners were shallow and emotionally exhausting. Some had unpleasant experiences due to cultural misunderstandings.

CMU2: "Their social energy is overwhelming. When we first meet, it feels like they have a set script, which I find very difficult to adapt."

CMU3: "When engaging in small talk, it felt like a brief Q&A session followed by a goodbye. It seemed very superficial, not heartfelt, and a bit awkward."

CMU5: "Sometimes, I ask questions without any bad intentions, but they think I'm being impolite."

Additionally, CMU's language barriers may lead them to feel uneasy in social situations, thereby tending to avoid social gatherings.

CMU5: "When I speak English, I think they think I am dumb."

The above obstacles had led CMU students to experience greater psychological stress, which leads some to avoid communication with foreigners.

UKU students generally display a higher level of adaptation in this aspect, even internalizing the social habits they have acquired in the UK as their own. However, Due to cultural differences, UKU students found it difficult to establish deep friendships with foreigners during their undergraduate studies. At the master's level, some UKU students are accustomed to not actively trying to make foreign friends.

UKU10: *"The habit of saying 'sorry' and 'thank you' has had a significant impact on me. When I returned to China during the holidays, it became like a catchphrase for me. Even though I don't say it in English, I still say 'thank you' frequently, like when I buy a cup of milk tea. It's interesting because people in China don't say it as often."*

UKU13: *"I personally don't really socialize much with foreigners. It's just hard to find common topics to talk about, and I find socializing with foreigners quite boring. For example, my roommate and her British boyfriend, often just sit with a drink and chat for hours. Honestly, what they talk about isn't very interesting. Also, I find their food quite unappetising."*

In contrast, UKU's interactions may involve fewer language barriers, reducing social avoidance due to language discomfort. They have all tried to make friends with foreigners at different stages, but after encountering obstacles, almost all of them have taken measures to reduce their interactions. In this sense, better adaptation in terms of culture and language has not significantly aided the self-formation of UKU students, as their social interactions with foreigners are generally limited.

4.4.2 Perception regarding the difference in the lives of surrounding people

Many CMU students perceive a significant difference in the pace of life in the UK compared to back home. This change alleviates their "time anxiety" and "pace anxiety." By meeting people from diverse backgrounds, they broaden their understanding of life choices and feel more motivated to explore the life they aspire to, rather than conforming to societal expectations and rhythms.

CMU3: *"One significant change I've noticed is that my mindset has become more inclusive. I've encountered many ways of living, especially when it comes to concerns like age and educational background. These worries seem to be gradually dissipating. I see that people don't necessarily need to do the same things at the same age or follow a predetermined path. It feels like life shouldn't be restricted by too many self-imposed limits."*

CMU4: Coming from a relatively singular evaluation system in China, you arrive here and find yourself exposed to different people and diverse societal evaluation dimensions and standards. You start to realize that there are many ways to achieve self-fulfilment, and it doesn't have to be about having the best academic scores. This realization makes you feel much more relaxed. So, rather than saying that studying abroad for a year is about gaining knowledge, I feel it's more about a change in mindset and outlook on life."

On the other hand, UKU students do not experience this shift as strongly. Having spent more time within the domestic educational system, CU students face a greater cultural shock upon arriving in the UK compared to UKU students.

But this does not necessarily indicate that the differences are due to educational backgrounds. It can be understood that UKU students have already adapted to this individualistic culture, whereas students from mainland China are transitioning from a collectivist to an individualist cultural environment. This transition involves an adaptation process to a culture that does not follow a collective social rhythm.

4.4.3 Support provided by previously established social networks

In terms of social life in the UK, both CMU and UKU students tend to rely on previously established social networks for support, this support can sometimes be remote, online support, while in other cases, friends are physically close during the master's program. The former is more commonly for CMU students whereas the latter is more typical for UKU students.

CMU5: "My social relationships here are quite shallow. I mainly rely on my boyfriend for support, which is very important. Without him, it would be hard to stick it out here."

However, for both groups, there are cases where their undergraduate classmates have joined the same master's program or university, reducing their need for new social connections, although this situation is more common among UKU students.

UKU1: *"Most support comes from my family and some friends from undergrad. A one-year master's is too short to build close relationships."*

UKU11: *"My best friend in the UK is someone I met during my undergrad, and we're now at the same school for our master's."*

UKU13: *"If you're asking if I've made new friends during my master's, I haven't. Since I did my undergrad here, my social circle is the same as before. I already have fixed friends, so I don't feel the need to make new ones."*

CMU7: *"Because many of us from the same undergraduate program came to the UK together, my best friends from my undergraduate years also came here. I mainly hang out with them"*

From the above, it can be observed that for a UKU, the likelihood of having people from one's original social circle around during the UK master's program is higher than CMU. However, it's worth noting that, it is not necessarily true that UKU students always have more friendship support than CMU students. There are also situations where UKU students have experienced increased loneliness during their master's studies because their close friends from undergraduate studies have moved elsewhere.

UKU10: *"During my undergrad, I lived with my best friend from high school. This year, she took a gap year and went back home, so now I'm alone and have no one to talk to, which makes it hard to relieve stress."*

This indicates that the extent of support from past social networks is related to whether past friends are physically present. Being a UKU can increase the likelihood of having familiar faces around during the master's program, but it is not a guarantee that they are socially supported.

4.4.4 Unique Challenges for CMU Students

The data shows that CMU students have a lower probability of encountering friends from their previous social circles, which results in a higher need for making new friends in their master's studies. However, they sometimes face difficulties when trying to connect with UKU, as these UKU students often have their own networks and topics of conversation.

P2: *"Initially, my social circle was narrow. Most people I met in my department were UK undergrads. I found it hard to join their conversations because they talked about their previous schools and teachers, which I had no experience with."*

P6: *"Most of my close friends here did their undergrad in the UK. Their boyfriends are also here, so they prefer to spend time with them rather than go on trips with me."*

Both CU and UKU students noted that making deep connections in the UK is difficult due to the short duration of the master's program. Depending on their social dependency, CU students exhibited two patterns: those with high social dependency leaned on previous relationships, while those with lower dependency adapted to or even enjoyed solitude.

4.4.5 uniqueness of relational experience's impact on self-formation

The social experiences of the two groups of students highlighted many of their unique traits. These uniquenesses are related to their personalities, social habits, and willingness to engage in friendships. Overall, their social experiences acted like a mirror, reflecting their self-awareness and helping them make decisions that foster personal growth.

P8 discovered during the master's program that his values differed from those of the Chinese students around him. In this process, he chose to distance himself and stick to his values: "In my experience, it's hard to make friends here. I know some people because we were classmates in undergrad and came here together. But in general, I find it hard to meet people with similar interests or viewpoints."

P4 found the need to establish new social relationships during the master's program but encountered obstacles in the process: "I found the biggest problem after coming here was that my close friends were mostly in relationships because many of them did their undergrad here and their boyfriends were also here. So, they tend to spend time with their boyfriends, which affects the building of deeper relationships. " Facing these obstacles, she chose to try to enjoy her own company: "I feel that socializing is less important for me now compared to undergrad. Socializing now feels like it requires more energy, so sometimes I gradually accept being alone and enjoy spending time by myself. "

P10 also experienced a shift from fearing loneliness to adapting to it: "Before, I always wanted someone to accompany me in whatever I did, but I found that I couldn't always find someone to join me, so I tried doing things alone. Now I can do many things by myself, like travelling alone or doing challenging activities. I feel like I've accomplished things that I couldn't before, and maybe it was because I was forced to do so at the beginning, now I've grown a lot and enjoy being alone."

P13 proactively gave up previously established social relationships during the master's program, feeling that ineffective social interactions consumed too much energy and weren't what she needed to focus on at this stage: "During the master's program, since I started working and had part-time jobs, I couldn't always be with my friends. Sometimes I felt it was actually a bad thing to always be together because it distracted me from getting things done. After starting the master's program, I had to focus more on personal career goals, so I spent more time on myself."

In summary, everyone had unique social experiences, and through different choices, they gained a better understanding of themselves, went beyond their past habits, solidified their values, and grew personally.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

This section will address the research questions of this thesis by summarizing the current findings to answer these questions and discussing their connection to and implications for previous studies. Then, the impact of these findings on real-world applications will be examined, along with the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

To begin with, this chapter will discuss the findings of a study exploring the self-formation processes of two groups of Chinese students during their master's programs in the UK: those with undergraduate degrees from UK institutions (UKU) and those from mainland China (CMU). The initial hypothesis was that UKU students, leveraging their previous experience studying in the UK, would adapt more quickly to master's life and exhibit deeper self-formation compared to CMU students. The findings indicate that this is true for some

participants, but the research also uncovers numerous similarities between the two groups and differences in their individual experiences.

5.1 Is the Self-Formation Process Different in CMU and UKU Students and What Causes These Differences?

Overall, the research findings reveal differences in the self-formation processes between the two groups. Among the five aspects, past educational experiences primarily influenced the will to learn and immersion in knowledge, with less impact on autonomy and reflexive agency. In terms of relational experience, both groups reflected and grew through interactions with people from their own countries. The main difference lies in the availability of social support from previous educational courses, with UKU students finding it easier to obtain such support.

Autonomy and Reflexive Agency

The findings in this area focus on two critical decision-making moments: the decision to pursue a master's degree and the decision about future development after completing the master's. It was discovered that both groups demonstrated autonomy and reflexive agency at these moments. However, for the latter decision, UKU students, benefiting from the continuity of their past educational experiences, could better recognize the increased academic difficulty at the master's level by comparing it with their undergraduate study. This allowed them to make more objective attributions when fell short of expectations or faced academic obstacles.

In contrast, CMU students, facing greater adaptive pressure and lack of continuity in their educational systems, often attribute their struggles to their lack of capability when they encounter academic obstacles.

This conclusion is in line with the research on the influence of stress factors on decision-making. This risk-averse behaviour aligns with cognitive dissonance theory, which suggests that when stress exceeds an individual's coping capacity, it is challenging to maintain high self-efficacy. Additionally, a lack of mastery experiences can contribute to a decrease in self-efficacy. Research shows that when students face excessive academic challenges, their self-efficacy declines, affecting their motivation and decision-making behavior (Schunk, 1991;

Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moderate challenges can stimulate motivation and engagement, but excessive challenges may lead to anxiety and academic disengagement, prompting students to avoid and give up (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). This phenomenon is particularly evident among Chinese international students, who experience higher levels of academic and cultural adjustment stress (Yan & Berliner, 2011). In summary, these research findings indicate that stress and academic challenges have a significant impact on students' self-efficacy and decision-making behavior. While moderate challenges can foster personal growth and motivation, excessive challenges may lead to negative coping behaviors and disengagement.

The Will to Learn

Overall, the educational background presents more challenges for CMU students compared to UKU students during their master's studies. CMU students need to invest more time and effort, which in turn increases their psychological stress and reduces their willingness to learn.

For UKU, their previous educational experiences familiarized them with the UK education system, the use of English in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and transferable learning skills. This familiarity not only reduced the practical difficulty of studying during their master's program but also alleviated psychological anxiety and reduced adjustment issues to the new environment. On the other hand, UKU students benefit from the high transferability of their past study skills, which minimizes obstacles in immersive learning and helps them absorb knowledge more effectively.

The findings regarding learning willingness are consistent with research on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a sense of confidence in one's competence. Bandura and Wessels (1997) found that self-efficacy influences goal setting, the level of effort, persistence in the face of difficulties, and resilience to failure. This influences their learning willingness. For students from mainland China, On one hand, they need to mobilize their motivation under significant pressure, while the new educational system makes it difficult for them to reference their achievements in undergraduate studies for confidence. According to Bandura and Wessels (1997), the most important factor in forming self-efficacy is the experience of success. Therefore, beginning learning with a low self-efficacy makes it difficult to get expected academic feedback, which in turn leads to a further decline in the willingness to learn, which can be considered as a vicious cycle

Research indicates that learners' psychological, cognitive, and emotional struggles primarily stem from their language limitations and unfamiliarity with different teaching and learning traditions (Gu & Maley, 2008). When students face difficulties in a new learning environment, such learning shocks can lead to unpleasant feelings and psychological stress. Particularly for students studying abroad, these feelings can be exacerbated, resulting in deeper psychological and emotional pressure. Amotivation arises from not feeling capable of completing tasks (Deci, 1975).

Immersion in Knowledge

Regarding immersion in knowledge, there was no significant difference between the two groups. Most students' enthusiasm for learning remained passive: either the difficulty of the learning material diminished their enthusiasm or they did not see the connection between the material and real-life applications. Those who were truly immersed in knowledge generally found that this immersion was related to their future career development.

The generally passive learning state aligns with previous research findings. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains this phenomenon. SDT posits that motivation and autonomy are closely related. When a person is driven by interest or curiosity, recognizes the importance of an activity for achieving personal goals or values, or acknowledges the significance of an activity within their value system, they are more likely to engage actively (Deci & Ryan, 2013). Conversely, if a person's motivation is driven by avoidance of self-criticism or external evaluation, the motivation does not originate from the individual's internal self.

In this study, many students' motivation primarily derived from identified regulations mentioned in SDT, where they integrated their academic pursuits with future career values. However, when they perceived a "lack of practicality" in their studies and questioned "the real usefulness of the knowledge," this regulation was disrupted, leading to decreased motivation. This conclusion is consistent with research on factors influencing student decision-making. James, Baldwin, and McInnis (1999) noted that students who initially aimed to enhance employability often regarded admission to a prestigious institution as an end in itself, overlooking the actual value of knowledge and academic experience. This

phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the current market-driven higher education context, where education aligns with market demands and becomes a marketable commodity (Marginson, 2016).

Relational Experience

There was no significant difference in relational experience. CMU students often reported a broader perspective and a sense of having more life choices. This conclusion is consistent with previous research, which suggests that exposure to other cultures leads to increased tolerance and acceptance of new practices and values: openness, open-mindedness, understanding, and tolerance are frequently used to describe how students feel their perspectives have changed.

Despite differences in demographic structures and backgrounds, most returnees in our study considered studying and living abroad as a profound identity transformation experience (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Additionally, the findings revealed different performance in language and cultural adaptation in social contexts. UKU students had established social language and cultural understanding during their undergraduate studies, while CMU students faced more challenges and discomfort in language and cultural adaptation. Many CMU students felt uneasy and believed their language skills were insufficient for in-depth interaction with foreigners, leading to passive social withdrawal due to perceived inadequacy. This aligns with previous research on language anxiety, which indicates that language difficulties often lead to negative emotions (Mitchell & Brumfit, 1993; Kramsch, 1993). Lewthwaite (1996) posits that crossing cultural boundaries involves a learning process with many obstacles to overcome, the core of this process is psychological adaptation and socio-cultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

In relational experience research, we found that Chinese students generally preferred to form friendships with fellow countrymen and were less likely to interact with foreigners. This is consistent with past research findings. Bochner (1977) reported that 70% of the sample of 30 foreign students at the University of Hawaii preferred cooking with compatriots, strongly indicating that cooking and food play a significant role in establishing friendships abroad (Bochner, 1977). According to Ward and Masgoret (2004), loneliness is a common psychological feeling of international students, which can be alleviated by building

friendships with people from the same country. However, this behaviour also highlights the critical, often conflicting role of human interaction: mitigating loneliness through isolated friendship groups often comes at the cost of language and cross-cultural learning. (Yu & Moskal, 2019)

5.2 How Are These Differences Linked with Their Undergraduate Educational Background?

Overall, the impact of educational background on the experiences of the two groups primarily manifests in differences in adaptability to the UK education system, the transferability of study skills, language proficiency in academic and social contexts, and cultural adaptability. These differences create varying levels of academic and social pressure, which in turn affect decision-making, learning willingness, immersion in learning, and self-formation in social contexts.

5.3 Implications for Practice

This study reveals the different challenges faced by students from the same cultural background but with different educational backgrounds during their self-formation process in a master's program. The findings have three key practical implications.

First, by recognizing the diverse experiences and adaptability that different educational backgrounds can bring within the same course, educators can tailor their teaching methods to individual students' backgrounds and set appropriate goals and expectations. Additionally, higher education institutions can establish a comprehensive counselling mechanism to help students develop a holistic perspective on their setbacks to enhance the psychological adaptability of less experienced students.

On the other hand, this research can inspire Chinese educators or institutions to provide adaptive training for students preparing to study abroad. Offering pre-session training on the host country's culture and language can help these students build a foundation for adaptation and ease their transition into a new phase of study.

Furthermore, the study's findings about the advantages of UKU students' adaptive experiences can encourage educational institutions to establish support networks. By connecting UKU students with CMU students, UKU students can share their academic,

personal, and cultural experiences to assist CMU students in better adapting. This approach not only provides UKU students with an opportunity to reflect on and consolidate their experiences but also fosters connections and integration between the two groups within the same cultural background.

5.4 Limitations

This article focuses on the differences between the two groups due to their educational background in the five parts of self-formation. The limitations here are that, on the one hand, the limitations of the sample can only reflect the experience of the current group, which is not enough to support the generalization of the results. Specifically, half of the sample comes from the University of Oxford, while the other half is from other prestigious UK institutions. These students inherently possess higher academic abilities, as evidenced by their acceptance into such institutions. As a result, UKU students have likely demonstrated genuine academic effort in their past studies, which has contributed to their continued success during their master's programs. Nonetheless, individual attitudes towards learning may vary, and it is possible that some UKU students did not derive valuable experiences from their undergraduate studies.

At the same time, this conclusion reflects the current experience of the participants, the conclusion formed is time-sensitive and specific, and there's limited potential to replicate the conclusion.

Nonetheless, in terms of theoretical framework, breaking down the process of self-formation into five aspects is not conducive to a comprehensive understanding of a person's experience. It can only focus on one side of the experience and does not form a comparison of the self-formation process of the two groups as a whole.

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

This study focuses on how different undergraduate educational backgrounds impact self-formation during the master's phase. Given that students applying to overseas institutions and those from mainland China have experienced different educational systems—international schools primarily following A-levels versus domestic schools focused on the Gaokao—future research could examine how secondary education in different Chinese educational systems

affects self-formation at the undergraduate level. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how early educational experiences influence their form of self and realization of subjectification.

At the same time, future research can also explore the space for quantitative research on self-formation. Although quantifying the five dimensions of self-formation is difficult, especially considering the diversity and richness of each person's background, if there is a set of test questions that can measure a person's degree of self-formation (degree of subjectification) from these five dimensions, it will be very helpful to compare how the difference in a certain variable between groups leads to differences in the degree of self-formation.

Summary

In summary, this study illuminates the self-formation processes of Chinese master's students in the UK, highlighting both unique challenges and common experiences among those with different undergraduate backgrounds. By understanding these dynamics, educators and policymakers can better support international students in their academic and personal growth.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the differences in the self-formation process between Chinese students from mainland China and those who have completed their undergraduate studies in the UK while speaking in the UK. The study employs a qualitative research method, using semi-structured interviews as the data collection approach. A total of 14 Chinese students pursuing a master's degree in the UK were interviewed, with 7 coming from mainland China and 7 from UK universities. The analytical framework of this study is based on the five key components of self-formation proposed by Marginson (2023): autonomy, reflexive agency, the will to learn, immersion in knowledge, and relational experience.

Overall, the study found that the effect of past educational experiences on self-formation during the master's phase is not direct; rather, it influences psychological states through different levels of adaptability to life and study, which in turn leads to varying degrees of knowledge immersion and acquisition, resulting in different self-development trajectories for each individual.

To be more specific, the greatest difference between the two groups lies in the will to learn. This is because UK undergraduates (UKU) had adapted to the UK education system in advance, gained certain academic English skills during their undergraduate studies, and had a set of directly transferable learning strategies, which reduced their adaptive stress in learning. Conversely, Chinese mainland undergraduates (CMU), under these pressures, tend to experience a decline in confidence and develop lower self-efficacy, resulting in weaker perseverance when facing difficulties. Additionally, in terms of relational experience, UKU's advantage in interacting with foreigners culturally and linguistically comes from their adaptation to the UK social system during their undergraduate years. However, due to cultural differences between China and the UK, neither CMU nor UKU established close social relationships with foreigners, relying mainly on pre-existing social connections. Therefore, the influence of past educational backgrounds on self-formation in this aspect is not significant.

In terms of autonomy and reflexive agency, both groups demonstrated high levels of autonomy and reflexive agency at two critical decision-making points: deciding to pursue a master's degree and planning for their future after the master's degree. However, CMU's future planning was partly influenced by stress reactions from their master's studies, leading them to feel unsuitable for continued academic pursuit. Regarding immersion in knowledge, no significant differences were found between the two groups. Students who were more immersed in knowledge during their master's studies were generally those pursuing a PhD or those who could connect their learning with the real world, understand phenomena around them, reflect on themselves, or positively impact society. This was not significantly affected by their undergraduate educational background.

The main contribution of this study is that it explores the differences in the self-formation process among individuals from the same cultural group with different educational backgrounds, enriching empirical research on self-formation. It also reveals the different challenges that students with varying educational backgrounds may face during their master's studies, inspiring policymakers to explore more personalized educational models to create a more conducive higher education environment for self-formation.

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Appendix A Thematic Analysis and Codes

Theme	Codes	Definition	Words Discussed
Autonomy	Reason for UK master's. Plan after master PhD;	Autonomy in the concept of self-formation refers to one's self-awareness of their likes, dislikes and developing direction. In the context of learning, autonomy will enable students' proactive learning attitude and capability.	Family expectation; improved competition; interest; self-exploration. escape from work. UK culture;
Reflexive agency	Find job	Reflexive agency refers to one's capability to look back on their experience and generate understanding which can be used to direct future decision.	Undergraduate life; Academic interest; Self 'strength
The will to learn	Interests; Study skills; Stress coping methods; English writing and reading difficulties;	The will to learn refers to the motivation to learn which originates from one's acknowledge of a certain activity's value. To activate the will to learn, one's belief in their capability of accomplishing the task (self-efficacy) and the support from others are important.	Passion; Interests; Reality-related; Passive learner; DDL; Assignments
Immersion in knowledge	Interaction with knowledge; Time spent	Immersion in knowledge refers to one's highly focused study state and active interaction with knowledge over a long period of time.	Motivation; Focus; Interests;

	on learning;	This state can be more easily realized if one is intrinsically motivated and confident, as well as being supported with achievable and clear goals, in-time feedback and resources needed.	Time; Curiosity; Enjoyment
Relational experience	Make friends with Co-nations; Make friends with foerigners; Previous relationship; New relationship	Relational experience in self-formation is formative yet complex. The relation with peer and teacher are two typical types in the context of higher education. Positive relation contributes to student's psucholohical well-being and academic performance.	Previous friends; Family; Boyfriend; Trip; Common topic; Language difficulty; culture misunderstanding

Appendix B Interview Questions

Interview Questions of the Study on

Comparative Analysis of Self-Formation Processes between Mainland China-Educated and UK-Educated Chinese Undergraduates in UK Master's Studies

Background Information

Could you provide an overview of your educational background, particularly your undergraduate studies? Were they completed in China or in the UK?

Questions about autonomy:

1. Can you tell me why you chose to come to the UK for your master's studies?
2. Has your plan for the future changed after the master's program? Why?

Questions about the will to learn and immersion in knowledge

1. After starting your master's program, have you felt academic pressure?
2. What differences have you noticed compared to your undergraduate experience?
3. Has your study method changed since starting the master's program?
4. How do you cope with academic pressure?
5. Have you experienced similar pressures during your undergraduate studies? How did you handle them?
6. How strong is your willingness to learn during your studies?
7. What knowledge gained during your master's studies do you find most useful or meaningful?

8. How would you evaluate your level of immersion in your studies during the master's program? (This can be described in terms of study frequency, study duration, flow experiences, etc.)

9. How would you evaluate your learning style (active/passive)?

Questions about Social Relationships

1. How were your social relationships during your undergraduate studies?

2. How is your social life during your master's program?

3. How do social relationships affect you? (Challenges encountered/changes in yourself)

Questions about Cultural Adaptation

1. Compared to your undergraduate experience, do you find there to be any differences in the cultural environment of your master's program?

2. Have you encountered any challenges in adapting to the current cultural environment? Could you share specific events?

3. How has the cultural environment of your past university impacted your adaptation to the current environment?

4. Have you participated in any local cultural activities during your master's studies?

Questions about Personal Growth

1. What challenges have you encountered in your master's program?

2. How has your mindset changed in response to these challenges?

3. What do you believe has contributed the most to your personal growth during your master's program? Why?

4. What challenges do you think one might encounter in the pursuit of personal growth and progress?

Chinese Version of Interview Questions

关于《大陆中国与英国教育背景的中国本科生在英国硕士学习中的自我形成过程比较分析》研究的访谈问题

背景信息

请简要介绍一下你的教育背景，特别是你的本科学习经历。你的本科是在中国完成的还是在英国完成的？

关于自主性的问题

1. 你能告诉我为什么选择来英国读硕士吗？
2. 硕士课程之后，你的未来计划有改变吗？为什么？

关于学习意愿和知识沉浸的问题

1. 开始硕士课程后，你是否感受到学业压力？
2. 与你的本科经历相比，你注意到了哪些不同之处？
3. 自从开始硕士课程以来，你的学习方法有改变吗？
4. 你是如何应对学业压力的？
5. 在本科学习期间你是否经历过类似的压力？你是如何应对的？
6. 在学习期间，你的学习意愿有多强烈？
7. 在硕士学习期间，你认为哪些知识最有用或最有意义？
8. 你如何评价自己在硕士课程中的学习沉浸程度？（可以从学习频率、学习时长、心流体验等方面描述）
9. 你如何评价自己的学习模式（主动/被动）？

关于社会关系的问题

1. 在本科期间，你的社交关系如何？
2. 在硕士课程期间，你的社交情况如何？
3. 社会关系是如何影响你的？（遇到的困难/自己的变化）

关于文化适应的问题

1. 与你的本科经历相比，你觉得硕士课程的文化环境有什么不同吗？
2. 在适应当前的文化环境时，你遇到过什么挑战吗？你能分享一下具体的事件吗？
3. 你过去的大学文化环境对你适应现在的环境有什么影响？
4. 你在硕士学习期间参加过当地的文化活动吗？

关于个人成长的问题

1. 你在硕士课程中遇到了哪些挑战？
2. 面对这些挑战，你的心态发生了怎样的变化？
3. 在你的硕士课程中，你认为对你个人成长贡献最大的是什么？为什么？
4. 你认为在追求个人成长和进步的过程中会遇到哪些挑战？

Appendix C: Research Information for Participants

[Comparative Analysis of Self-Formation Processes between Mainland China-Educated and UK-Educated Chinese Undergraduates in UK Master's Studies]

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC_C1A_24_065

Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Why is this research being conducted?

The background of this research is that the number of international Chinese students in the UK is increasing these years, and their ways of self-formation are valued as it gives a perspective to understand foreign students' experience and the effects of international education. This research aims to explore the self-formation process of Chinese international students who are from different educational backgrounds, compare the common points and differences in their self-formation process in their master's studies and how their past educational experiences affect this process.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate because you meet the criteria below. The participants in this research should be Chinese international students in the UK pursuing their master's degrees. Participants should also be those who completed their undergraduate education either in China or in the UK. We expect to recruit 10-20 participants, all of whom should be 18 years old or older.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part.

Up to the point when the data has been anonymised (2024/04/30), any time during the data collection process and afterwards, you can withdraw any personal information you have provided and withdraw yourself from this research by sending an email to [REDACTED] and stating your request. However, after the Deadline of 2024/04/30, it will not be possible to withdraw your data anymore.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

- *You will receive an electronic version of a consent form from [REDACTED] for you to review and sign an electronic signature. The original signed and dated consent form will be kept with the project's main documents, which will be kept in a secure location.*

- *You will then be invited to take part in a set of interviews of 120 minutes (Maximum). The main interview will take no longer than 1 hour. There will be several online minor interviews for follow-up questions which will take no longer than 1h in total. Participants can ask to pause or stop the research activities at any time. For longer sessions, you will be offered regular breaks.*
- *The interview can be either online through Teams or in person, depending on your preferences.*
- *The interview will focus on your educational background and how you navigate your process of self-formation during your master's study life in three aspects: cultural adaptation, social relationship, and academic development.*
- *With your consent, I would like to audio record you so I can have an accurate record of our conversation. No other unusual requirement is needed in this research interview.*
- *The research will last for 6 months from February 1st to August 31st, 2024.*

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Risks: Participants may at times feel uncomfortable talking about their past educational experiences and the challenges they faced during their master's study. This will be addressed through a highly confidential system where their private information will be anonymous, and participants will not be directly identifiable from the research output. After the research, all information preserved on my laptop will be erased.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the research, it is hoped that this research will lead to a chance for them to reflect on their experience through organized interview questions.

Expenses and payments

There will be no payment for taking part in this research.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

I am interested in your experiences of how your undergraduate educational background affects the process of your self-formation process in your master's year. The information from your reflection on your own experience will help me better understand the process of Chinese international students' self-formation process. The researcher and supervisor will have access to the research data.

Identifiable data (including consent forms) will be stored securely in Oxford One Drive for at least 3 years. Other research data will be stored for 3 years after publication or public release of the work of the research.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written up in a dissertation, which may be published in a peer-reviewed journal, publicly available report, website or be presented at a conference. Participants will not be directly identifiable from the outputs. Data will be pseudonymised by replacing personal identifiers with IDs.

I would like participants' permission to use direct quotations but without directly identifying participants in any research outputs. However, participants' identifiable information will be included in the research output if they want to.

A copy of my dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where its access will be restricted.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance web site at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_065).

Include details of any other reviews, e.g. from a local ethics committee if the research is taking place overseas.

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact [REDACTED] and [REDACTED].ox.ac.uk or [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]@education.ox.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. we will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Education DREC

*Email: staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; Address: Department of Education, University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY*

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

*Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6PY*

Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Material

Participants needed for education studies!

Research Title: [Comparative Analysis of Self-Formation Processes between Mainland China-Educated and UK-Educated Chinese Undergraduates in UK Master's Studies]



1. About the Research:

This research aims to find out how past educational experience affects the self-formation process of Chinese international students in their master's studies.

2. About the Researcher

I am a master's student at the University of Oxford. My major is Higher education. I have a great interest in finding out the diversity and complexity of Chinese international students' experience, especially when students from the same cultural backgrounds are often considered to have similar self-growth experiences. Your experience is greatly valued in my research.

3. You are eligible to participate if you are

- Chinese
- 18 years old and above
- Currently pursuing a master's degree in the UK
- A graduate student from a university that is either in mainland China or in the UK.

4. Benefits from participation

There will be no payment for taking part in this research. However, you will be provided with an opportunity to share your thoughts in a safe place with a patient listener with no judgment or bias. You will also be guided through a journey of self-reflection with carefully designed questions that will lead you to realize how your past education experience affects your current status of self and how your self-formation is completed.

Please email [REDACTED].ox.ac.uk if you have any questions about the study or are interested in participating.

Appendix E: CUREC Ethics Approval

**SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk;
staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk



██████████
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

18 March 2024

Dear ██████████

Research Ethics Approval Research Title: Comparative Analysis of Self-Formation Processes among Mainland-educated and Overseas-educated Chinese Students in International Master Studies

Research Ethics Reference: EDUC_C1A_24_065

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study. Please note the following:

- **Personal data:** It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).
- **In-person activities:** Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).
- **Amendments:** Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments you might have to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Faidra Faitaki, AFHEA
Departmental Lecturer in Applied Linguistics
DREC Member

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Faitaki'.

Cc: Dr ██████████@education.ox.ac.uk; Student CUREC,
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk

Appendix F: CUREC Study Request Form

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC)

CUREC 1A Application form for research projects in the social sciences and humanities with less complex ethical issues



The University of Oxford places a high value on the knowledge, expertise, and integrity of its members and their ability to conduct research to high standards of scholarship and ethics. The research ethics review process has been established to ensure that research involving human participants is conducted in a way that respects the dignity, rights, and welfare of participants, and minimises risk to participants, researchers, third parties, and to the University itself. It is assumed that all members of the University will take their responsibilities and obligations seriously, and will ensure that their research involving human participants is conducted according to established principles and good practice in their field and in accordance, where appropriate, with legal requirements.

Before completing this form, please refer to the [guidance](#) and [flowchart](#) on the Research Support website. Only type-written forms will be accepted. Completed application forms should be emailed, along with relevant supporting documents, to your [Departmental Research Ethics Committee \(DREC\)](#) or to ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk from your ox.ac.uk email address.

Please contact your [DREC](#) or the [SSH IDREC](#) if you have any questions about completing this form or the review process.

SECTION A: Filter for CUREC 2 application		
This section determines whether the application for ethics review should be made using this form (CUREC 1A) or the CUREC 2 form (for research with more complex ethical issues).		
Please indicate with an 'X'.	Yes	No
1. Does the research involve the deception of participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. Are the research participants vulnerable in the context of the research, or classed as people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question ? For example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants aged 16 or under (also answer question A5); • Participants aged 16 – 18 who can neither be considered competent youths nor recruited under Approved Procedure 25 • adults at risk; 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Note the University's Safeguarding Guidance and Code of Practice and its implications for researchers involving young people or adults at risk.		
3. By taking part in the research, will participants be at risk of criminal prosecution or significant harm?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4. Does your research raise issues relevant to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (the Prevent Duty), which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism? Best Practice Guidance 07 on the Prevent Duty provides further guidance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If you answered 'No' to all the questions above, go to Section B. If you answered 'Yes' to any question above, continue to question 5 below.		
5. Is your project covered by a CUREC Approved Procedure ?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If yes, list the CUREC Approved Procedure(s) you will follow		
If you have answered 'No' to all questions 1-4, go on to Section B . If you answered 'Yes' to ANY of questions 1-4, and answered 'No' to question 5, stop completing this form and do not submit it for ethical review. You will instead need to submit a CUREC 2 application form . If you answered 'Yes' to any of questions 1-4, and your project is covered by an Approved Procedure, go on to Section B . If more than one Approved Procedure applies, contact the SSH IDREC or your DREC for advice on whether a CUREC 2 form should be submitted instead.		

SECTION B: Researchers	
1. Name of Principal Investigator or student's supervisor	██████████
2. Department or Institute	Department of Education
3. University of Oxford email address	██████████@education.ox.ac.uk
Copy and paste the following six rows as necessary to complete for each additional researcher who will be involved in this study, including student(s) and those external to the University.	
4. Name of researcher or student	██████████
5. Department or Institute	Department of Education
6. University of Oxford email address	██████████@kellogg.ox.ac.uk
7. Role in research	Student

8. Degree programme, if student research	MSc	
The whole research team		
9. Have the researchers undertaken research ethics and integrity training?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
10. Please provide details of any research ethics and integrity training undertaken, including the dates of the training. Alternatively state relevant research experience.	I took the core course of the University's <u>research ethics and integrity training</u> in the Cosy system on 2024/01/31 with a certificate obtained.	
11. State any <u>conflicts of interest</u> and explain how these will be addressed.	None.	

SECTION C: The research project

1. Title of the research project	
Comparative Analysis of Self-Formation Processes among Mainland-educated and Overseas-educated Chinese Students in International Master Studies	
2. Anticipated start date of the aspect of the research project involving human participants and/ or personal data (dd/mm/yy).	As soon as ethical approval is obtained
3. Anticipated research end date (dd/mm/yy).	31/08/2024
4. Provide a brief lay summary of the aims and objectives of the research. This should cover the questions it will answer and any potential benefits. (max 300 words)	
<p>Aim of this research: This research aims to explore the self-formation processes of Chinese master's students pursuing a master's degree in the UK, distinguishing between those who completed their undergraduate studies in the UK and those who did so in China.</p> <p>Potential benefits: Firstly, this research can provide personal growth strategy for future international students to better navigate their self-directed learning process. Secondly, it can provide insights for policy makers to refine current policy to better support international students. Finally, it could facilitate cultural understanding through the adaptation process of international students' personal experience.</p>	
5. Please indicate the methods to be used (indicate with an 'X'):	

Analysis of existing records	<input type="checkbox"/>
Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters (refer to guidance in BPG 01: Researcher safety)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant observation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Covert observation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Observation of specific organisational practices	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Using social media to recruit or interact with participants (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Participant performs paper and pencil task	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Focus group	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interview (refer to guidance in BPG 10: Conducting research interviews)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Audio recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Video recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others (please specify below)	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Provide a brief summary of the research design and methods. What will research participants be	

<p>asked to do? (max 300 words)</p> <p>Please also submit a copy of the questions participants will be asked, if applicable, or some information about the sorts of topics that will be covered.</p>		
<p>This research will focus on comparing the self-formation process of Chinese international students from different undergraduate educational backgrounds: The UK VS China. I will conduct online/offline interviews through Teams with participants and the audio of the interview will be recorded and transcribed. The main interview with each participant will take no longer than 1h, with possible follow-up interviews to confirm the details of the main interview and other topic-related questions. The whole interview set with each participant will take no longer than 2 hours. During the interview, participants will be asked a set of questions regarding their educational backgrounds and how they navigate their process of self-formation during their master's study life in three aspects: cultural adaption, social relationship, and academic development.</p>		
7. List the location(s) where the research will be conducted, including any other countries.	Only in the UK.	
8. Clarify which parts of the research will be conducted in-person and which will take place remotely, e.g. online .	The selection between online and offline depends on the availability and convenience of participants.	
9. If your research involves fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? Please indicate with an 'X'. (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are advised to take out University travel insurance .) Refer to guidance available from your Department, the Safety Office , the Social Sciences Division , and the Humanities Division , and on travel for University business .	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Not required in this instance	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10. In the case of international or collaborative research, explain how you will address any ethical issues specific to the local context. Please provide details of the local review, approval or permission obtained or required. Refer to the BPG 16: Social science research conducted outside the UK and the Code of Conduct for Ethical Fieldwork . If there will be no local review, explain why not. Please mention any stakeholder or community engagement that has been/ will be undertaken in relation to the research. Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in Section G .		
This research does not require a local review, as it will be conducted only in the UK with participants in the UK.		

11. Name of departmental/ peer reviewer (if applicable)	
12. External organisation funding the research and grant reference (if applicable)	No funding
13. Please refer to the CUREC Best Practice Guidance and list any that have been used to develop your research.	BPG 02 Ethnographic and other types of qualitative research BPG 09 Data collection, protection and management

SECTION D: Recruitment of research participants		
1. Number of participants	10s	
2. How was the number of participants decided?	10s participants will be sufficient to secure an in-depth analysis and capture a range of examples to generate a research output.	
3. Age range of participants	18 and over	
4. Inclusion criteria	Participants should be Chinese who are pursuing a master's degree in the UK and graduated from either a UK or Chinese undergraduate university.	
5. Exclusion criteria	Non-Chinese, Non-Master's students and students with undergraduate study not in the UK or China.	
6. Indicate with an 'X' all intended recruitment methods Please submit copies of the recruitment material that will be used, e.g. advertisement text, introductory email text.	Poster advert	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Flyer	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Email circulation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Website	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

	In-person approach	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Snowball sampling	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Recruitment sites (e.g. Mechanical Turk)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Existing contacts or volunteer database	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. How will potential participants be identified and approached?	The message of the recruitment material will be sent to the WhatsApp group of Oxford students/Chinese social media such as Xiaohongshu and Wechat, and personal contacts will be made in Oxford classrooms where Chinese students can be reached.	
8. Will informed consent be obtained from the research participants or their parents/ guardians? If not, please explain why not.	Consent will be obtained from the research participants	
9. For each activity or group of participants, explain how informed consent will be obtained from the participants themselves and/ or their parents/ guardians, if applicable. How will their consent be recorded? Please submit copies of all participant-facing materials for review. E.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment material (e.g. emails, posters) Information for participants to read (or hear) before they agree to take part (e.g. written information or, if applicable, an outline oral information script). A document to record informed consent. Further guidance and templates. 	Firstly, I will send out the initial invitation through email or social media, and then follow that up with the participant information sheet to interested participants. Secondly, for those who express interest in taking part, I will send them the electronic consent form through my university email account. In the email, I will inform my participant of the expected return date of the consent form and the places where they should sign an electronic signature.	
10. Provide details of any payments and incentives and the rationale for providing these. Further guidance in Best Practice	None	

Guidance: 05 Payments and incentives in research.	
<p>11. Describe how participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may withdraw from the study • may withdraw any personal information they have provided from the study <p>State any limits to withdrawal, for example once the data has been anonymised or at some other specified stage prior to publication. Make sure participants are aware of any withdrawal limits.</p>	<p>Limits to withdrawal</p> <p>Any time during the data collection process and afterwards, up to the point when the data has been anonymised (2024/04/30), individuals may withdraw from the study any personal information they have provided by sending an email stating their request.</p> <p>Participants will be informed of the submission date for the thesis, after which it will not be possible for them to withdraw their data anymore.</p>

SECTION E: Research data

All information provided by participants is considered research data for the purpose of this form. Any research data from which participants can be identified is known as [personal data](#); any personal data which is sensitive is considered [special category data](#). Management of personal data, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, as set out in the [University's Guidance on Data Protection and Research](#).

In answering the questions below, please also consider the points raised in the [Data Protection Checklist](#) and [Data Protection Screening Assessment](#) and whether, for higher-risk data processing, a separate [Data Protection Impact Assessment](#) may also be required for the research. Advice on research data management and security is available from [Research Data Oxford](#) and your local IT department. Advice on data protection is available from the [Information Compliance team](#).

For guidance on conducting internet-mediated research, refer to CUREC's [Best Practice Guidance 06: Internet-mediated research](#).

1. What data will be collected? (Indicate with an 'X')

Screening documents	<input type="checkbox"/>	Task results (e.g. questionnaires, diaries)	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Consent records (e.g., written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	IP addresses (refer to Best Practice Guidance 09: Data collection, protection and management for guidance)	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Contact details for the purpose of this research only	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Field notes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Contact details for future use (guidance)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Photographs	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Opt-out forms	<input type="checkbox"/>	Information about the health of the participant (including mental health)	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Audio recordings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Previously collected (secondary) data	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Video recordings	<input type="checkbox"/>	Data already in the public domain. Specify the source of the data:	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Transcript of audio/ video recordings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. During the course of the research, where will each type of research data be stored?	All data collected, including consent forms, will be stored in the Oxford One Drive. The audio recording of participants will be downloaded to my personal laptop (password protected) for analysis purpose. Recordings should normally be deleted after transcription has been completed unless there's a reason to keep them.			
3. Who will have access to the research data during the project?	Research: ██████████ Supervisor: ██████████ Only supervisor of the researcher will have the access to the research data. A unique participant number will be used so that individuals will not be identified from the data.			
4. Please complete this section if your research involves the use of secondary (i.e. previously	Please indicated with an 'X'.		Yes	No
	Are data access agreements in place for access to and use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

collected) data.	Did the individuals agree that their data could be used for this purpose?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Could anyone (including members of the research team) link the data back to an individual or individuals? If this is a possibility, please explain how the associated ethical issues will be addressed:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. How do you intend to share the research data at the end of the project?	Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Submitting to a journal to support a publication	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Depositing in an institutional repository	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Dissemination via a project or institutional website	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No plans to share the data	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the research? (Indicate with an 'X')	Thesis publication	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publication in a peer reviewed journal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publicly available report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Conference presentation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publication on a website	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Pre-registration	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Report to a research funder	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Providing participants with a lay summary of the results	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Submission for academic assessment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>	

7. Explain what will happen to the data at the end of the research project.
This question must be answered for each type of data, including completed consent forms.

All the data (consent forms, interview recordings and transcripts) will be stored on the University of Oxford Nexus365 OneDrive for Business file storage service, which is approved by the University for all research data storage.

During my research, audio recordings and other necessary data will be downloaded and saved to my personal laptop, which will be erased after the submission of my dissertation. Audio recordings will be permanently deleted after transcription.

Data will be pseudonymised by replacing personal identifiers with IDs, and the data containing the personal identifiers, and any linkage to that, will be stored separately and deleted at the end of the project. All the downloaded data will be moved from the file folder to the wastebasket application of my Mac laptop and cleared at the same time.

SECTION F: Protection of research participants and their personal data

1. How identifiable will the participants be from the research outputs ? (Indicate with an 'X')	Directly identifiable from the information included	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Pseudonymised / indirectly identifiable	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Not identifiable – data is anonymous	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. To what extent will the data be de-identified ? How identifiable will any individuals be from the research data? Describe any measures you will take towards assuring confidentiality , potential risks to	Data will be pseudonymised by replacing personal identifiers with IDs. No direct identifiable personal information will be collected or used in the research.	

confidentiality.	
3. How will you ensure that third parties (e.g., interpreters and transcribers) are aware of and adhere to the measures described in this form?	Present the confidentiality agreement to the third party the before conducting the research and request their signature as well.

SECTION G: Risks and benefits of the research

1. Will the research involve topics that could be considered [sensitive](#)? If so:
 - a. Please provide more detail or supporting information (such as the interview questions) to show the range of questions;
 - b. Explain what steps will be taken to reduce risk of distress;
 - c. Consider seeking advice from within your Department or from the ethics committee including whether the application might benefit from additional ethics review (e.g., via a CUREC 2 application).

The topic of this research is not considered sensitive according to examples of sensitive research topics from the Economic and Social Research Council's guidance.

2. Describe any additional burden or risks to the participants or others, including the potential for any indirect negative consequences. Explain the steps you will take to address these.

None.

3. Describe any physical or psychological risks to the researcher(s) (including local fieldworkers or research assistants) and the steps you will take to address these.

None.

4. Describe any benefits of the research, both to participants and to others. Outline the processes put in place to enable equitable research (see [BPG 16 Social science research conducted outside the UK](#) for further guidance).

Benefits to participants and others

- (1) To participants: They will be provided with an opportunity to share their thoughts in a safe place with a patient listener with no judgment or bias. They will also be guided through a journey of self-reflection with carefully designed questions that will lead them to realize how their past education experience affects their current status of self and how their self-formation is completed.
- (2) To others: This research will provide valuable insights into how the past educational experience affects the self-formation process of Chinese international students in their personal growth, academic pursuits, and socio-cultural adaptations, enriching their understanding of the connection between higher education and the realization of self-formation.

5. Comment on the societal impact.

This research will contribute to the society in 2 aspects.

- (1) Filling research gaps: This study focuses on a group that has often been overlooked in previous studies, namely Chinese students with similar cultural backgrounds who completed their undergraduate education at home or in the UK. Previous studies have tended to focus on the differences between international and local students, with less research looking at groups of students in the same cultural background who experience differences due to the location of their undergraduate education. Therefore, this study fills the research gap and makes an in-depth discussion on the self-development process of this group.
- (2) Contribute to a better international student policy: This research provides insights on how different educational backgrounds affect the self-formation process of Chinese international students in their future studies, which can inform policymakers on how to tailor the current policy to better support students' self-development and exploration.
- (3) Facilitate cultural understanding. This research investigates the experience of international students in a foreign country, where their narratives can be used to better understand the situation of international students in the UK, and the conflict between their adaptation process with their own cultural identity, thus facilitating a better mutual understanding.
- (4) Personal growth strategies: This research explores the self-direct process of transformative learning of international students. The experience of participants will provide a practical strategy for international students to navigate their self-formation journey effectively.

6. Give details of any other ethical issues or relevant information.

None.

SECTION H: Professional guidelines

Please indicate with an 'X' at least one set of professional guidelines you will follow.

Research specialism/ methodology	Association and guidance	
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK	<input type="checkbox"/>
Computer Science	ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	<input type="checkbox"/>
Criminology	British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Geography	American Association of Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internet-mediated research	Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines British Psychological Society: Ethics Guidelines for internet-mediated research Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	<input type="checkbox"/>
Management	Academy of Management Code of Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	<input type="checkbox"/>
Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	<input type="checkbox"/>
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct	<input type="checkbox"/>

Social research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socio-legal studies	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research Practice	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visual research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other professional guidelines	None.	<input type="checkbox"/>

SECTION I: Endorsements and signatures

Please ensure this form is endorsed by the [Principal Investigator](#) (or student's supervisor), the Head of Department (or nominee) and, if student research, by the student themselves.

The SSH IDREC Secretariat accepts either option below. If you have a [DREC](#), check which signature option it prefers.

- **Option 1: direct email endorsements**
Each of the signatories should submit an email from a University of Oxford email address, indicating their acceptance of the responsibilities listed below.
- **Option 2: signatures**
Please scan the signed form and email it to us as a PDF. Pasted images of signatures cannot be accepted.

Endorsement by the Principal Investigator/ student supervisor and student, if applicable

I/ we the researchers understand my/ our responsibilities as Principal Investigator (and student, if applicable) as outlined in the guidance on the CUREC website. I/ we declare that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that the ethics committee will be informed of any changes to the project which affect the answers to this form.

I/ we will inform the relevant IDREC if the Principal Investigator changes.

Name of Principal Investigator	██████████
Principal Investigator's signature	██████████@education.ox.ac.uk
Date	

Name of student (if applicable)	██████████
Student's signature	██████████.ox.ac.uk
Date	

Departmental endorsement – from the Head of Department or nominee

(Another senior member of the department may sign where the head of department is the Principal Investigator, or where the Head of Department has appointed a nominee. Example nominees include Deputy Head of Department, Director of Research, or Director of Graduate/ Undergraduate Studies.)

On the basis of the information available to me, I confirm that:

- I am aware of the research proposed and have read this application;
- To the best of my knowledge, the proposed design and scientific methodology do not raise ethical concerns;
- I support this research in principle, subject to ethical and other necessary reviews.

Signature	██████████@██████████.ox.ac.uk
Name	██████████
Role	researcher
Date	



Appendix G: Participant Consent Form

DEPARTMENT CONTACT DETAILS

[PI name]: [REDACTED]

[PI contact details]: [REDACTED]@education.ox.uk.ac.uk

[Primary researcher details and status]: Master student

Oxford University e-mail: [REDACTED]ox.ac.uk

Consent to take part in

[Studies on the Self-Formation Processes among Mainland China-educated and UK-educated Chinese Students in International Master Studies]

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: EDUC_C1A_24_065

Purpose of Study: To investigate the self-formation process of Chinese international students from different undergraduate backgrounds who are pursuing a master's degree in the UK.

**Please initial each
box if you agree
with the
statement**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until 30/04/2024, without giving any reason. After 30/04/2024, individuals are no longer identifiable from the data, and no data is withdrawable.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications.

I consent to be audio recorded.

I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**

b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or**

c) I agree to the use of direct quotations, attributed to my name, in research outputs.

d) I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I agree to take part.¹ I hereby assign to the researcher all copyright in my contribution for use in all work stemming from this project and future projects.

dd/mm / yyyy

Name of participant

Date

Signature

dd/mm / yyyy

Name of person taking consent

Date²

Signature

To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant. Once this has been signed by both parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. The original signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents, which must be kept in a secure location.