



# Chinese International Students' Cross-Cultural Adjustment Experiences: in the context of 'Reverse Study Abroad' in the UK

Huixin Xu

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## Abstract

In the age of globalisation, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese international students pursuing higher education in the UK. In this context, ‘reverse study abroad’—which describes a phenomenon where a high density of Chinese international students in certain programs at foreign universities, with their numbers significantly exceeding those of local students to an extent that they feel as if they are not studying abroad but rather studying in their home country—has become an emerging trend in the UK. This trend has significantly changed the study-abroad environment for Chinese international students and brought a new perspective to examining their cross-cultural adjustment. However, inadequate research has been conducted to explore Chinese international students’ cross-cultural adjustment in this unique ‘reverse study abroad’ setting. With the intention of filling this research gap and providing new insights into the study of Chinese international students and cross-cultural adjustment issues for student sojourners, this study aims to address the main research question: What are the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of Chinese international students in the context of ‘reverse study abroad’ in the UK?

Nineteen Chinese international students who are currently studying in, or recently graduated as the Class of 2023 from the Education Department in Institution X—which is identified as one of the universities with the highest enrolment of Chinese international students in the UK—were purposively sampled through snowball sampling. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ diverse perspectives on the trajectories, opportunities, and challenges they experienced in the ‘reverse study abroad’ setting. In addition, this research carried out thematic analysis for data analysis.

The findings first indicated that the purpose of studying abroad was an influential factor in Chinese international students’ perception of ‘reverse study abroad’. Secondly, the study critiqued the traditional U-curve model fails to capture the complexities and uncertainties associated with the trend of ‘reverse study abroad’ in Chinese international students’ cross-cultural adjustment. This study further highlighted the prominent role of social media and co-national peers in shaping international students’ adjustment trajectories. Thirdly, the study suggested that language competency, pedagogical and cultural differences, academic pressure, homesickness, and perceived discrimination are significant stressors for Chinese international students’ cross-cultural adjustment. More importantly, it offered critical perspectives on the two-sided impact of fellow national students on Chinese international students’ cross-cultural adjustment under the ‘reverse study abroad’ context. While they may benefit from the language convenience and gain a greater sense of belonging and social connectedness, the overwhelming number of co-national students in the cohort may obstruct them from enhancing their English capabilities, constrain the diversity in academic discussions needed to develop global-mindedness, and raise peer pressure among them.

## Acknowledgement

Time flies. I still remember the matriculation day last autumn. Now, it is summer, and the time has come to mark the end of my postgraduate studies at Oxford. Being the first generation in my family to go to university, traveling independently to a country I had never been to for higher education at the age of 19, and completing my master's degree at the University of Oxford have all been significant milestones in my journey. Throughout my growth, I received immense love and support from my family and friends, helping me navigate the struggles in my academic and personal life. Here, I want to express my greatest gratitude to my family members, who consistently took great care of me and provided sufficient financial support, allowing me to bravely pursue my dreams. I also want to thank all my friends in China, the UK, and the US, who consistently provided me with mental support and companionship during my breakdowns.

Studying at the University of Oxford is bittersweet. I am lucky to have met a group of lovely people in my cohort. Firstly, I want to express my great appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Xin Xu, who always gives me insightful suggestions for improvement and provides warm encouragement during our meetings. Secondly, I want to express my gratitude to the teaching team for the Higher Education pathway: Professor Simon Marginson, Dr. James Robson, Dr. Xin Xu, and Yushan Xie. It is my great honour to meet and study with so many knowledgeable and supportive academics. This has motivated me to continue pursuing my academic dreams in the future. Thirdly, I want to thank all my classmates from the HE cohort. They not only brought diverse and critical perspectives on the educational issues we discussed, but also brought so much happiness to my master's studies. Lastly, I want to thank all the participants in my dissertation research, who shared many meaningful and interesting points that significantly contributed to this research.

More than the knowledge, studying at Oxford has made me a more mature person. And I am now filled with passion and ready for my next adventure.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research Context

#### 1.1.1 'Reverse Study Abroad' (“反向留学” *fan xiang liu xue*)

“反向留学—除了老师全都是中国人,就像本科时上了外教课一样。”

‘Reverse Study Abroad’—everyone here is Chinese except the teacher, everyone is Chinese. It is just like taking a foreign teacher’s class during my undergraduate studies in China.

(Translated by the researcher)

— Caption from Douyin<sup>1</sup> Video by User Bovermin, 6/10/2022

“反向留学了,放眼望去留学一个班 80%都是中国人。”

Studying abroad with 80% of the class being Chinese students definitely represents a ‘reverse study abroad’ phenomenon. (Translated by the researcher)

— Post Title from Xiao Hong Shu<sup>2</sup> by User nini, 26/07/2023

“这属实是反向留学了,又是一个全华班。”

This is definitely a ‘reverse study abroad’ situation, with another class entirely made up of Chinese students. (Translated by the researcher)

— Caption from Douyin Video by User Mikhailo, 8/02/2024

In 2022, a Chinese student uploaded a Douyin video featuring a classroom scene from lectures at a British university, where most of the students, including the lecturer, were Chinese (Sohu, 2022). This video quickly garnered public attention and sparked widespread online discussions because the phenomenon it reflects—an exceptionally high density of Chinese international students enrolled in some programs abroad—contrasts with the traditional conception of the ‘study-abroad’ scenario. In this regard, many netizens, including Chinese international students and those without experience studying abroad, mocked that learning in such an environment does not truly qualify as studying ‘abroad’. Therefore, they described this phenomenon as ‘reverse study abroad.’ Subsequently, as the popularity of this video surged online, the term ‘reverse study abroad’ has become a buzzword on Chinese social media.

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<sup>1</sup> Douyin (抖音) is a video-sharing platform owned by ByteDance. It is portrayed as ‘the Chinese version and TikTok as the international version of the same short video application’ (China Gravy, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Xiao Hong Shu (小红书), also known as Little Red Book, is a popular Chinese social platform ‘where users create and share content related to lifestyle, fashion, beauty, travel, and more’ (Chinafy, 2023).

Nevertheless, the term ‘reverse study abroad’ was not recently coined. Before the 2020s, researchers used this term in the Chinese educational context to describe the reverse mobility of international students<sup>3</sup> coming to China—a world-known ‘exporter’ of international students—for higher education, primarily due to the distinctiveness of the Chinese language and the remarkable development in the Chinese economy, soft power, and global competitiveness (Ding, 2016; Wen et al., 2018; Ahmad & Shah, 2018). Its current meaning on social media, however, differs from this traditional interpretation, with little research exploring this new development. In the existing literature in both Chinese and English, there is no explicit definition of the term ‘reverse study abroad’. However, it is worth mentioning that some studies have used different terms to describe the same phenomenon. For instance, You and Moskal’s (2019) investigation referred to ‘Chinese school in the UK higher education system’ when examining the impact of the overwhelming number of fellow national students on Chinese international students’ intercultural engagement with the host society.

Reflecting on the contextual background and information from posts using this buzzword on Chinese social media, the researcher proposes that in this study, ‘reverse study abroad’ refers to a phenomenon where a substantial number of Chinese international students enrol in certain programs<sup>4</sup> at foreign universities, with their numbers significantly exceeding those of local students to such an extent that they feel as if they are not studying abroad but rather studying in their home country. The following sub-section will focus on statistics illustrating the substantial number of Chinese international students studying in the UK, as well as the contributing factors from both the UK and China to the growing trend of ‘reverse study abroad’ in UK higher education.

### *1.1.2 Chinese Students Among the Internationalization of Higher Education*

In the contemporary age of globalisation, there has been an increased ‘flow of people, goods, and capital across geographical, cultural, and national divides’ (Kirkegaard & Nat-George, 2016, p. 390). In higher education, one prominent manifestation of advanced globalisation is

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<sup>3</sup> According to UNESCO (n.d.), ‘international students’ are defined as ‘individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin’.

<sup>4</sup> According to China Daily (2023), majors such as accounting and finance, social science-related subjects, and economics are particularly favoured by Chinese international students in the UK. Thus, the phenomenon of ‘reverse study abroad’ is likely to occur in these study programs at British universities.

the significant increase in international student mobility (Zhao & Schartner, 2024).

According to the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference report (2022), the number of students travelling across borders to pursue their tertiary education almost tripled from 2000 to 2019. Specifically, in 2019, the global population of tertiary international students reached over 6 million, representing nearly 3% of all tertiary students (Ibid.).

In the current global higher education market, China has emerged as the largest source of international students. The number of Chinese students travelling abroad for higher education has dramatically increased over time (see Table 1), growing from merely 860 in 1978 to 20,381 in 1995 and further increasing to 284,700 in 2010. Despite a slight decline amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers gradually rebounded, rising from 450,900 in 2020 to 661,200 in 2022.

Various factors contributing to the remarkable increase in the number of Chinese international students studying abroad. At the national level, this growth is primarily attributed to the progressively open attitudes and educational policies towards overseas higher education implemented by the Chinese government (Welch & Cai, 2011). During the Great Cultural Revolution, China was isolated from the world, and its higher education system was detrimentally destroyed (Zwart, 2013). Consequently, China significantly lagged in the global competition during that period due to a lack of trained professionals to promote Chinese academic research and scientific developments (Ibid.). Deng Xiaoping attempted to revitalize the Chinese economy, education, and science by reopening national borders and reactivating international communication and collaboration with other countries (Thepaper, 2018), a movement known as the Reform and Opening Up. He highlighted the significance of sending Chinese students to study abroad for China's post-Cultural Revolution recovery and issued instructions for the large-scale dispatch of Chinese students overseas, marking a new era in the history of Chinese overseas higher education (China News, 2008). From 1978 to 1984, pursuing overseas higher education for Chinese students was funded by the government and had limited availability, making the application process highly competitive. However, with the permission of self-funded study abroad in 1984 and the cancellation of the self-funded overseas study qualification review in 1985, studying abroad for Chinese students transformed from elitism to massification (Tsinghua News, 2008). Chinese students thus experience increased freedom in their decision-making regarding studying abroad, resulting in a growing number of Chinese international students across the world. At the individual

level, external factors such as the desire to escape the competitive and pressured Gaokao<sup>5</sup> (Zhai et al., 2012); improve English capabilities by studying in Anglophone countries (Zheng, 2014); and gain advantages from the symbolic value of foreign diplomas<sup>6</sup>, particularly those from economically advantaged Anglophone countries, when entering the Chinese labour market (Fong, 2011), are recognised as essential in driving Chinese students to pursue higher education abroad. Moreover, the inherent values of studying abroad, such as enriching life experiences (Yang et al., 2018); enhancing intercultural competence (Maharaja, 2018); broadening social networks on a global scale (Yang et al., 2011); and developing problem-solving skills, independence, and resilience to become better versions of themselves (Wu, 2014; Yang et al., 2018; Fraide et al., 2022), are also highly valued by Chinese students.

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National Bureau of Statistics (2007). *Postgraduate and undergraduate students*. Available at: [https://www.stats.gov.cn/zt\\_18555/ztsj/hstjnj/sh2007/202303/t20230303\\_1925950.html](https://www.stats.gov.cn/zt_18555/ztsj/hstjnj/sh2007/202303/t20230303_1925950.html);

Center for China and Globalization (n.d.). *The development of Chinese student studying abroad (2023-2024)*. Available at: <http://www.ccg.org.cn/archives/84327> and

Ministry of Education (2020). *Statistics on Chinese learners studying overseas in 2019*. Available at: [http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press\\_releases/202012/t20201224\\_507474.html](http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/202012/t20201224_507474.html)

### 1.1.3 The UK as A Significant International Student Receiving Country

The United Kingdom is one of the preferred study-abroad destinations for Chinese international students due to its strategic advantages in the global higher education marketplace, such as high rankings in international education league tables, English as the medium of instruction, and rich cultural resources (Altbach, 2012; Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; Scott, 2021; Consoli, 2024). According to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2023) (see Table 2), Chinese international students have constituted the largest international student cohort in the UK higher education system for a decade. There has been a steady upward trend in the number of Chinese international students enrolled in UK higher

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<sup>5</sup> Gaokao is the National Higher Education Entrance Examination in China (UCAS, 2016). It is recognised as one of the world's toughest school exams in terms of difficulty and competitiveness (The Guardian, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> From Deng Xiaoping's designation of Western developed countries as destinations for the training of Chinese scholars during the Reform and Opening-up period (Welch & Cai, 2011) to the dominance of Western superpowers in global higher education rankings in the modern era (Altbach, 2012), Western-developed countries have typically presented an image of superiority and advancement (Wallerstein, 1974). This perception has led to the formation of Western worship in China, making university credentials from Western countries more desirable and symbolically valued for fostering promising employment prospects for Chinese international students (Mok et al., 2016).

education institutions, growing from 25,135 in 2006 to 58,975 in 2014 and reaching 99,965 in 2021, approximately four times the number recorded in 2006.

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The accomplishment of the UK in attracting international students is primarily attributed to the development of neoliberalism, characterised by its ‘export-orientated, market-driven approach to higher education’ (Wen et al., 2018, p. 205). Under the neoliberal agenda, although British public universities have gained greater autonomy from the government in setting strategic targets and institutional missions, they have simultaneously experienced reduced subsidies and funding from the government (Scott, 2021). This latter shift increases the financial burden on institutions, compelling them to take greater responsibility in seeking financial support to maintain their operational capabilities and financial stability (Ibid.). In this context, high-tuition fee-paying international students<sup>7</sup> have been recognised as a crucial monetary source (Walker, 2014), and a spectrum of policies and activities have been implemented to enhance international student recruitment. These initiatives include the Graduate Visa Scheme, the provision of scholarships for international students, and dedicated international student recruitment campaigns (Gov.UK, n.d.; British Council, n.d.). Consequently, the UK has become an appealing study-abroad destination for international

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<sup>7</sup> In the UK higher education system, the tuition fee cap for domestic students is strictly controlled by the UK government, whereas that for international students is not (Scott, 2021). This results in a noticeable gap in tuition fees between international and domestic students. For instance, at the University of Oxford, the tuition fee for Philosophy, Politics, and Economics is £9,250 for domestic students, while it is £38,550 for international students (approximately 4.2 times higher). This example evidently demonstrates the significantly higher tuition fees set for international students.

students worldwide.

#### *1.1.4 International Students and Their Adjustment Issues*

International students have made enormous contributions to the host country in various ways. Economically, they bring substantial economic value to the UK economy due to their considerable expenses on tuition fees, accommodation, and transportation, to name a few (Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007). Culturally, they promote cultural diversity on campuses, exposing domestic students to divergent perspectives and better preparing them for the global career market (Office for Students, 2022). Socially, highly skilled international students who choose to work in the host country after graduation make positive impacts by ‘enriching the human resource potential of the host country’ (Mahroum, 1999, p. 181) and further improve the global competitiveness of the host country in the contemporary knowledge economy. Given the significant impacts of international students on economic, cultural, and social aspects, they have received growing attention from researchers in higher education studies (e.g., Morrison et al., 2005; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Gu et al., 2010).

Among the numerous research topics concerning international students, their cross-cultural adjustment experiences have been the focus of extensive study over the years (e.g., Kagan & Cohen, 1990; Andrade, 2006; Li et al., 2010). Adjustment, as will be further elaborated in Chapter 2, is defined as ‘the process that takes place when an individual moves or has contact with a new environment’ (Malay et al., 2023, p. 486). Studying international students’ adjustment experiences is significant because findings from relevant studies provide higher education institutions with an insightful understanding of the opportunities and challenges involved in international students’ cross-border transitions. This understanding enables institutions to develop solutions to support international students and enhance their overall satisfaction with studying abroad (Malay et al., 2023, p. 486). In turn, this helps institutions to attract more international students, thereby enriching campus diversity and mitigating financial shortfalls.

## **1.2 Research Rationale**

The rationale for conducting this research stems from the researcher’s personal experience and the identified research gap in existing studies. Firstly, the researcher undertook undergraduate studies in a ‘reverse study abroad’ context, with approximately 90% of the student cohort being Chinese. The academic and sociocultural adjustments the researcher experienced in this distinctive environment significantly differed from their initial expectations and concerns. This unique adjustment experience sparked the researcher’s

interest in investigating the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of other Chinese international students studying in similar contexts. Secondly, despite the rapid increase in Chinese students studying abroad, existing research typically views them as a minority ethnic group within the student body (e.g., Wang et al., 2012; Zhang, 2017; Lu et al., 2018). However, in the context of ‘reverse study abroad,’ Chinese international students in some programs are no longer a minority ethnic group in terms of numbers. This shift in the status of Chinese international students brings research on their cross-cultural adjustment experiences into a new era. Yet, to date, no studies specifically focus on the emerging trend of ‘reverse study abroad’ to explore their intercultural adjustment experiences in such a unique environment, as evidenced by a search conducted in 2024 on Google Scholar using keywords such as ‘reverse study abroad’ and ‘Chinese international students’ cross-cultural adjustment.’ To fill these research gaps and bring new insights into the study of Chinese international students and cross-cultural adjustment issues for student sojourners, the main research question addressed in this study is: What are the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of Chinese international students in the context of ‘reverse study abroad’ in the UK?

### **1.3 Outline of the Thesis**

This research is presented in six chapters. In the following sections, Chapter 2 reviews the definition of adjustment and elaborates on the trajectories and different types of adjustment experienced by international students. Moreover, Chapter 2 identifies the research gaps in the existing literature and outlines the research questions addressed in this study. Chapter 3 critically discusses the research methodology, providing detailed discussions, analysis, and evaluation of the research design, data collection and analysis techniques, research rigour, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents findings from the data analysis. Chapter 5 builds upon these findings to conduct an extended discussion. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the research, highlights the contributions of this study, identifies limitations of the current research, and provides recommendations for future studies as the final conclusion.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature regarding international students' adjustment experiences. Firstly, it reviews and evaluates relevant literature to propose a definition of 'adjustment' for the current study. Secondly, it discusses the theoretical frameworks concerning sojourners' cross-cultural adjustment. It also critically analyses the challenges and influential factors affecting international students' adjustment experiences in academic, sociocultural, and psychological aspects. Importantly, the adjustment experiences of Chinese international students are reviewed in the discussion of these three domains. Thirdly, it outlines the research gaps identified in the existing literature and presents the research questions of this study.

### 2.1 Definition of 'Adjustment' for International Students

The term 'adjustment,' which derives from the Latin word *ad-justare* (Moritsugu et al., 2016), describes an interactive and dynamic process that takes place between the person and the ever-changing environment (Anderson, 1994; Ramsay et al., 1999). Although the definition of 'adjustment' has been explicitly introduced in previous literature investigating the intercultural learning and living experiences of international students, nuances exist in their interpretations. It is therefore necessary to clarify these differences before conducting the research.

On the one hand, 'adjustment' has been defined as a process that involves integrating with the host culture and distancing from the native culture, as in Kagan and Cohen's (1990) study on the cultural adjustment of international students in the U.S. higher education context. Similarly, Thomas and Harrell (1994) described 'adjustment' as the process individuals experience when they attempt to 'fit in' to the new environment through cultural assimilation and personal change (cited in Landis et al., 2004). Applying these interpretations to the current study would mean that the degree of Chinese international students' familiarisation, assimilation, and accommodation into British culture, and simultaneously, the extent to which they alienate and abandon Chinese culture, are considered reference points for determining their progress and outcomes of adjustment while studying abroad. However, the researcher argues that both Kagan and Cohen (1990) and Thomas and Harrell (1994) demonstrate ethnocentric overtones by adopting the cultural ideologies of 'white hegemony'<sup>8</sup> and 'white

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<sup>8</sup> 'White hegemony' refers to a form of rule where whites hold the dominant status in society with the acknowledgement of racial minorities (Edwards, 2008)

supremacy'<sup>9</sup> in understanding the term 'adjustment' to some extent. They tend to consider the cultural norms and values of the host country as the standard and dominant for sojourners to follow, with the implication that the sojourners' native culture is inferior to that of the White majority (Li, 2015; Yao et al., 2019). In this regard, their interpretations imply unbalanced power relations between white and non-white individuals.

On the other hand, Mesudor and Sly (2016) conceptualised 'adjustment' as 'the process by which one balances needs and the obstacles in his or her environment' (p. 263). Similarly, Malay et al. (2023) defined 'adjustment' for international students as 'the process that students go through to perform their tasks and achieve comfort while pursuing education and living in the host country' (p. 488). In this regard, it becomes evident that these authors advocate for an alternative perspective, shifting away from viewing the culture of host countries as the dominant standard for sojourners' adjustment. Instead, they propose that the feelings and comfort experienced by international students when interacting with a new environment should be regarded as reference points to assess individuals' degree of adjustment. More importantly, they recognise that individuals' native culture and the host culture exist in a compatible manner during the adjustment process (Hartwell & Ounoughi, 2019). Therefore, the researcher argues that these two interpretations imply more equalised power dynamics between white and non-white individuals.

In sum, the current research deems the latter interpretations more appropriate. Building upon this perspective, the term 'adjustment' in this study is defined as the process by which individuals address the various needs and challenges of moving to an unfamiliar environment until they reach a level of satisfaction and comfort in their new surroundings.

## **2.2 Theorisation of the Adjustment Process**

### *2.2.1 The U-Shaped Curve and Related Models*

In the existing literature, scholars recognise that cross-cultural adjustment often follows an incremental model, manifesting as a sequential transition over time (Quan et al., 2016). Among the conceptual frameworks used to understand sojourners' cross-cultural adjustment trajectories, the U-curve model (see Figure 1), introduced by Lysgaard (1955) in his study of Norwegian scholars in the U.S., is regarded as a crucial heuristic framework that has been widely adopted for decades (Ward et al., 1998). According to Lysgaard (1955), sojourners are

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<sup>9</sup> 'White supremacy' refers to 'a historically based and institutionally perpetuated system of violence, exploitation, and oppression driven by the belief in society structured around a white racial ideal' (Jaffee & Casey, 2020, p. 694),

typically filled with optimism and positive expectations during their initial interactions with the host environment. However, as they become increasingly involved in the host country, they may face frustrations and difficulties in their daily lives, which could induce feelings of depression and anxiety. This experience results in a decline in their overall adjustment. Subsequently, when sojourners take action to resolve the challenges they encounter, they experience a recovery towards better adjustment, allowing them to live comfortably and securely in the host country (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Burnapp, 2006; Chien, 2016).

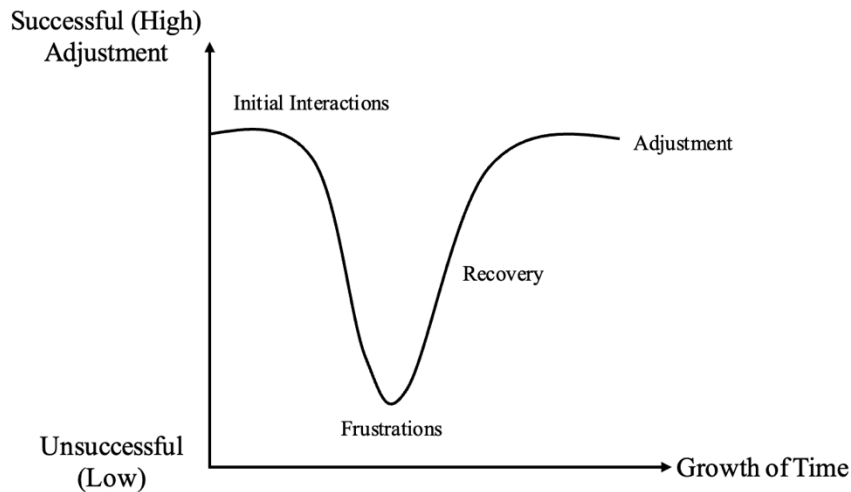


Figure 1: Illustration of the U-Curve Adjustment Model

Building upon Lysgaard’s U-curve hypothesis, other scholars have further developed and contributed to the investigation of sojourners’ adjustment trajectories. For example, in Oberg’s (1960) anthropological interpretation and elaboration of ‘culture shock,’ he described sojourners’ cross-cultural adjustment in four stages: the ‘honeymoon’ stage, during which sojourners often live in excitement and euphoria due to their curiosity of the new cultural environment; the stage where attitudes towards the host country shift from positive to aggressive and hostile due to the difficulties and distress they encounter; the ‘recovery phase,’ as they navigate the host culture and deal with various culture shocks in different aspects of life; and the completion of the ‘adjustment’ process, where they are able to function within the new milieu with an increased sense of enjoyment and decreased anxiety. Overall, Oberg’s four-stage model of cross-cultural adjustment is similar to Lysgaard’s and can also be illustrated by a U-shaped curve (Ward et al., 1998).

Moreover, Adler (1975), who emphasised sojourners’ self and cultural awareness, proposed a five-phase adjustment model similar to the trajectory of a U-curve. Firstly, at the initial contact stage, individuals are enchanted by the new culture. Secondly, at the disintegration stage, the cultural distinctions between the host culture and the sojourners’ native culture

inevitably intrude into the perceptual reality of the sojourners, giving rise to feelings of alienation, depression, and confusion. Thirdly, the reintegration stage is characterised by sojourners strongly rejecting the second culture and leaning heavily on compatriots who share a similar cultural background for emotional security and comfort. Fourthly, at the autonomy stage, sojourners are likely to integrate into the second culture by acquiring the skills and knowledge of the host culture. Lastly, at the independence stage, sojourners begin to accept and draw nourishment from the cultural diversity.

Reflecting on the above-discussed frameworks for studying sojourners' adjustment, it becomes evident that Lysgaard's U-shaped curve has been an influential model in this research field for years. However, findings from recent research that reapply the U-curve model to study international students' intercultural adjustment have raised doubts about the model's applicability. For instance, in Chien's (2016) mixed-method study using qualitative interviews, quantitative self-evaluation, and graphical analysis with 26 full-time international postgraduate students in the UK, significant impacts of various external factors (e.g., technology for information dissemination and institutional support) and internal factors (e.g., age, personality, and purpose of studying abroad) on shaping international students' adjustment trajectories were highlighted. Chien (2016) argued that international students did not necessarily follow a predictable process in their cross-cultural adjustment and criticised the U-curve model as oversimplistic, failing to capture the dynamics, complexities, and uncertainties involved in international students' adjustment. In addition, Brown and Holloway's (2008) ethnographic study of international students studying at a university in Southern England revealed a finding contradictory to the U-curve model. They found that international students tend to experience overwhelming negative feelings due to culture shock during the initial adjustment stage rather than feelings of excitement. Therefore, Brown and Holloway (2008) indicated that the U-curve model is overgeneralised and unsuitable as a one-size-fits-all framework for examining international students' adjustment.

Given the central position of Lysgaard's U-curve model in research on cross-cultural adjustment, this study aims to further contribute to the scholarly debate on the appropriateness of the U-curve for studying the adjustment experiences of international students, with a specific focus on its applicability in the 'reverse studying abroad' context.

### *2.2.2 Different Types of Adjustment*

In earlier studies on sojourners' cross-cultural adjustment, researchers have often focused on the sub-types of sociocultural and psychological adjustment (e.g., Adler, 1975; Oguri &

Gudykunst, 2002; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). However, international students represent a distinctive type of sojourner because they stay in the host country for a relatively short period compared to long-term sojourners such as immigrants (Malay et al., 2023). More importantly, they come to the host country for educational purposes (Quan et al., 2016). Thus, international students, who typically receive prior education in foreign countries with education systems significantly different from those in the UK, may face various issues when adjusting to a new academic environment (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Following this perspective, it is essential to consider academic adjustment when studying international students' overall adjustment experiences, in addition to the sociocultural and psychological dimensions (Schartner & Young, 2016; Bastien et al., 2018).

#### 2.2.2.1 Academic Adjustment

According to Ramsay et al. (1999), 'academic adjustment' refers to 'the fit which students achieve with the academic context' (p. 129). Zhao and Schartner (2023) elaborated on this concept, defining 'academic adjustment' as 'the process involved in adjusting to academic life and study in the host environment' (p. 3). Drawing on these definitions and linking them to the previously proposed notion of 'adjustment,' this research defines 'academic adjustment' as the process of familiarising oneself with the educational culture and norms of the host country and seeking a learning style that facilitates individuals in achieving their academic aspirations.

In the existing literature, English proficiency is highlighted as one of the common challenges in international students' academic adjustment, particularly for non-native speakers, when studying in Anglophone countries (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Bastien et al., 2018). As the most fundamental and significant component in academic learning, international students' English competence strongly determines their progress in academic adjustment and their academic achievements (Zhang & Mi, 2010; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). For example, in Chiang and Dunkel's (1992) experimental study comparing the listening comprehension of high- and low-intermediate Chinese students learning English as a foreign language, the authors found a positive impact of a competent English level on students' ability to comprehend and digest lecture content. This research finding is supported by Rahimirad and Moini (2015), who investigated the challenges experienced by Iranian learners when listening to academic lectures during English for Academic Purposes workshops. Besides classroom learning, Zhang and Mi (2010) conducted survey-based research on the language difficulties encountered by Chinese international students in the Australian higher education context. The authors identified reading English academic articles

as a challenging task for Chinese international students. In addition, Heng (2018) conducted longitudinal qualitative research on the adjustment challenges for Chinese undergraduate students in the UK and found that Chinese international students are less likely to engage in group discussions due to language barriers. These findings further indicate the significant impact of English competence on international students' academic survival and successful academic adjustment in English-speaking countries.

However, Zhang and Mi (2010) highlighted the differences across academic disciplines in terms of linguistic demands and the impact of English proficiency on international students' academic adjustment. To clarify, the authors indicated international students majoring in arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS) subjects face significant linguistic demands and are sensitive to English competence due to the substantial amount of text-based work involved. In contrast, students studying science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects experience fewer negative impacts on their academic achievements if they lack English proficiency.

Another barrier to international students' academic adjustment is the pedagogical difference between the host country and their home countries. This is demonstrated in Zhou et al.'s (2017) study on the transnational learning experiences of Chinese master's students in a Canadian university, where the participants reported their struggles in actively speaking up in class to share their perspectives when adjusting to the Western teaching style. In the traditional Chinese education system, the Confucian tradition has played an essential role in shaping classroom norms and teaching approaches in China. Specifically, the teacher-student relationship is characterised as hierarchical, with teachers typically playing an authoritative role in leading the class and transferring knowledge, while students take on the role of passive learners and refrain from questioning authority (Zhao, 2013; Tian et al., 2021). However, classroom norms and teaching strategies in many Western countries are characterised by the dominant influences of theorists such as John Dewey. These theorists strongly advocate for the social constructivist tradition, emphasising the benefits of students' active participation in constructing their knowledge (Li & Wegerif, 2014). Consequently, students are expected to proactively engage in activities and contribute to discussions in many Western classes. Hence, due to the conflicting cultural norms from their previous learning experiences, Chinese international students may find it challenging to express their ideas during class discussions and often perform as the 'quiet students' (Ruble & Zhang, 2013).

However, Fang et al. (2016) attributed the phenomenon of ‘the reluctant speaker’ among East Asian students (Li, 2012) to the ‘double translation bind’ faced by non-native English speakers. In their study, Chinese international students reported needing extended pauses to translate lecturers’ questions into Chinese for better understanding and then translating their responses from Chinese back into English for reporting. Therefore, the finding suggests that Chinese students and other non-native English-speaking international students tend to experience a greater cognitive workload compared to native English speakers. From this perspective, Fang et al.’s (2016) study provides an alternative interpretation of the stereotypical image of East Asian students as ‘too shy and nervous’ (p. 149) and highlights the potential threat of discrimination in class for them. More importantly, it further emphasises the crucial role of language competence in successfully adjusting to the student-led teaching style featured in many Western universities (Dincer et al., 2012).

#### 2.2.2.2 Sociocultural Adjustment

Ward and Kennedy (1999) defined ‘sociocultural adjustment’ as ‘the ability to fit in, acquire culturally appropriate skills, and negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment’ (p. 660). However, as criticised earlier, the phrase ‘fit in’ reflects implicit cultural hegemony in explaining the process of sojourners’ adjustment. In this regard, the interpretation of ‘sociocultural adjustment’ provided by Razgulin et al. (2023) is considered more appropriate for this study. They defined it as a dynamic process involving sojourners acquiring new practical and social skills necessary to cope with diverse challenges when living in a new cultural environment, ultimately achieving a good balance between the sojourners and the host environment.

Sociocultural adjustment is widely acknowledged as a crucial aspect of sojourners’ overall adjustment experience (Coles & Swami, 2012). For international students, travelling across borders to pursue higher education in a country with a distinct culture from their home country is both enlightening and stressful (Kwon, 2013). On the one hand, they may gain a deeper awareness of cultural diversity and develop greater open-mindedness (Newsome & Cooper, 2016). On the other hand, they may confront various difficulties when engaging with an unfamiliar culture. These challenges include the absence of culturally appropriate food (Taylor & Ali, 2017), differences in public transportation systems between the host country and their home countries (Ibid.), and unfamiliarity with cultural customs and social behaviours of the host country, such as rules related to politeness in conversational and non-conversational contexts (Newsome & Cooper, 2016). These obstacles make sociocultural adjustment challenging for international students, leading to confusion and frustration during

this process (Kwon, 2013). In such contexts, the cumulative impact of unfamiliar experiences often results in ‘culture shock,’ which inevitably threatens their sense of identity, life satisfaction, and overall well-being (Zhou et al., 2008).

Studies have identified that interacting with host nationals is an effective strategy for facilitating international students’ sociocultural adjustment (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Wang & Hannes, 2014). In other words, the more leisure time international students spend with native peers, the better their sociocultural adjustment outcomes will be. This is because host nationals are the most indigenous members of the host culture (Newsome & Cooper, 2016). They are able to help international students develop local networks, gain knowledge and understanding of the social and cultural norms in the host society, and acquire the necessary social skills (Church, 1982; Coles & Swami, 2012; Wang & Hannes, 2014) to overcome the negative influences brought by cultural shock, thereby enhancing their sociocultural experiences while studying abroad.

Despite the positive impact of close contact between local and international students is well-documented, the extent of this interaction is still limited (e.g., Zhou et al., 2008; Hendrickson, 2011). The first identified barrier is related to language proficiency. This is evidenced by the positive correlation between international students’ level of language proficiency and their interaction with local students, as identified in Kwon’s (2013) qualitative study involving Chinese international students studying at Korean universities. Similarly, Newsome and Cooper (2016) suggested that inadequate language skills may pose challenges for international students in communicating clearly and fluently with local students, discouraging them from building friendships with host nationals and hindering meaningful interactions between local and international students. The second identified barrier is the host nationals’ discriminatory attitudes towards international students. For example, in Hendrickson et al.’s (2011) research on the friendship networks among international students in the U.S., they identified ethnic prejudices and racial stereotypes held by host nationals towards foreign sojourners as the main impediments to the establishment of host-sojourner friendships. This finding aligns with that of Dovchin (2020), who investigated international students’ experiences of linguistic racism in Australia. Dovchin indicated that distinctive differences between local and international students, such as strong ethnic accents, may trigger ethnic accent bullying and increase perceived discrimination among international students, pushing them to withdraw from social interactions with host nationals. The third barrier is that local students tend to stay within their comfort zones of friendships and maintain interactions with students from their previously established social circles in earlier educational experiences

(Wang & Hannes, 2014). As a result, local students are found to be less open to international students (Hendrickson et al., 2011), which challenges international students in making friends with host nationals.

Some scholars argued that interacting with culturally and linguistically different host nationals might be a stressful experience for international students (e.g., Coles & Swami, 2012; Zhao & Schartner, 2024). Instead, international students prefer building friendships with co-national peers for their sociocultural adjustment. Sheng et al. (2022) suggested that interacting with co-national peers facilitates international students' understanding of the host culture through discussions and intellectual exchanges, which has a similar effect as interacting with host nationals. Additionally, Tran (2019) highlighted the beneficial role of fellow national students in the sociocultural adjustment of international students by providing the emotional and spiritual support necessary to navigate the new environment. However, Tran (2019) also indicated that over-dependence on co-national networks can adversely impact international students' development in language proficiency, which has negative implications for their adjustment in both academic and sociocultural aspects.

Moreover, the advantageous role of social media in international students' sociocultural adjustment has been noted in Forbush & Foucault-Welles's (2016) study on the impact of social networking sites (SNS) on study abroad preparation for Chinese international students in the US, as well as in Lin's (2012) research on the impact of SNS on international students' social capital and adjustment. By using social media, people have the opportunity to share information and personal experiences about living and studying in the host country, which serve as meaningful social resources in facilitating student sojourners' intercultural transition (Rui & Wang, 2015). In addition, social media platforms help international students build, accumulate, and strengthen social capital (Pang & Wang, 2020). In other words, social media enables international students to keep in touch with friends and family in their home country, which reduces acculturative stress in adjusting to a new culture (Lim & Pham, 2016). It also fosters international students to make friends with host nationals and co-national students online, thus better adjusting socially and culturally during their study abroad period (Rui & Wang, 2015).

### 2.2.2.3 Psychological Adjustment

According to Zhang and Goodson (2011), psychological adjustment refers to 'psychological well-being or satisfaction' (p. 140). Zhao and Schartner (2024) offered a more detailed explanation by conceptualising it as the affective adjustment process concerning individuals'

subjective well-being and satisfaction. Drawing upon these interpretations, this study defines international students' 'psychological adjustment' as the process through which individuals adjust their mental well-being in response to various issues encountered during their study abroad experiences, aiming to achieve mental satisfaction in the host country.

For both international and local students, psychological adjustment is a crucial aspect of transitioning to university life, as individuals' personal safety, academic achievement, and sociocultural competence are closely tied to their degree of psychological adjustment (Ward et al., 1998; Owusu-Ansah et al., 2020; Duffy et al., 2020; King et al., 2021). However, as discussed earlier, international students who study and live in an unfamiliar country tend to experience unique and significant challenges in their academic and sociocultural adjustment due to cultural differences (e.g., Fang et al., 2016; Taylor & Ali, 2017). These additional challenges may bring an increased level of acculturative stress, making international students more psychologically vulnerable compared to local students (Mori, 2000).

Extensive research has investigated the potential obstacles hindering the psychological adjustment of international students. One notable obstacle is homesickness<sup>10</sup>, which increases international students' intention to return to their home country, reinforces their negative impressions of the host country, and negatively impacts their emotional well-being (Saravanan et al., 2017). These issues ultimately reduce international students' life satisfaction and disrupt their smooth psychological adjustment (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Further, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) highlighted that older students generally cope with homesickness more effectively than younger students, revealing age as a factor influencing international students' psychological adjustment.

Another critical barrier is perceived discrimination. For instance, Sun et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative, longitudinal investigation on the relationships between perceived discrimination and the mental well-being of Chinese international students in U.S. universities. They found that perceived discrimination—commonly race- and language-based discrimination—experienced by Chinese international students is strongly and positively correlated with their mental distress, characterised by symptoms of anxiety and depression. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) also recognised that higher levels of perceived discrimination among international students contribute to worsening mental well-being. More importantly, they pointed out that non-white international students, who belong to a visible racial or ethnic

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<sup>10</sup> 'Homesickness' refers to the distress and functional impairment caused by being detached from significant others and familiar places (Thurber et al., 2007).

group, experience more discrimination compared to white students. Further supporting this point, both Haft and Zhou (2021) and Maleku et al. (2022) indicated that Chinese international students experienced significantly higher perceived discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, including verbal harassment and racial slurs. Perceived discrimination leads to increased feelings of depression, alienation, loneliness, and insecurity in the host country for Chinese international students, ultimately threatening their mental well-being and hindering their psychological adjustment (Haft & Zhou, 2021; Ji & Chen, 2023).

Furthermore, studies have indicated that the degree of the academic and sociocultural adjustment for international students is related to their psychological adjustment (e.g., Searle & Ward, 1990; Ryder et al., 2013). Their findings identified that factors such as academic pressure, proficiency in the host country's native language, the establishment and development of interpersonal networks, and adjustment to academic, social, and cultural norms and customs all influence the mental well-being of international students and, consequently, their psychological adjustment (Bender et al., 2019; Altinyelken et al., 2020; Can, Poyrazlı, & Pillay, 2021).

In light of the existing literature on the psychological adjustment of international students, another central focus is the social support available for promoting their mental well-being. Bender et al. (2019), who conducted a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of different types of support sources on international students' psychological adjustment, categorised social support into two categories: objective social support, which refers to the actual support received, and subjectively measured social support, which 'is commonly measured as either the perceived availability of potential support (e.g., from friends and family) or a sense of social integration or connectedness' (p. 830). The authors found that subjective support has a stronger positive impact on international students as it makes them feel more mentally safe and supported. In addition, they highlighted the significant roles of host nationals, fellow nationals, and support projects and interventions from host organisations in positively contributing to international students' psychological adjustment. Likewise, Maundeni (2001) confirmed the positive influence of co-national students on international students' psychological adjustment, suggesting that fellow students usually provide a sense of belonging to international students, helping to stabilise their emotions or recover from depression. Moreover, Rückert (2015) similarly identified the effectiveness of institutional support, including psychological counselling services, in offering international students professional assessment and consultation to address their mental health issues and facilitate their psychological adjustment. However, studies revealed the reluctance of Asian students to

seek help from school counselling services when experiencing mental stress. Despite Li et al. (2013) indicated that this reluctance is primarily due to cultural beliefs, which perceive emotional control and resilience during challenging periods as virtues, Can et al. (2021) provided an alternative explanation by considering language competency as a significant factor, as it is the precondition for effective communication with counsellors.

### **2.3 Research Gaps and Research Questions**

Upon reflecting on the existing studies, it becomes evident that despite a growing body of literature on the academic, sociocultural, and psychological adjustment experiences of tertiary international students across different countries, the adjustment experiences in these three domains for Chinese international students—one of the most significant international student populations worldwide—have not yet been systematically and comprehensively examined. In addition, there is substantial evidence regarding the impact of co-national students on influencing international students' cross-cultural adjustment trajectories (e.g., Adler, 1975) and on shaping their cross-cultural adjustment experiences (e.g., Maundeni, 2001; Sheng et al., 2022), such as enhancing social connectedness, providing mental support, and posing a potential threat to the development of international students' language competence.

Following this perspective, another research gap has been revealed: under the emerging trend of 'reverse study abroad' in the UK, where the density of Chinese international students in some programs is high, it remains uncertain whether Chinese international students in this context experience similar trajectories, challenges, and influential factors in their adjustment experiences as described in prior studies while studying in such a unique environment. To the researcher's knowledge, no empirical studies have focused on the 'reverse study abroad' context in the UK and the associated adjustment experiences of Chinese international students. Therefore, to fill these research gaps and shed new light on the study of Chinese international students and cross-cultural adjustment issues for student sojourners, the present study aims to address the main research question: What are Chinese international students' cross-cultural adjustment experiences in the 'reverse study abroad' context in the UK?

The sub-research questions for the current study are as follows:

1. How do Chinese international students interpret and perceive the term 'reverse study abroad'?
2. In the context of 'reverse study abroad', what are Chinese international students' 1) academic, 2) sociocultural, and 3) psychological adjustment trajectories in the UK over time?

3. In the context of 'reverse study abroad', what are the challenges and influential factors in Chinese international students' 1) academic, 2) sociocultural, and 3) psychological adjustment experiences in the UK over time?

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

This chapter focuses on the detailed procedures, considerations, and evaluations in designing and conducting research. Firstly, it begins with the researcher's claim of the research philosophy and paradigm, followed by an overview of the research design. Secondly, it thoroughly presents the approaches and criteria for sample selection, data collection, and data analysis. Thirdly, it critically discusses the trustworthiness of the research, the researcher's positionality, and the ethical considerations taken in this research.

### **3.1 Research Philosophy and Paradigm**

The research philosophy of this study is grounded in the constructivist-interpretive approach. Firstly, 'ontology is the study of the nature of reality' (Spencer et al., 2014, p. 82). Following this definition, this research posited that Chinese international students' perceptions of the trajectory, challenges, and influential factors in their academic, sociocultural, and psychological adjustment while studying abroad are socially constructed and subjective to each individual's unique experiences (constructivist ontology). Secondly, epistemology focuses on the knowledge-gathering process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994)—how to produce valid, legitimate, and trustworthy knowledge (Saunders et al., 2015). Following this perspective, this research considered that the researcher's meaning-making and knowledge construction regarding Chinese international students' cross-cultural adjustment experiences is built upon individuals' subjective interpretations (interpretivist epistemology). As Grix (2002) indicated, ontology concerns what can be known, epistemology describes the ways of knowing what is to be known, and methodology relates to the plan for proceeding with the inquiry of the research question. Thus, it becomes evident that these three components are connected in a logical sequence, which plays significant roles in guiding the decision-making process for the research design.

### **3.2 Design of the Research**

Building upon the ontological and epistemological considerations discussed above, this research adopts an exploratory, qualitative approach because its inductive nature is advantageous for generating informative and insightful data from participants for knowledge construction (Berryman, 2018; Cuthbertson et al., 2020).

This research is a case study. Employing this design, which focuses on a single, bounded system, allows the researcher to gain a holistic and intensive investigation and analysis of the previously unresearched phenomenon of 'reverse study abroad' and the associated adjustment experiences of Chinese international students (Merriam, 1985). However, narrowing the

focus to a single unit for research may lead to a reduced generalisability of the findings (Priya, 2021).

Institution X was purposively selected for this research because it is identified as one of the universities with the highest enrolment of Chinese international students in the UK. More specifically, this research focused on its Education Department, which the researcher has observed to have one of the largest populations of Chinese international students within Institution X (see Section 3.3). The target population for this research comprised Chinese international students who were currently studying at, or have graduated as the Class of 2023 from, the Education Department at Institution X. These individuals were assumed to be likely experiencers of 'reverse study abroad' based on the researcher's personal experience (see Section 3.8). Therefore, they were considered well-suited to provide the relevant and valuable information needed for this research.

This research employed semi-structured interviews for data collection. Semi-structured interviews, characterised by their unique combination of open and closed questions, are deemed appropriate for gaining a more in-depth and insightful understanding of the participants' cross-cultural adjustment experiences (Jamshed, 2014). Lastly, the qualitative research data was analysed using thematic analysis to respond to the listed research questions.

### **3.3 The Case University-Institution X**

Institution X was intentionally selected as the case school for this research because it is known for enrolling one of the highest numbers of Chinese international students in the UK (HESA, 2023). According to the latest database on student demographics provided by Institution X, the percentage of Chinese undergraduate students among Asian/Asian British students increased from 64.2% in 2007 to 79.1% in 2021, while the percentage of Chinese postgraduate students rose from 51.8% to 82.7% over the same period (see Table 3). In addition, the percentage of Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students among the broader category of non-UK domiciled students at Institution X reached 50.5% (approximately 4.2 times that in 2007) and 57.9% (approximately 4 times that in 2007), respectively, in 2021. Therefore, it is evident that Chinese international students consistently make up a significant portion of international students at Institution X.

Moreover, according to the researcher's observation while studying at Institution X, the Education Department at Institution X was highlighted as one of the academic departments that enrolled a considerable number of Chinese international students at both the

undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, no relevant statistics are provided on Institution X's official website.

Given the overwhelming number of Chinese international students studying at Institution X at various degree levels, Institution X, particularly its Education Department, becomes an appropriate choice for conducting this research on the emerging phenomenon of 'reverse study abroad' for Chinese international students.

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.

Data Source: Official Website of Institution X (n.d.)

### 3.4 Participants

A total of 19 participants were purposively selected to take part in this research based on the inclusion criteria of being Chinese international students who are either currently studying in, or have graduated as the Class of 2023 from, the Education Department at Institution X.

Given that the researcher was previously enrolled in the Education Department at Institution X and already recognised a number of eligible respondents in social circles, in this context, the snowball sampling approach is considered appropriate for this research due to its convenience and efficiency in reaching the target population (Johnson, 2014). The researcher initially identified a sample of 8 potentially eligible respondents through personal contacts and sent them a brief introduction of the research project via WeChat, a Chinese social media messaging application, to ask for their willingness to participate. After obtaining consent from these eight respondents, the researcher invited them to refer other individuals from their social networks who meet the criteria of interest (Johnson, 2014) to participate in this

research. According to Crouch and McKenzie (2006), a small sample size of approximately 20 respondents is ideal to ‘facilitate researchers’ close association with the respondents and enhance the in-depth inquiry in naturalist settings’ (p. 483) in qualitative interview-based studies. Therefore, the sampling process stopped when the number of participants reached the target of twenty (initial N = 20). However, due to scheduling issues in arranging suitable meeting times for both the interviewee and the researcher, one participant withdrew from the research, resulting in a final sample size of 19.

Upon reflecting on the recruitment process and the demographic information of participants, snowball sampling demonstrated advantages in terms of efficiency and convenience (Johnson, 2014). However, its non-probabilistic nature and the heavy reliance on the social connections of researchers and initial contacts led to a less representative sample group of the overall population studied (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013), as evidenced by the homogeneity in age and gender<sup>11</sup> among the participants (see Table 4).

<b>Participant No.</b>	<b>Gender (F/M)</b>	<b>Programme</b>	<b>Student Status at Institution X</b>	<b>Country for receiving the pre-university education</b>
1	F	BA Education Studies	Graduated Student Class of 2023	Australia (for high school)
2	F	BA Education Studies	Year 2	China
3	F	BA Education Studies	Graduated Student Class of 2023	China
4	F	BA Education Studies	Graduated Student Class of 2023	China
5	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	UK (for high school)
6	F	BA Education Studies	Year 2	China
7	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China
8	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China (for foundation year)
9	F	BA Education Studies	Graduated Student Class of 2023	China
10	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China

<sup>11</sup> Although the homogeneity in gender is a major limitation of the research sample, the researcher argues that the uneven gender distribution among students in education-related subjects significantly contributes to this situation. According to the latest statistics from Institution X, the female-to-male ratio for students enrolling in the Education Department was 7:1, 12.5:1, and 11:1 in the academic years 2020-2021, 2019-2020, and 2018-2019, respectively. This gender limitation is partly due to the shortcomings of snowball sampling (as discussed above) and partly due to the gender imbalances in the program of the selected participants.

11	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China
12	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	UK (for high school)
13	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China
14	F	BSc Education & Psychology	Year 3	China
15	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China
16	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China
17	F	BA Education Studies	Year 2	China
18	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China
19	F	BA Education Studies	Year 3	China

Table 4: Interviewees' demographic profile

### 3.5 Data Collection

Interviews, a well-recognised data collection protocol for eliciting rich and informative data (Rabiee, 2004; Schultze & Avital, 2011; Jentoft & Olsen, 2019), were employed in this study. These interviews were designed in a semi-structured format, with predetermined closed-ended questions facilitating the researcher's adherence to the research topic, while follow-up open-ended questions allowed for clarification and further exploration of interviewees' interpretation to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject matter (Newcomer et al., 2015; Kallio et al., 2016). Given that this research grounds its epistemological assumptions within interpretivism and aims to build on participants' subjective descriptions of their cross-cultural learning experiences for knowledge construction, semi-structured interviews were considered an appropriate method for data collection in this context (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Interview questions primarily focused on participants' interpretation of the term 'reverse study abroad', their motivations for studying abroad, their adjustment trajectories in academic, sociocultural, and psychological domains, as well as the opportunities and challenges they encounter in these three aspects during their studying abroad period. The interview protocol is attached in the Appendix D.

Two pilot interviews were conducted with the researcher's colleagues, who are Chinese international students in the UK enrolled at universities different from the case institution, before proceeding with the official data collection process. Malmqvist et al. (2019) suggested that conducting pilot interviews is beneficial for researchers to 'identify the necessity to

modify questions that do not elicit appropriate responses or enable researchers to obtain rich data' (p. 3). For the pilot interviews in this research, the researcher did not make many changes to the original interview questions, as they proved effective with the pilot interviewees. However, the researcher was inspired by the colleagues' responses to add new questions, such as those addressing peer pressure among Chinese international students.

The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams from late May to early June 2024. Considering that several interviewees travelled back to China or across Europe during the interview period, online interviewing—identified as effective in overcoming distance issues and accessing globally distributed participants in a cost-effective manner (Robson, 2020)—was well-suited to this research. In addition, utilising online video conferencing software such as Microsoft Teams can automatically generate interview transcripts, which provides greater convenience for the subsequent data analysis process.

The length of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, covering topics noted above. To better understand the adjustment trajectories experienced by participants, the researcher also asked them to draw on the provided coordinate diagram (see Appendix F), send their drawings to the researcher through WeChat, and provide detailed explanations of their drawings. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin. Using the common native language of both the researcher and interviewees not only promoted linguistic equality (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004) in the interview but also facilitated interviewees in 'producing more authentic answers that exhibit more subtle nuances' (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 428).

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

After completing all the scheduled interviews, the researcher downloaded all the recordings and auto-generated transcripts from Microsoft Teams and began preparing for data analysis. Initially, the researcher reviewed all the transcripts and identified several transcription errors caused by technical issues. These errors led to confusion and threatened the accuracy of the data analysis outcomes (Chu & Ilyas, 2016). Consequently, the researcher re-listened to the audio recordings of all the interviews to correct the errors and become familiar with the data. In addition, the researcher was aware of the difficulties in conveying the precise meaning of some phrases and idioms when translating the interviewees' responses verbatim from Mandarin to English for data analysis (Turhan & Bernard, 2022). As a result, the researcher conducted the data analysis in Mandarin due to considerations of convenience and accuracy in the results (Ho et al., 2019). In the final stage of writing up the research findings, which

involved quoting the participants' expressions, the researcher manually translated the essential quotes from Mandarin to English to meet the submission criteria.

This research employed thematic analysis for text data analysis. Following this approach enables the researcher to analyse the diverse and complex data from the interviews in an organised and systematic manner and further facilitates the understanding of the shared experiences of participants to address the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The six-phase model of thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006) (see Appendix G) was used in this process. Specifically, after data familiarisation, the researcher proceeded to the coding process. This procedure typically involves organising and indexing qualitative data to provide an overview of disparate data that facilitates the researcher's sense-making in relation to the research questions (Elliott, 2018). Due to technical issues with downloading NVivo—a software designed for qualitative data analysis—the researcher alternatively used Microsoft Word for manual coding. During the transcript reading, the researcher identified relevant data, including potentially notable events, features, phrases, and behaviours, as meaningful and analysable units (codes) related to the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These were then labelled with different colour highlighters for differentiation (Benaquisto & Given, 2008). After generating the initial codes, the researcher sorted different codes based on apparent similarity to search for potential themes and gathered the relevant coded data extracts into the identified themes for further revision and refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016). Finally, several overarching themes were identified and named: Interpretations of the Term 'Reverse Study Abroad', Perceptions of the Trend of 'Reverse Study Abroad', Language Issues in Academic Adjustment, and Social Interactions with Host Nationals, to name a few.

In terms of diagram analysis regarding participants' adjustment trajectories, the researcher sorted the participants' drawings into categories of academic, sociocultural, and psychological adjustment following the interview questions. Given that no individuals produced identical drawings, the researcher proposed several key criteria for summarising their drawings into different categories. The key criteria include the starting point, the overall trend over time (upward, downward, or stable), the presence and frequency of fluctuations, and the ending point. Building upon this framework, the participants' adjustment trajectories were primarily categorised into six groups, as illustrated in Figure 2 in Chapter 4.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness of the Research**

Considering the practical contributions of the current research findings in supporting international students' intercultural adjustment in the UK, it is crucial to assess the trustworthiness of this research to ensure the rigour and quality of the research process and findings (Daniel, 2019). Four elements will be critically examined in this section, namely, credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Credibility, similar to internal validity in quantitative research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011), addresses whether the research findings accurately reflect or represent reality (Brink, 1993). One strategy to establish credibility in qualitative research is to carefully describe the data analysis process (Daniel, 2019). Building on this perspective, a comprehensive description of the data analysis approach was provided, detailing every step from the initial preparation and the coding process to the writing-up phase. This enhances the transparency of the data analysis and contributes to the credibility of this research. Another proposed strategy is using participants' direct quotes in the final report (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). In this regard, participants' quotes were extensively used in the findings chapter to support the arguments. This allows participants' voices to be authentically presented, thereby contributing to the credibility of this research. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, all transcripts had been reviewed and corrected by re-listening to all interview recordings. This ensures the data accurately reflects reality, further fostering the credibility of the current research.

Confirmability concerns the potential for bias in conducting the research and reporting the findings (Johnson & Rasulovala, 2017). It is equivalent to 'objectivity' in quantitative terms (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Scholars have suggested the significance of reflexivity in influencing the confirmability of qualitative research. Building on this perspective, this study presented a reflective and critical discussion of the researcher's positionality and associated impact on the research process as evidence of the researcher's reflexivity. In addition, aware of the potential biases brought by the researcher's 'insiderness' in shaping the design of interview questions, the researcher reviewed relevant literature prior to the interviews and conducted two pilot studies with colleagues to gather feedback for generating the interview questions. By taking these actions, the researcher acknowledged and critically evaluated potential bias, proposing corresponding solutions to address these issues, thereby contributing to the confirmability of the current research. Furthermore, the researcher was aware of the dual insider-outsider status adopted and thus consistently asked participants for clarification on some of the points they made during the semi-structured interviews, rather than interpreting their perspectives solely from the researcher's 'insiderness'. In this regard, the constant reflexivity involved led to enhanced confirmability of the study.

The notion of dependability in qualitative research is similar to the concept of reliability in quantitative research methods (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). It revolves around whether another researcher could draw similar findings by following the decision trail made by the current researcher (Yin, 2014; Johnson & Rasulova, 2017). Scholars have proposed that providing a thorough account involving the research purpose, sampling criteria and approach, details of the data collection and analysis methods, and triangulation of data collection methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011) strengthens the dependability of the research. All of these aspects are elaborated on in the ‘Methodology’ chapter, demonstrating the dependability achieved in the current study.

Transferability in qualitative research is analogous to external validity in quantitative research. It focuses on ‘how one determines the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects/participants’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). Daniel (2019) and Thomas and Magilvy (2011) indicated that transferability can be enhanced by providing a detailed description of the demographic and geographic boundaries, as well as the sampling procedures of the current study. Building upon these perspectives, this study first provided a comprehensive introduction and explanation of the term ‘reverse study abroad’—from social media quotes to a conceptual interpretation— to provide readers with sufficient contextual background for this unique research setting. Secondly, following the explanation of the ‘reverse study abroad’ context, a thorough description of the recruitment inclusion criteria, background information on the case institution, and the rationale for selecting the case institution were provided. Providing this series of relevant details enables readers to assess the applicability of the findings to their own settings (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017).

### **3.8 Researcher’s Positionality**

The researcher’s positionality is a significant consideration when planning and conducting qualitative research (Probst, 2015). The consistent reflection and critical analysis of positionality by the researcher throughout the research process is beneficial for the rigour of the research and for rapport building between the researcher and participants (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Darawsheh, 2014).

In this research, the researcher adopted a dual insider-outsider positionality. To explain, firstly, the researcher is a Chinese international student who previously studied in the Education Department at Institution X. In this regard, the similar academic and cultural

backgrounds between the researcher and the participants have partly positioned the researcher as an ‘insider’ within their research relationships. Holding the ‘insider’ position had advantages in terms of contextual knowledge of the research topics, which allowed the researcher to propose meaningful interview questions to gain topic-relevant information from participants and make sense of their viewpoints (Holmes, 2020). However, the researcher was also aware that ‘insider’ positionality might give rise to potential threats in designing the interview guide, as the researcher was likely to base the interview questions on their subjective understanding of the adjustment issues in the ‘reverse study abroad’ context (Probst, 2015; Darawsheh, 2014). Secondly, despite the shared academic and cultural background between the researcher and participants, the researcher differs from the participants in terms of familial socioeconomic status, the purpose of studying abroad, previous schooling experiences, and personality, to name a few. These nuances indicate that the researcher holds an ‘outsider’ positionality simultaneously. As a result, the researcher was motivated to conduct a literature review before designing interview questions to better explore participants’ viewpoints. Doing this also helped mitigate the potential research bias brought by the researcher’s ‘insiderness’.

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

This research was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research by the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018) and received ethical approval from the Central Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) of the University of Oxford (Appendix C&E). Before data collection, all respondents received an email containing 1) an information sheet (Appendix A), which provided them a better understanding of the nature and aim of the research, and 2) a consent form (Appendix B), which informed the researcher of the participants’ agreement to voluntary participation. Interviewees were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study or reject answer questions if they did not wish to do so at the beginning of every interview. Regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of this research, firstly, participants’ names remain anonymous, and pseudonyms (see Table 4) were used as indicators instead. Secondly, the name of the specific institution used for this case study will not be revealed to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. Thirdly, all interviews were recorded with the acknowledgement and permission of interviewees, and the audio recording and interview transcripts were securely saved in the OneDrive account provided by the University of Oxford with password protection. Only the researcher has access to these materials. However, it is challenging to fully guarantee the participants’ confidentiality in this research as snowball sampling is adopted, which means that the initially identified respondents also know the composition of the respondent group.

## Chapter 4 Findings

The research findings are presented in accordance with the three sub-research questions of this study. The first question centres on participants' interpretation of the term 'reverse study abroad'. The second question focuses on the adjustment trajectories that participants experience in the context of 'reverse study abroad'. The third question addresses the challenges and influential factors affecting participants' adjustment experiences in the context of 'reverse study abroad'.

### 4.1 Chinese international students' interpretation and perception of the term 'reverse study abroad'

#### 4.1.1 Interpretation of the Term 'Reverse Study Abroad'

At the beginning of the interview, when I asked participants whether they knew about the term 'reverse study abroad' and how they explained it, all of them indicated that they had heard of the term on social media or in informal conversations with classmates, except for Participant 1 (P1). She stated that it was her first time hearing the term when informed about participating in the current research:

*"Honestly, I haven't learned this term before. I assume that it means when international students study abroad, the program they enrolled in contains a large number of co-national students, which gives the local students a sense that they are the ones studying abroad."*

In line with P1, other participants who previously knew about this term also recognized the overwhelming number of compatriots in the learning environment of international students as central to the meaning of 'reverse study abroad'. For example, P8 reflected on her personal experience to explain the term 'reverse study abroad':

*"As a Chinese international student studying in the UK, it is assumed that I would interact more with British students. However, the reality is that I was surrounded by a significant number of students from the same country of origin as me."*

However, it is worth highlighting that there are also nuances among participants' interpretations, as demonstrated by the different reference points adopted in understanding the experiences of 'reverse study abroad'. For example, in contrast to P1, several participants (e.g., P5 & P16) shifted the emphasis to the experiences of international students rather than those of the host nationals,

*"My understanding is that when international students study abroad, the dominant*

*student population in their foreign classrooms often consists of their co-national peers, while the local students make up a minority. This experience can create the 'illusion' that they are not actually studying abroad.” (P5)*

#### *4.1.2 Perceptions of the Trend of 'Reverse Study Abroad'*

To understand participants' perceptions of the 'reverse study abroad' trend, I first asked their opinions on whether their studying abroad experiences at Institution X could be considered a 'reverse study abroad' experience. All participants provided a 'yes' answer. Some of them described their learning environment as “80-90% students in the cohort are Chinese” (P14) and “it is rare to see foreign faces in class” (P15), indicating the novel unbalanced ratio between Chinese international students and other student populations in their program.

Subsequently, I asked participants for their first impressions of the 'reverse study abroad' phenomenon and their current attitudes based on their personal experiences. In terms of their first impressions, the participants' responses fell into two distinct categories. On the one hand, several participants expressed negative attitudes toward the phenomenon of 'reverse study abroad.' For example, P5, who completed her high school studies at a British high school with very few Chinese international students, found the phenomenon of 'reverse study abroad' shocking because it contrasted with her previous learning experience:

*“I walked into the seminar room to attend my personal tutor meeting at the first day of school, and everyone except the tutor was Chinese. I was so shocked that I thought I had gone to the wrong room. After checking the room number again, I realized I was in the right place, but it was a fact that most of my classmates were also Chinese.”*

Additionally, both P1 and P16 shared her dissatisfaction with the 'reverse study abroad' trend, primarily due to the significant gap between their expectations of studying abroad and the reality,

*“I used to expect to study in a multicultural environment while studying abroad. But it turns out differently. I felt that staying in such a 'reverse study abroad' environment was a waste of my expensive tuition fee...” (P16)*

On the other hand, there were also participants who expressed their excitement about studying in an environment surrounded by co-national students. This is illustrated by P11, who changed her major from Language and Culture to Education Studies during the first month of university due to faculty administration issues:

*“In my previous program, I was one of the very few Chinese international students in class, and I felt so anxious. But when I transferred to the education department, I cannot describe how happy and mentally secure I felt surrounded by many fellow nationals in my program.”*

In terms of the participants’ current attitudes towards the trend of ‘reverse study abroad’ after an extended period of studying in such an environment, 18 out of 19 participants (e.g., P1, P9, P10) expressed positive feelings, albeit to varying extents. For example, P16, who initially felt disappointed by the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend in her program, changed her attitude. She highlighted the significant amount of subjectively perceived support (Bender et al., 2019) provided by the large presence of co-nationals in the program, which helped reduce her feelings of loneliness and exclusion while studying as a short-term sojourner in an unfamiliar country. In contrast, P6, who chose to participate in an exchange student program in another European country in the upcoming final year of university, still held relatively negative attitudes towards this trend. She emphasised her strong desire to study in a diverse learning environment and leave the comfort zone created by the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend in order to challenge herself and gain personal development from her study abroad experiences. In addition, despite most participants acknowledged the advantages of the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend in facilitating their development of interpersonal networks and enhancing social connectedness, its disadvantages in reducing the diversity in academic discussions were also mentioned. Several participants (e.g., P1, P10, P17) remarked on the importance of diversity in social, cultural, and educational backgrounds within the student cohort when studying humanities and social science subjects. They believed this diversity allows students to gain more comprehensive and critical perspectives on the social issues being discussed. However, the expected population diversity in foreign classes was significantly constrained when the cohort contained an overwhelming number of Chinese international students. This led to some complaints when discussing participants’ current attitudes towards the trend of ‘reverse study abroad’.

#### **4.2 Adjustment trajectories for Chinese international students in the context of ‘reverse study abroad’**

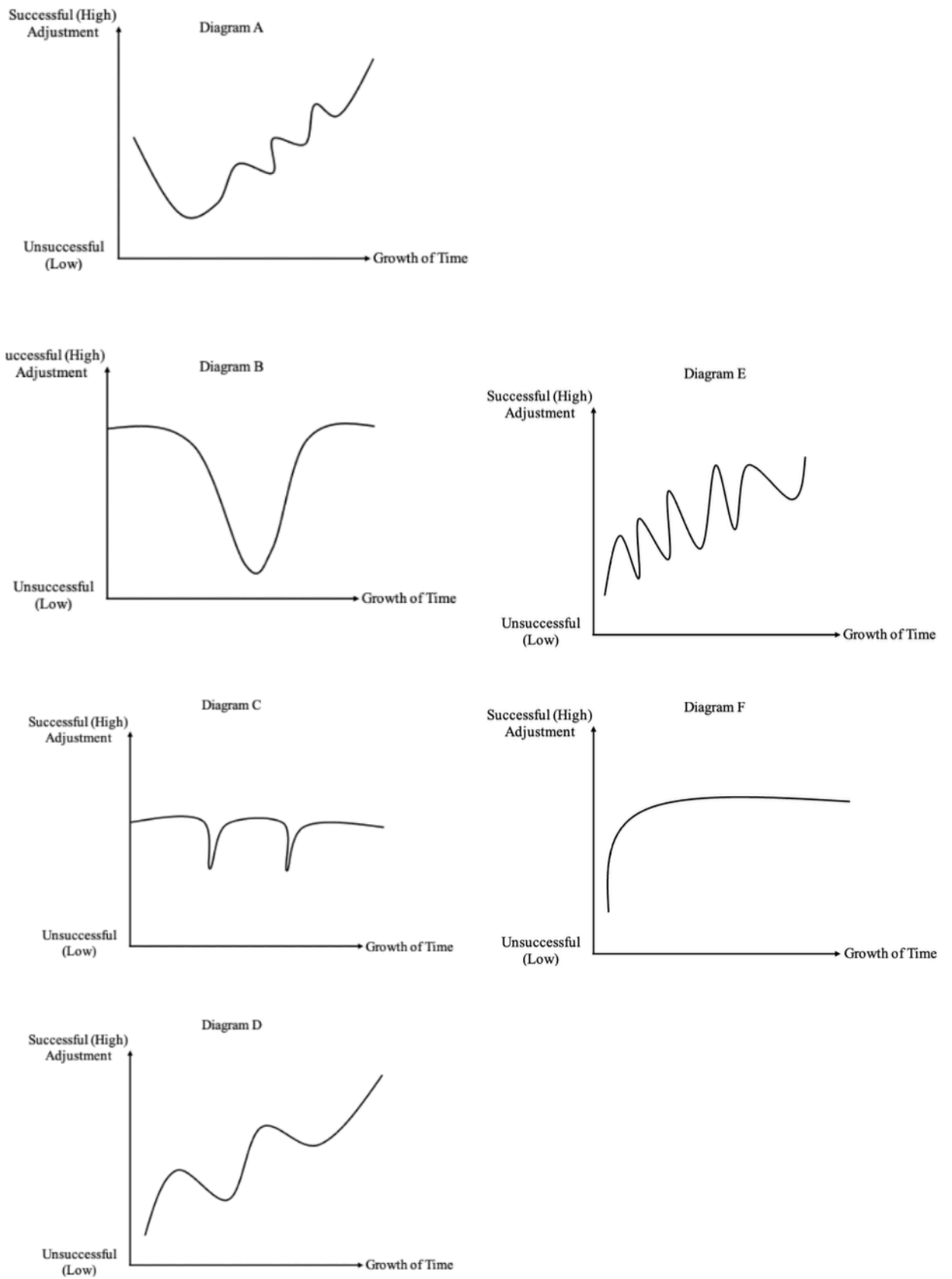


Figure 2: Summary of Participants' Visual Representations for Adjustment Trajectories

During the interview, the researcher investigated participants' academic, sociocultural, and psychological adjustment trajectories by asking them to draw visual graphs for illustration. The diagrams that participants provided varied from each other, but through analysing the trends they showed, their adjustment trajectories can be broadly categorized into six forms (see Figure 2).

Regarding participants' academic adjustment, the majority of the participants (e.g., P5, P8, P10) described their adjustment trajectory as shown in Diagram A. They experienced an initial downward trend ranged from one month to one academic year due to 'cultural shock' in educational settings, followed by a progressive upward trend. However, fluctuations were present throughout their adjustment process. One participant identified the changing marking criteria for academic assignments as an essential factor contributing to fluctuations in her academic adjustment:

*“The marking criteria are updated every academic year, so we must constantly readjust to the higher-level criteria to maintain our academic achievement. As a result, academic adjustment is not a smooth process.” (P15)*

Moreover, P3 and P14 drew their adjustment trajectory as Graph B, indicating that they experienced a relatively smoother adjustment process after recovering from the initial cultural shock when interacting with the unfamiliar learning environment and culture.

Regarding participants' sociocultural adjustment, approximately half of the participants (e.g., P7, P10, P15) described their adjustment trajectory as resembling Diagram F. The ascending trend during the early period of their stay in the host country indicated that they *“became familiar with and adjusted to the social and cultural customs and norms of the host country over time”* (P10). The horizontal line after a certain period represented that they eventually found a lifestyle in the host country that satisfied them and reached a balance with the host environment. Interestingly, there are also participants (e.g., P16) who considered their trajectory to be in the shape of Graph C; they maintained a consistently high and stable level of adjustment, despite small-scale fluctuations due to occasional difficulties they experienced in their sociocultural life.

Regarding participants' psychological adjustment, over half of the participants (e.g., P5 & P19) revealed their adjustment trajectory aligns with the pattern shown in Graph E. Although they generally experienced an upward trend in psychological adjustment, they frequently went through cycles of struggling with academic or social challenges and then recovering

from these challenges to continue with their lives. This results in unstable psychological well-being for the participants. This point is illustrated by 4:

*“Whenever I feel better from some hard-to-deal-with struggles, there are always issues from either academic assignments or social circles that make me stressed. It’s never going to end.”*

Some participants also reported that their adjustment trajectory aligns with Graph D (e.g., P10), indicating that they become increasingly adjusted towards healthy and stable mental well-being. However, during the final seasons, the heavy workload and stress negatively impact their progress and the outcome of their psychological adjustment during that period (e.g., P10 & 19).

### **4.3 Chinese International Students’ Adjustment Experiences in the Context of ‘Reverse Study Abroad’**

#### *4.3.1 Academic Adjustment*

##### 4.3.1.1 Language Issues

Given that English is not the native language of the participants in this research, language issues have been frequently mentioned during all interviews. From the data analysis, it is surprising that no participants reported having obvious difficulty listening to teachers and comprehending lecture content in class. One reason participants provided was the availability of pre-uploaded teaching materials, including PowerPoint slides and essential reading lists, for students to preview before lectures (P1). Another reason is related to the role of co-nationals. One participant explained, in the ‘reverse study abroad’ context, where there were a considerable number of Chinese international students in the student cohort, *“it is easy to ask co-nationals seated nearby for help when having problems understanding the lecture”* (P17). In this way, co-nationals could explain and discuss content with her using their native language to facilitate understanding.

Further on the point of using English in class discussion, participants had differing opinions on it, especially in situations when the study groups in the lectures or seminars were composed entirely of Chinese international students. On the one hand, some participants (e.g., P10, P15, P19) considered using their native language (Chinese) instead of English in group discussions to be unproblematic because they viewed *“language as just a tool for communication”* (P19). They highlighted the advantages of speaking Chinese in enhancing their engagement in group discussions due to the reduced language barrier. On the other hand, some participants indicated speaking their native language in group discussions *“took*

*away their opportunities to practice English” (P9), and it also “posed challenges for students to directly use discussion content for the assignment, as academic assignments were written in English” (P1). More importantly, some participants pointed out that speaking Chinese—which is not the native language for tutors—was disrespectful behaviour that may give tutors a feeling of exclusion and prevent them from joining students’ discussions (P14).*

During the discussion, reading English materials is a frequently highlighted challenge among the participants. For instance, P18 shared her frustrations with her slow reading speed (*“spend over an hour to read just ten pages”*) and difficulties understanding the reading content. Similarly, P15, who took science-based subjects such as chemistry and physics in high school, shared her struggles with the required readings for class preparation. This issue is particularly notable when studying content-heavy and difficult-to-understand subjects such as philosophy:

*“The readings for the education philosophy module were far beyond my understanding of English; I couldn’t read them at all. It was tricky because I recognised every word, but I could not understand them when they were put into sentences. This always made me doubt myself.”*

#### 4.3.1.2 The Quiet Class

From the data gathered, it is clear that the phenomenon of a quiet class during student-led seminars is noticed by participants. For example, P2 described seminars as *“quiet, inactive, and embarrassing”* when no one answered the tutor’s questions. Similarly, P12, who identifies herself as actively engaged and contributing to the seminar discussion, complained that *“the class is too quiet to be effective.”* One participant remarked on the differences in teaching culture between China and the UK as a dominant reason for such a situation and a key factor challenging Chinese international students’ academic adjustment.

*“In traditional Chinese culture, people are encouraged to speak up only after they have planned well and thought carefully. However, in Western teaching norms, students are encouraged to speak up because they are taught that there is no right or wrong answer” (P12).*

Given that Chinese international students are less willing to speak up because they tend to be afraid of saying something wrong or making no sense, which may lead to ‘losing face’ or ridicule from others, the constant requirement and encouragement to actively contribute to class tend to become an academic adjustment stressor for them. In this regard, in the context

of ‘reverse study abroad,’ where the less willing-to-speak Chinese international students make up the majority, the quiet class thus becomes a noticeable phenomenon. Further, few participants showed a willingness to change this situation. P17 explained that in the ‘reverse study abroad’ context, there was less pressure on them to reduce discrimination from their Western peers by actively participating in discussions. In this context, they were more willing to behave similarly to the students around them and adopt the role of the ‘quiet student.’

#### *4.3.2 Sociocultural Adjustment*

##### 4.3.2.1 Social Interactions with Host Nationals and Other International Students

There are two subthemes that have been identified within the broad category of social interaction with host nationals and other international students: 1) challenges in establishing social networks with other student populations, and 2) institutional support for interactions between Chinese international students and other student populations.

##### *Challenges in Establishing Social Networks with Other Student Populations*

A majority of participants expressed their aspirations to enrich their friendships and make friends with host nationals to “*gain a deeper understanding of the British culture, such as drinking and football*” (P3). However, a few participants mentioned that they were uninterested in establishing friendships with host nationals or other international students. This reluctance stems from their self-identification as ‘outsiders’ when studying in the host country (P17) and their planned short-term stay, as they intend to return to their home country after graduation (P2).

For those participants who expected to make friends with students from different cultural backgrounds, despite some making attempts by actively engaging in school activities—for example, P18 joined different student clubs while P8 attended various social parties held by the institution—they reported several challenges in establishing and maintaining social networks with host nationals and other international students.

The first challenge revolves around the language issue, where the lack of language proficiency obstructs effective communication with non-Chinese students. One participant indicated that the embarrassment caused by not understanding others’ words or confusing host nationals may put pressure on student sojourners to engage with locals in social activities, as illustrated in the quoted statement:

*“I am afraid that I might embarrass others if they cannot understand what I say. Sometimes I try to use gestures to convey my message if I don’t know how to say*

*something in English, but it does not work most of the time. I have become less talkative when interacting with local students ...because of the language barrier.”*

(P4)

Secondly, several participants observed that cultural differences are another barrier to Chinese international students' social interactions with host nationals and other international students. For example, P12 shared her experience of talking to a group of British students at a departmental social event. She found that *“the jokes they talk about make no sense”* to her, so she could only pretend she understood and laugh with them. As P12 further indicated, such experiences give her a feeling of marginalisation, thereby making her less willing to proactively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, both P15 and P19 shared experiences of feeling excluded when engaging in conversations with local students and other international students from Euro-American countries, who discussed popular TikTok trends and internet buzzwords in their leisure time. In this regard, Participant 15 commented with helplessness,

*“I want to engage in their conversation, but I know nothing about what they discussed. I can only say I've tried, but cultural differences are something I cannot overcome when making friends with them.”*

The third challenge pointed out by many participants is shaped by the current trend of 'reverse study abroad.' As P1 explained, studying in the context of 'reverse study abroad,' the high density of Chinese international students in the program ultimately resulted in reduced opportunities for participants to interact with host nationals and other international students in class. This creates a disadvantageous environment for socialising and building friendships between Chinese international students and other student populations.

#### *Institutional Support for Interaction Between Chinese International Students and Other Student Populations*

During the discussion, several participants reported the support that tutors and institutions provide to encourage their social interactions with other student populations, such as the intentional arrangement by tutors in the seating plan in the seminar room (e.g., P1) and in the group project groups (e.g., P3), where Chinese students were mixed with local students and other international students. However, such intervention is not that effective in facilitating closer contact between Chinese students and local students, as demonstrated by P18,

*“I know the tutor's purpose, but such an arrangement only leads to a superficial host-sojourner relationship, as we seldom talk to or hang out with them after class.”*

In addition, the provision of placement opportunities is identified by some participants as another support mechanism to facilitate their social interactions not only with the host nationals in their cohort but also within broader British society. Participants such as P3, P4, and P13, who took the placement opportunity offered by the department, all reported a positive impact on their sociocultural adjustment. They emphasised that taking the placement allowed them to reach a broader host population. More importantly, it gave them an immersive experience to observe and familiarise themselves with the social and cultural norms and behaviours in the UK.

#### 4.3.2.2 Social Interaction with Fellow Nationals

Two subthemes have been identified within the broad category of social interaction with fellow nationals: 1) the positive role of co-national students in sociocultural adjustment, and 2) diverse patterns among co-national students' social network.

##### The Positive Role of Co-national Students in Sociocultural Adjustment

All participants showed their preference to interact with co-national students when studying abroad. They highlighted the friendship building with national fellows are much more convenient and easy-going compared to interactions with host nationals, due to similarities in native language (e.g., P13) and cultural background (e.g., P16).

During the discussion, participants highlighted the positive impacts brought by co-nationals in facilitating their sociocultural adjustment, primarily from two aspects: social media and Chinese student organizations within the institutions. First, many participants revealed that, alongside the prevalence of social platforms such as Xiao Hong Shu in China, a growing number of Chinese international students in the UK have started to create content. This includes video blogs about their study abroad experiences (P16) and information and suggestions about academic, social, and cultural life in the UK (P4 & 8). These resources allow current or prospective Chinese international students in the UK to gain a more comprehensive and clear understanding of the UK, and thus facilitating their successful intercultural transition. For example, one participant mentioned that experience-sharing posts on topics such as 'things to do after arrival' were effective helping them get their lives on track when first interacting with the unfamiliar,

*"Xiao Hong Shu is like an 'encyclopaedia' for me. There are many posts created by other Chinese students in the UK that guide you on how to open the bank account, how to register for the NHS, how to collect the BRP...these posts made my transition smoother." (P18)*

Similarly, P14, who is a content creator herself shared her experience of being inspired to start her social media journey,

*“I always search for information about supermarkets, restaurants, art exhibitions, coffee houses, travel destinations on Xiao Hong Shu. It helped me a lot in learning more about the social and cultural aspects of the UK, and I started to create my own experience-sharing posts to help other Chinese international students the way others helped me.”*

Second, some participants mentioned that Chinese student-led organizations within institutions, such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), also make positive contributions to their sociocultural adjustment. For instance, participants who attended the departure party held by CSSA during their freshman year found that the personal experiences of studying and living in the UK shared by seniors provided practical information to help them prepare for the upcoming intercultural transition (P4 & 9). In addition, P16 indicated that such activities also provided opportunities for students to meet and make friends with other Chinese international students.

#### Diverse Patterns Among Co-National Students’ Social Network

Interestingly, several participants pointed out that even though Chinese international students always cluster together within the student cohort, there are clearly distinct patterns within their social networks based on each student’s preference for the characteristics of their fellow Chinese students when establishing friendships. For example, P 11, 14, and 15 all indicated that Chinese students tend to have closer contact with co-national students who live in cities or provinces adjacent to their hometown.

*“Students from Hong Kong or Guangdong Province who speak Cantonese always stick together, while those from Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province, and Shanghai tend to group together.”* (P14)

In addition, familial socioeconomic status (SES) was also identified as a factor shaping the patterns of social networks among Chinese international students in the UK. Some participants explained that SES strongly influences students’ daily expenses and consumption habits (P16). Therefore, students from higher SES backgrounds, characterised by carrying luxury bags and dining in fine restaurants, are more likely to become friends due to shared interests and topics of conversation (P9 & 17).

### 4.3.3 Psychological Adjustment

#### 4.3.3.1 Potential Threats For (Chinese International Students') Mental Wellbeing

Two subthemes have been identified within the broad category of potential threats for (Chinese international students') mental wellbeing: 1) academic pressure, and 2) homesickness.

##### Academic Pressure

Most participants indicated a strong relationship between their perceived academic pressure and mental well-being during their study abroad period. For example, participants remarked that the intense workload assigned by the faculty during the exam season inevitably resulted in a worsening of their well-being. This is supported by P9, who complained about her unhealthy lifestyle during the final season.

*“Three 2,500-word essays within one month? That’s insane. I have to stay up late and get up early to work on them in order to achieve a satisfactory grade. I was mentally stressed and physically exhausted every final season.”*

During the discussion, many participants highlighted that the perceived academic pressure was significantly raised by fellow Chinese international students. For example, some of them use the Chinese buzzword ‘Juan’ (卷)—which shares the meaning of ‘involution’ in the English context and refers to excessive and unnecessary internal competition (Yin, Ji, & Ni, 2023)—to describe the competitive learning environment they experienced, particularly within their Chinese international students’ communities. One participant mentioned that the peer pressure from other hard-working Chinese students significantly increased her perceived academic pressure and led to self-doubt and anxiety,

*“During induction week in my freshman year, one (Chinese) student in my cohort mentioned that she had finished reading almost all the essential readings for a key module. Many other students also shared that they had done similar things during the summer. This made me anxious and doubt whether I was lagging behind...” (P16)*

The perceived academic pressure raised by co-nationals is particularly prominent when preparing for a master’s application. Some participants shared that some Chinese students consider “fellow students who plan to apply to the same master’s program at the same school as competitors to some extent” (P1), and they constantly implicitly compete over academic achievements and work experiences (P9). Such comparison and competition ultimately led to an increased level of pressure that challenged their mental well-being.

### Homesickness

From the interview, participants also indicated the negative influence of perceived homesickness on their mental well-being, which is typically triggered by the discrimination they received and the safety issues they experienced. For example, some participants shared their personal experiences of receiving explicit or implicit discrimination during their studies abroad, including being “*rudely rejected from getting into an Uber because of their Asian ethnicity*” (P15) or being “*yelled at on the street to go back to China*” (P3). In this regard, participants reported that such experiences gave them a sense of disrespect and exclusion, which increased their homesickness and negatively impacted their mental health. In addition, some participants mentioned their concerns about personal safety when living in the UK. Both P4 and P14 noted that theft and robbery are common in the UK and are often reported on social media. Watching such news always increases their fear and anxiety during daily life, which triggers their homesickness when recalling the “*relatively safe life back in their hometown*” (Participant 4) and ultimately results in fluctuations in their mental well-being.

On the other hand, many participants remarked that despite the potential for fellow Chinese students to increase their academic pressure, the presence of a significant number of Chinese co-nationals in the ‘reverse study abroad’ context provides them with a greater sense of belonging and helps them recover from homesickness while studying abroad (e.g., P1, 9, 13). One participant shared her experience of celebrating traditional Chinese festivals with Chinese peers in the cohort and highlighted the positive impact of co-nationals in providing social connectedness and mental support to mitigate their perceived loneliness and homesickness.

*“During the Chinese New Year, my other Chinese classmates and I always go grocery shopping, make dumplings, have hotpot, watch Chinese New Year Gala together. I no longer feel alone because I have my ‘UK family members’ with me.”*  
(P14)

### 4.3.3.2 Institutional Arrangement for Chinese International Students’ Psychological Adjustment

From the interview, some participants highlighted the importance of personal tutors, who are arranged by the institution at the beginning of freshman year to provide help with students’ academic studies and living, in supporting their psychological adjustment. For example, P1 shared her experience of feeling overwhelming stress and asking her personal tutor for help. Her personal tutor not only patiently comforted her by giving positive affirmations but also provided practical suggestions such as applying for an extension of submissions and useful

resources for academic writing, which she found beneficial to her unstable mental state at that time. However, some participants (e.g., P14) complained about the ineffectiveness of their personal tutors, noting that they have weak connections with their personal tutor and that their personal tutors seldom reply to their emails when they face similar situations as P1, which potentially leads to an increased sadness for them.

In addition, some participants complained about the inadequacy of the mental well-being support services provided by the institution. They described it with phrases such as “*less efficient*,” as P1 was told that the earliest therapy appointment she could book was three months away, and “*lack of diversity*,” as Participant 3 stated that she preferred talking to a Chinese therapist and that using English to describe her symptoms was not only challenging but also reinforced her vulnerability during therapy sessions.

## Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter builds upon the findings that emerged from the data analysis to conduct an extended discussion. It establishes the relationship between the current research findings and the existing literature on cross-cultural adjustment trajectories and experiences of (Chinese) international students. The following discussion is structured around the three research questions.

### RQ 1: How do Chinese international students interpret and perceive the term ‘reverse study abroad’?

The findings indicate that ‘reverse study abroad’ is a prevalent concept among these students, and is a common phenomenon observed in their campus lives. Although interpretations of ‘reverse study broad’ vary—ranging from local students feeling as though they are studying abroad in China to Chinese international students in the UK feeling as though they are still in China—the core idea is the significant proportion of Chinese international students in the student cohort.

Building upon the research findings, this study suggests that the purpose of studying abroad significantly influences how Chinese international students perceive the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend. Aligning with Yang et al. (2011) and Maharaja (2018), the participants in this study note enriching their social circles by meeting and making friends with students from diverse cultural, educational, and ethnic backgrounds, enhancing their intercultural competence, and developing global-mindedness as essential factors motivating them to study abroad. However, the relatively monocultural environment created by the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend often prevents Chinese international students from achieving their desired interpersonal goals. This setting also hinders their ability to develop critical and diverse understandings of the learning content, particularly for those in AHSS disciplines who aspire to engage with social issues from a global perspective (Erunit et al., 2021). Consequently, the discrepancy between students’ study abroad expectations and the reality they encounter leads to their negative attitudes towards the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend (Pitts, 2009).

Given that no relevant studies have been conducted on the topic of ‘reverse study abroad’ yet, the discussion of the first research question contributes to filling the research gap by providing a foundational understanding of this emerging trend.

### RQ2: In the context of ‘reverse study abroad’, what are Chinese international students’ adjustment trajectories over time?

The empirical evidence from the research shows that none of the Chinese international students' adjustments in all three domains necessarily followed the U-curve hypothesis (see Figure 2). In this regard, the current research echoes Chien (2016) and suggests that the U-curve hypothesis fails to capture the dynamics, complexities, and uncertainties involved in international students' adjustment trajectories.

In terms of the academic adjustment trajectory, findings from this study indicate that Chinese international students become more adjusted to the academic environment and norms after the initial cultural shock over time, similar to the pattern of the U-shaped curve (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960). However, in line with Zhao and Schartner (2024), the findings reveal constant fluctuations during the 'recovery phase' of their academic adjustment. One possible explanation provided by Zhao and Schartner (2024) is that English language ability is a significant and longstanding barrier to international students' academic adjustment. Another possible explanation, as suggested by the research findings, is the increasing rigour in marking criteria for academic assessments each year. This could lead them to feel that they can never fully adjust to the elevated marking criteria, thereby hindering their smooth academic adjustment. This finding is also highlighted in the report from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2024). In sum, rather than experiencing stable progress in academic adjustment after recovering from the initial cultural shock, Chinese international students in the current study continue to face various difficulties in their ongoing development towards a satisfactory level of academic adjustment. However, it is worth noting that the U-curve hypothesis is applicable to a few participants in the current study. This indicates that while the U-curve hypothesis can be useful in understanding academic adjustment, its applicability is limited to only a small extent.

In terms of the sociocultural adjustment trajectory, the research findings indicate that the most common trajectory portrayed by participants begins at a low level and smoothly increases over time, resembling the latter half of the U-curve model. This trajectory diverges from the traditional U-curve hypothesis, which predicts that international students start with excitement and optimism about living in the host country during the pre-arrival or early arrival stage—typically illustrated as a high starting point—followed by a decline due to 'culture shock' (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960).

One possible explanation for the differences in the starting point and the 'disappearance' of culture shock is that the information gap among Chinese international students regarding living and studying in the UK has narrowed. This can be attributed to the potential benefits of both co-national students and social media for international students' sociocultural

adjustment, as indicated by the participants in the interviews. The research findings highlight that the increased number of social events targeted at Chinese international students, as well as the diversification of study-abroad-related social media posts, are essential outcomes of the rise in Chinese international student mobility. These developments help prospective Chinese international students gain contextual background and real-life examples of learning and living experiences in foreign countries through interactions with fellow students (especially senior fellow students) (Sheng et al., 2022) and social media (Sheng et al., 2022; Foucault-Welles, 2016). As a result, Chinese international students can form a more realistic idea of their future study abroad life beforehand. In this context, instead of holding high expectations driven by curiosity about the host country, Chinese international students may experience concerns and anxiety about their upcoming living arrangements (Brown and Holloway, 2008). This results in a low starting point at the beginning of their sociocultural adjustment journey. Moreover, the information and experience-sharing provided by fellow students, particularly through social media (e.g., Xiao Hong Shu), can serve as significant resources to support newly arrived Chinese students, facilitating their intercultural transition in the UK smoothly without experiencing a significant ‘cultural shock’.

Interestingly, another sociocultural adjustment trajectory identified from the findings is a mostly stable horizontal line at a high degree of adjustment, which is also significantly different from the U-shaped curve. One possible explanation for this might relate to Chinese international students’ unique interactions with the host environment under the influence of the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend. To clarify, as Razgulin et al. (2023) interpret, sojourners’ sociocultural adjustment typically involves acquiring new practical and social skills necessary to achieve a balance between sojourners and the host environment. However, in the context of ‘reverse study abroad,’ the number of Chinese international students is so considerable that they have formed a large-scale Chinese circle and often cluster together on a daily basis, a phenomenon also identified by prior studies (e.g., Lim & Pham, 2016; Yu & Moskal, 2019). From this perspective, it means they do not necessarily need to learn different skills related to the social and cultural norms of the host country to find an appropriate lifestyle. Instead, they can stay within their sociocultural ‘comfort zone’ with co-nationals (Hartwell & Ounoughi, 2019) and maintain their sociocultural customs and norms of their home country while studying abroad. This is evidenced by the participants’ unwillingness to interact with host nationals and other international students while studying abroad, as shown in the findings. This allows them to achieve a balance between themselves and the host environment in an alternative way and remains a high degree of adjustment.

In terms of the psychological adjustment trajectory, findings from the research indicate consistent fluctuations in Chinese international students' psychological adjustment, amid an overall ascending trend over time. This trajectory differs from the U-curve hypothesis. Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Sarvanana et al., 2017; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Searle & Ward, 1990), this study suggests that factors such as academic pressure, homesickness, and perceived discrimination significantly influence individuals' progress and outcomes in psychological adjustment. A detailed analysis and discussion of these factors will be developed in the following section that addresses RQ3.

To conclude, the current research findings show the limited applicability of the U-curve hypothesis when studying international students' adjustment in academic, sociocultural, and psychological domains. Thus, this study criticised the U-shaped curve as an overgeneralised and overly idealistic model. This model overlooks the long-lasting effects of existing adjustment barriers and the complexities of the factors involved that either hinder or support the adjustment process. More importantly, the emerging concept of 'reverse study abroad' adds a new layer to the study of adjustment issues for Chinese international students, as it alters the surrounding environment they interact with and their mindset towards an adjustment in the host country, particularly in the sociocultural domain.

RQ 3: In the context of 'reverse study abroad', what are the challenges and influential factors in Chinese international students' adjustment experiences over time?

The third research question focuses on the challenges and influential factors affecting in Chinese international students' academic, sociocultural, and psychological adjustment within the 'reverse study abroad' context. It aims to understand the potential impact of this trend on their cross-cultural adjustment.

Regarding academic adjustment, this study notes the crucial role of English competency for non-native English-speaking international students studying in Anglophone countries, aligning with previous research (e.g., Bastien et al., 2018; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Specifically, consistent with Zhang and Mi (2010), the research highlights that inadequate English proficiency often presents challenges in academic reading, as there is a high-level requirement for reading skills and experiences to manage the heavy and hard-to-understand academic content in social science subjects (Anderson, 2015).

However, contrary to the findings of Rahimirad and Moini (2015) and Heng (2018), this study indicates that English proficiency does not significantly hinder Chinese international students from understanding the lecture content during class or participating in group

discussions. This discrepancy can be explained by the unique learning environment created by the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend, where Chinese international students are surrounded by a high density of co-national peers who share the same native language. In this context, it is common for Chinese international students to seek assistance from classmates and engage in group discussions using Chinese, a phenomenon also identified by Su and Harrison (2016). Thus, rather than suggesting that English competency is no longer associated with international students’ performance in lecture comprehension and class engagement, the findings highlight that the linguistic convenience brought by the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend reduces the necessity of using English in some academic activities. Despite the short-term benefits of this linguistic convenience, it does not translate into long-term advantages for Chinese international students’ academic adjustment. Academic assessments, which are fundamental measures of students’ academic achievement (Boud, 1990), are still conducted in English. Moreover, improving English capability remains a significant motivation for Chinese international students studying in the UK (Zheng, 2014). Consequently, the reduced opportunities to practice English in daily academic settings due to the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend may pose challenges for achieving desired academic outcomes in assessments and fulfilling the primary goal of studying abroad.

Moreover, the study indicates the differences in teaching culture between Chinese and British classroom as another important factor influencing Chinese international students’ academic adjustment; that these students often find it challenging to actively participate and contribute to class discussions due to traditional Chinese cultural values such as ‘thinking carefully before saying’. This finding echoes with prior research by Fang et al. (2016). Interestingly, building on Ruble and Zhang (2013), who characterized Chinese international students as ‘quiet students’ in class, this study extends their work and identifies the phenomenon of the ‘quiet class.’ This phenomenon emerges due to the significant proportion of Chinese international students within the cohort in the ‘reverse study abroad’ context. In this regard, it indicates the impact of changes in student demographics resulting from the ‘reverse study abroad’ trend on foreign classroom dynamics.

Regarding sociocultural adjustment, this research aligns with prior studies (Sheng et al., 2022; Foucault-Welles, 2016) in recognising the positive impact of co-nationals and social media in mitigating cultural shock and facilitating the sociocultural adjustment of Chinese international students within the context of ‘reverse study abroad’. Additionally, in examining the characteristics of the social networks of Chinese international students in their sociocultural adjustment, the study, consistent with Kwon (2013) and Newsome and Cooper

(2016), identifies language as a significant barrier in establishing and maintaining social networks with host nationals. Inadequate non-academic English proficiency can lead to confusion and embarrassment in communication, reducing confidence and causing stress for Chinese international students, thereby making it challenging for them to proactively make friends with other student populations (Wang & Hannes, 2014).

However, rather than confirming previously discussed factors (in the literature review section) that hinder host-sojourner friendship building, such as perceived discrimination (Dovchin, 2020) and the less open attitude of host nationals (Hendrickson et al., 2011), this study offers different interpretations of the limited host-sojourner interaction. The special social environment created by the trend of 'reverse study abroad' is a primary factor. To elaborate, Coles and Swami (2012) suggest that international students are likely to rely heavily on their co-national peers for sociocultural adjustment. In the 'reverse study abroad' context, where Chinese international students make up a sizeable proportion of the student body and are easily accessible, this unique environment tends to increase their reliance on co-national peers and reduce openness to forming friendships with local students and other international students. From an alternative perspective, the limited number of local students in the cohort under the 'reverse study abroad' context fundamentally reduces Chinese international students' opportunities to interact with local students, even if they are willing to do so. This also contributes to the limited host-sojourner interactions identified in this study.

Building on previous studies (e.g., Coles & Swami, 2012) that highlight Chinese international students' preference for clustering with fellow nationals during their study abroad period, this research provides a more detailed perspective. It specifies that the formation of close social networks among Chinese international students is influenced by factors such as the geographical location of their home city (Bunnell et al., 2012) and familial socioeconomic status (Malacarne, 2017).

Regarding psychological adjustment, the current research suggests that experiencing academic pressure, homesickness, and perceived racial discrimination tends to increase anxiety, depression, and feelings of alienation among Chinese international students. These negative experiences significantly impede a smooth psychological adjustment trajectory during their study abroad period, aligning with findings from prior studies (e.g., Saravanan et al., 2017; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Searle & Ward, 1990). Additionally, consistent with Maundeni (2001), this study highlights the importance of institutions providing professional and effective support or intervention programs (e.g., psychological counselling services) for

international students. However, it is crucial to consider the unique needs of international students, such as the language barrier, in developing these services (Can, Poyrazli, Pillay, 2021). The empirical findings also note the role of co-nationals in enhancing the subjective social support for Chinese international students, offering them a greater sense of social belongingness and connectedness, which helps relieve their homesickness and loneliness. This observation echoes Maundeni (2001).

However, this study provides an alternative perspective, indicating the potential negative impact of co-national peers on Chinese international students' psychological adjustment within the 'reverse study abroad' context. To elaborate, in Chinese higher education institutions, the atmosphere of 'juan' becomes prominent, with many visible and invisible peer comparisons and competitions among young generations striving for higher-quality resources (Yin et al., 2023). The research found that due to the significant number of Chinese international students in the cohort under the 'reverse study abroad' trend, they naturally cluster to form a Chinese community in foreign universities, exhibiting similar characteristics to those in Chinese universities. Specifically, Chinese international students frequently compare and compete with each other, aiming to achieve better academic achievements than others. This competition leads to increased stress and academic pressure, which threaten their mental well-being. In this unique context, interacting with fellow nationals who share similar cultural beliefs and backgrounds is thus considered a disadvantage for Chinese international students' psychological adjustment.

To conclude, the empirical findings show several similarities with previous studies, highlighting the significance of factors such as language proficiency, fellow nationals, host nationals, and homesickness in influencing Chinese international students' adjustment experiences across academic, sociocultural, and psychological domains. However, the 'reverse study abroad' context creates a unique learning, living, and social environment for Chinese international students. This transformation allows this study to identify alternative and critical perspectives on their adjustment experiences, primarily revolving around the two-sided role of co-national students in all three domains. In this regard, the discussion of the third research question further contributes to filling the identified research gap by providing new insights on Chinese international students' cross-cultural adjustment issues.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Research Summary

Leaving China to pursue higher education in the UK is a crucial milestone for Chinese international students (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). In the current age of globalisation, when international student mobility has increased rapidly, China has become a significant international student ‘sending’ country to the UK. The remarkable increase in the number of Chinese international students has led to an emerging phenomenon of an exceptionally high density of Chinese students enrolled in certain programs at some popular British universities, which is called ‘reverse study abroad’. Considering the unique learning and living environment brought about by the trend of ‘reverse study abroad’ for Chinese international students, this study focuses on their adjustment experiences in terms of their trajectories, challenges, and influential factors encountered in the ‘reverse study abroad’ context in the UK.

The findings first indicated that Chinese international students recognise and are aware of the phenomenon of ‘reverse study abroad’ in their campus environment. In addition, the purpose of their study abroad experience influences their perception of this emerging trend. Secondly, the study critiqued the traditional U-curve model proposed by Lysgaard (1955) as overgeneralised and overly idealistic. It argued that adopting such a one-size-fits-all model fails to capture the complexities and uncertainties associated with the trend of ‘reverse study abroad’ in Chinese international students’ academic, sociocultural, and psychological adjustment. In addition to factors such as language competency, academic pressure, homesickness, and perceived discrimination, which have been widely discussed in prior studies, the study highlighted social media and co-national peers as particularly prominent in shaping Chinese international students’ attitudes towards the host country and shifting their expectations towards cross-cultural adjustment, thereby providing alternative adjustment trajectories from the U-curve hypothesis.

Thirdly, the study confirmed that language competency, pedagogical and cultural differences between China and the UK, academic pressure, homesickness, and perceived discrimination, which have been widely discussed in prior studies, are significant stressors that hinder Chinese international students’ successful adjustment in all three domains. More importantly, the findings revealed that the impact of fellow nationals is two-sided for Chinese international students’ adjustment in the ‘reverse study abroad’ context. On the one hand, Chinese international students may benefit from the language convenience provided by co-nationals, which facilitates their comprehension of teaching content and engagement in group

discussions. Additionally, the experiences and suggestions regarding life in the UK shared by co-national students on social media or in school activities play crucial roles in facilitating Chinese international students' sociocultural adjustment. Furthermore, the presence of a significant number of co-national students increases the subjective social support perceived by Chinese international students, bringing them a sense of belonging and social connectedness and helping to mitigate their homesickness and loneliness. On the other hand, in the 'reverse study abroad context, the frequent use of the Chinese language in academic settings while studying in the UK obstructed Chinese international students from enhancing their English capabilities, which does not provide long-term benefits for achieving academic adjustment and success. Moreover, the overwhelming number of Chinese international students in the student cohort tends to reduce the diversity of student demographics in the program. This not only limits opportunities for Chinese students to interact with local and other international students to enrich their social circles and foster sociocultural adjustment, but also constrains the diversity in academic discussions to develop global-mindedness. Furthermore, the existence of a significant number of Chinese international students may also raise peer pressure among them and lead to a more competitive learning atmosphere, which increases the level of academic pressure they perceive and consequently hinders their psychological adjustment.

## **6.2 Contributions of this Study**

This study has made several contributions in conceptual and practical aspects. Regarding conceptual contributions, as discussed in the literature review chapter, one significant research gap identified in the existing literature is the lack of systematic and comprehensive investigations into Chinese international students' intercultural adjustment across academic, sociocultural, and psychological domains. In this regard, the current study, which focuses on the adjustment issues experienced by Chinese international students in the UK higher education context across these three aspects, contributes to addressing this research gap. Moreover, given that the crucial role of co-national students in supporting international students' adjustment has been widely acknowledged, the adjustment experiences of Chinese international students in the unique context of 'reverse study abroad'—where they are surrounded by an overwhelmingly significant number of co-national students in their program—have not yet been studied. Therefore, this study, which addresses the associated adjustment experiences of Chinese international students specifically in the 'reverse study abroad' context, contributes to addressing this research gap. It not only explicitly provides conceptual interpretations of the term 'reverse study abroad' but also offers insightful and

critical perspectives on the two-sided impact of fellow national students on Chinese international students' cross-cultural adjustment in all three domains.

Regarding practical contributions, the findings from the current research offer insights that can inform recommendations for supporting international students' cross-border adjustment. Firstly, the findings highlighted the significant role of personal tutors in providing the support necessary for international students' adjustment, particularly in academic and psychological aspects. Building on this perspective, the study suggests that universities should assign personal tutors to students upon entry and provide these tutors with systematic and professional training that addresses the unique challenges encountered by international students. Secondly, the findings revealed that language barriers have been a major obstacle for Chinese international students in accessing psychological counselling services at school. Therefore, the study suggests that universities should consider the multilingual international student population and develop a multilingual and culturally diverse counselling team by inviting counselling personnel from major international student-sending countries (e.g., China) to better address international students' mental wellbeing. Thirdly, the findings indicated the advantageous role of experience-sharing posts on social media in facilitating international students' sociocultural adjustment. Following this perspective, the study recommends that universities develop a social media channel for uploading relevant materials, such as student video blogs of their daily experiences at school, guidance on using public transportation, information on renting houses, and restaurant recommendations, to name a few. By doing this, universities can facilitate the sociocultural adjustment of international students when moving to an unfamiliar environment.

### **6.3 Limitations and Further Studies**

The limitations of the current research primarily revolve around the sampling strategy and its design as a case study. Firstly, although snowball sampling brings convenience in recruiting the target population, the overdependence on the researcher's personal contacts resulted in a lack of diversity in the age and gender of the participants. Building on this perspective, it is important to form a more diverse sampling group involving participants of different genders and age groups in future research on similar topics.

Secondly, the study is designed as a case study, which means that the research findings mostly apply to the specific department of the specific institution where the research was conducted. However, this study provides meaningful information about the challenges and influential factors for broader international student populations in their academic,

sociocultural, and psychological adjustment. These insights are beneficial for better understanding the cross-border adjustment issues of international students and for providing corresponding support.

This research has laid a foundation for future research regarding Chinese international students' adjustment experiences in the 'reverse study abroad' context. Future research can be carried out in different faculties, such as the business faculty, which is particularly preferred by Chinese international students, or in different schools. More importantly, considering that the 'reverse study abroad' context is unique not only for Chinese international students but also for local students, it is necessary to investigate local students' learning experiences in this context in future research.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

**Cross-border learning experiences for Chinese international students: in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education.**

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [C1B-24TT-Educ-036]

##### 1. 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.

##### 2. Why is this research being conducted?

This research aims to investigate the cross-border learning experiences for Chinese international students in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education, with specific focus on the opportunities and challenges that Chinese international students experience in their academic and sociocultural adaptations when studying abroad.

##### 3. Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you are a Chinese international student who enrolled in full-time undergraduate/postgraduate programs in the [REDACTED]

##### 4. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me of this decision.

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

If you are happy to take part in the research, you will be invited to attend an online one-to-one interview via Microsoft teams. You will be asked questions related to your transnational learning and living experiences when studying in the UK, the opportunities and challenges that you encounter in your academic engagement and sociocultural adaptation when studying abroad, and your motivations and aspirations of studying in the UK. The time and date of the interview will be decided based on your choice. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. You can also ask to pause to stop the interview at any time. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed for follow-up data analysis. After the transcription, you can review the transcript and revise the contents, if you wish to. If you are still happy to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form or give verbal consent.

##### 6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

There are no potential physical and emotional harms identified in this research. There is also limited risks of being identifiable. Given that this research is designed as a case study with specific focus on [REDACTED] in order to make your provided data less identifiable, the researcher will not directly mention the institution that I chose [REDACTED] in the dissertation. Instead, the research

will the phrase ‘one of the institutions that enrolled a large number of Chinese international students in the UK higher education’ as a reference. The researcher will make every effort to preservice confidentiality and privacy to ensure the confidentiality. All collected data will be pseudonymized in the research output and will be stored properly and securely with password protected. Only the research has the access to the collected data.

#### **7. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for individuals participating in the research, it is hoped that future Chinese international students can effectively utilize the evidence-based suggestions derived from this study to enhance their adaptability in cross-border learning and living experiences. Additionally, it is hoped that this research will inform UK universities about more effective ways to assist international students during their study abroad periods.

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

In general, I am interested in your cross-border learning and living experiences when studying at the [REDACTED], in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ where a large number of students in the campus are Chinese to answer my main research. I am also interested in the opportunities and challenges you faced in the academic adaptation and sociocultural adaptations when moving to the UK. The information you provide will help me better understand Chinese international students’ cross-border learning experiences in the new era of ‘reverse studying abroad’ to answer my main research question (What are the cross-border learning experiences for Chinese international students in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education?) and two sub-research questions *Sub-RQ 1*: In the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education, what are Chinese international students’ experiences in academic adaptation? *Sub-RQ 2*: In the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education, what are Chinese international students’ experiences in sociocultural engagement?

When the research is in process, all recorded interviews and transcribed scripts will be securely stored in my Oxford Nexus 365 OneDrive account, which provides a secure and encrypted file storage with daily backups. At the end of the research project, all recorded interviews, transcripts and informed consent forms will be transferred to my OneDrive account for the storage over three years’ time. All this data will be completely destroyed after the final publication. The collected data is not intended for reuse. The researcher and the researchers’ supervisor will have access to the research data. The findings will be written up in a dissertation.

#### **9. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?**

The research is intended to be deposited as an open access and I may develop publications and presentations on this study. The participants will not be identified from the outputs.

#### **10. 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>.

### **11. 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: **C1B-24TT-Educ-036**).

### **12. 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]. [REDACTED] I 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 Departmental Research Ethics Committee; Email: [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk), Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

### **13. Further Information and Contact Details**

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

[REDACTED]  
Department of Education, University of Oxford  
15 Norham Gardens, OX2 6PY  
University tel: 01865 274024  
[REDACTED]

## Appendix B: Consent Form

University of Oxford



MSc Student

Oxford University telephone number: 01865 274024

Oxford University e-mail: general.enquiries@education.ox.ac.uk



### Consent to take part in [The cross-border learning experiences for Chinese international students: in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education]

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **C1B-24TT-Educ-036**

This research aims to investigate the cross-border learning experiences for Chinese international students in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education, with specific focus on the opportunities and challenges that Chinese international students experience in their academic and sociocultural adaptations when studying abroad.

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

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version \_\_\_\_\_, dated \_\_\_\_\_ 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 until **20/07/2024** without giving any reason.

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 that I will not be identifiable from any publications.

I consent to being 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.

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

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

Template written consent form, version 4.2, November 2022

I agree to take part.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

dd / mm / yyyy  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person taking  
consent

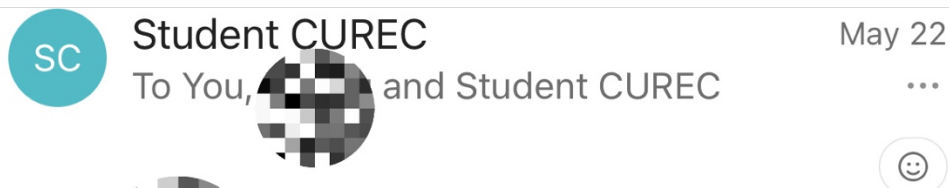
dd / mm / yyyy  
Date<sup>1</sup>

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Appendix C: CUREC Approval Email



Dear [redacted]

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of your CUREC 1B application entitled '*Under the context of 'reverse studying abroad': Investigating Chinese international students' transnational experiences in UK higher education'*. The application was reviewed and approved by Dr [redacted], your supervisor. No further approval from the Education DREC is required for applications reviewed under the CUREC 1B process. As such, the project will not receive a formal letter of ethical approval from the SSH IDREC.

The ethics reference for your application is **C1B-24TT-Educ-036**. Please add this reference to your CUREC 1B form and include it on documents for the research participants such as the participant information sheet.

Please note that this is contingent on the research project adhering to the criteria set out in the [CUREC 1B guidance](#). Please ensure, therefore, that you comply with the conditions of this process and, should anything change in the course of the project, you should discuss this with your supervisor to determine whether this requires further review and approval by the Education DREC.

## Appendix D: Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

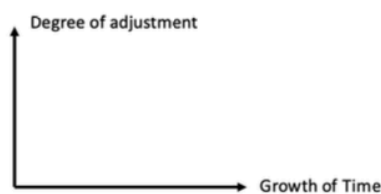
#### Research Topic: Investigating Chinese international students' adjustment trajectories in the context of 'reverse study abroad' in a British university

##### • PART 1: Introduction

- General Information
  - What is your name, enrolled program and grade  
您的姓名, 就读专业和年级是什么
  - In which country did you pursue your high school (UG student)/undergraduate degree (PG student)?  
您的高中/本科是在哪个国家完成的
  - What is your purpose and expectations for studying abroad?  
您出国留学的目的和期待是什么?
- 'Reverse study abroad'
  - Have you ever heard of this term?
    - And how do you interpret it?  
您是否有听说过反向留学这个词?  
您是如何理解这个词的?
  - Do you consider your current experience/environment of studying abroad as a form of 'reverse studying abroad'? Why?  
反思您的留学经历, 您认为您目前所处的留学环境和经历是否符合反向留学的概念? 为什么?

##### • PART 2: Academic Adjustment Trajectory

- Can you draw a diagram illustrating your academic adjustment trajectories? Use the y-axis to represent the degree of adjustment and the x-axis for time, from the beginning of college life to the current stage. Line 1 should represent your imagined academic adjustment trajectory (before studying abroad), and Line 2 should represent your actual experienced academic adjustment trajectory. Can you explain your diagram?  
请您画一张图表来说明您的学业调整轨迹。用 y 轴表示调整程度, x 轴表示时间, 即从大学生活开始到现阶段。第一条线应该代表您在出国留学前想象的学业调整轨迹, 第二条线应该代表您实际经历的学业调整轨迹。您可以解释一下您的图表吗?

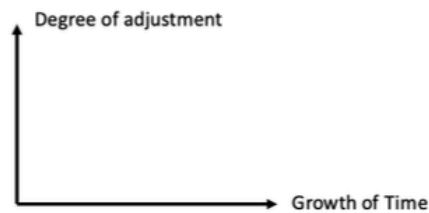


- Before travelling to and studying in the UK, did you have expectations or concerns regarding your academic study?
  - What leads you to have such expectations or concerns, or why don't you have such concerns?  
在来英国留学之前, 您对于在英国的学术学习有什么期待或者担忧吗? 您为什么有/没有这样的期待和担忧?

- Reflecting on your study abroad experiences, did you encounter any of these issues during your actual experiences when studying in the UK?
  - If so, were there any differences between your expectations and concerns and what you actually experienced?  
反思您在英国的留学经历, 您之前的期待和担忧与实际经历之间是否存在差异? 如果有, 你觉得造成差异的原因和‘反向留学’的整体环境是否有一定关联? 您可以进一步解释一下吗?
  
- Reflecting on your learning experiences in the UK higher education context, do you feel that the large number of Chinese students affects your adjustment to academic learning?
  - Is that effect positive or negative or both? Why?  
反思您的学习经历, 您觉得校园/专业里大量中国留学生是否影响了会影响您对英国高等教育学术学习的适应吗? 这种影响是积极的还是消极的, 或者两者都有? 为什么?
  
- Do you feel that fellow students are facilitators of your academic adjustments?
  - If so, why, and how? (This may have some overlapping with the previous questions)
  - If not, what kind of supports (from the university, mentors, or others) do you feel are beneficial in supporting your academic adjustments?  
您觉得同胞(其他中国留学生)是您在英国大学学习过程中学业调整的促进者吗?  
如果是这样, 具体原因是什么以及他们是怎么怎么帮助您的学业调整的?  
如果没有, 您认为什么样的支持, 例如来自大学, 老师对支持您的学业调整是有益的?
  
- When you have some confusion in your academic learning, how do you try to address your learning issues?
  - Are you more likely to ask tutors for help, try to solve them by yourself, or ask classmates for help and have a discussion with them?
  - If you prefer to discuss with classmates, do you have a specific preference to go to (national fellows-Chinese international students or other students)? Why?  
当您在学术学习中遇到一些困惑时, 例如在阅读过程中, 您如何尝试解决您的学习问题? 你更愿意向导师寻求帮助, 尝试自己解决问题, 还是向同学寻求帮助并与他们讨论? 如果您更喜欢与同学讨论, 您是否有特定的偏好去(国家同胞, 即中国留学生, 或其他学生)? 为什么?
  
- Have you ever met Chinese mentors, tutors, or lecturers during your past learning experiences in the UK?
  - If so, how many Chinese mentors, tutors, or lecturers have you met?
  - How do you feel about having a Chinese tutor while studying abroad?  
您过去在英国的学习经历中是否遇到过中国辅导员, 导师, 或讲师? 如果有, 您遇到了多少位中国辅导员, 导师, 或讲师? 您对于在出国留学时遇到中国导师的感受如何?

### • PART 3: Sociocultural Adjustment Trajectory

- Can you draw a diagram illustrating your sociocultural adjustment trajectories? Use the y-axis to represent the degree of adjustment and the x-axis for time, from the beginning of college life to the current stage. Line 1 should represent your imagined sociocultural adjustment trajectory (before studying abroad), and Line 2 should represent your actual experienced sociocultural adjustment trajectory. Can you explain your diagram?  
请您画一张图表来说明您的社会文化调整轨迹。用 y 轴表示调整程度，x 轴表示时间，即从大学生活开始到现阶段。第一条线应该代表您在出国留学前想象的社会文化调整轨迹，第二条线应该代表您实际经历的社会调整轨迹。您可以解释一下您的图表吗？



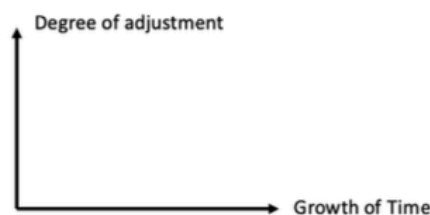
- Before travelling to and studying in the UK, did you have expectations concerns regarding your sociocultural engagement (social life)? What leads you to have such expectations and concerns, or why don't you have such concerns?  
在来英国留学之前，您对于在英国的社交生活有什么期待或者担忧吗？您为什么有/没有这样的担忧？
- Reflecting on your study abroad experiences, did you encounter any of these issues during your actual experiences when studying in the UK? If so, were there any differences between your expectations and concerns and what you actually experienced?  
反思您在英国的留学经历，您之前的期待和担忧与实际经历之间是否存在差异？如果有，你觉得造成差异的原因和‘反向留学’的整体环境是否有一定关联？您可以进一步解释一下吗？
- Reflecting on your experiences in the UK higher education context, do you feel that the large number of Chinese students affects your sociocultural adjustment?
  - Is that effect positive or negative or both? Why?  
反思您的学习经历，您觉得校园/专业里大量中国留学生是否影响了会影响您在英国社交生活的适应吗？这种影响是积极的还是消极的，或者两者都有？为什么？
- Do you have any Chinese student-led societies or organizations at your university?
  - If yes, do you attend them?
  - Do these organizations organize activities on campus? If so, can you provide some examples? How frequently do you attend these activities

- From your perspective, do you feel that attending these activities is beneficial for your sociocultural adjustment when studying in the UK? 您所在的大学里有中国学生领导的社团或组织吗? 如果是, 您会参加吗? 这些组织在校园内组织活动吗? 如果是这样, 您可以提供一些例子吗? 从您的角度来看, 您觉得参加这些活动对您在英国留学时的社会文化适应有帮助吗?
- Do you feel that fellow students are facilitators of your sociocultural adjustments?
  - If so, why, and how? (This may have some overlapping with the previous questions)
  - If not, what kind of supports (from the university, mentors, or others) do you feel are beneficial in supporting your sociocultural adjustments?

您觉得同胞(其他中国留学生)是您在英国大学学习过程中社会文化适应的促进者吗? 如果是这样, 具体原因是什么以及他们是怎么怎么帮助您的社会文化调整的? 如果没有, 您认为什么样的支持, 例如来自大学, 老师对支持您的社会文化调整是有益的?

• **PART 4: Psychological Adjustment Trajectory**

- Can you draw a diagram illustrating your psychological adjustment trajectories? Use the y-axis to represent the degree of adjustment and the x-axis for time, from the beginning of college life to the current stage. Line 1 should represent your imagined psychological adjustment trajectory (before studying abroad), and Line 2 should represent your actual experienced psychological adjustment trajectory. Can you explain your diagram? 请您画一张图表来说明您的心理调整轨迹。用 y 轴表示调整程度, x 轴表示时间, 即从大学生活开始到现阶段。第一条线应该代表您在出国留学前想象的心理调整轨迹, 第二条线应该代表您实际经历的心理调整轨迹。您可以解释一下您的图表吗?



- Before travelling to and studying in the UK, did you have concerns regarding your psychological wellbeing? What leads you to have such concerns, or why don't you have such concerns? 在来英国留学之前, 您对于在英国的心理适应有什么担忧吗? (例如想家, 学习生活平衡, 学习生活的适应) 您为什么有/没有这样的担忧?
- Reflecting on your study abroad experiences, did you encounter any of these issues during your actual experiences when studying in the UK?
  - If so, were there any differences between your expectations and concerns and what you actually experienced?

反思您在英国的留学经历, 您之前的期待和担忧与实际经历之间是否存在差异? 如果有, 你觉得造成差异的原因和‘反向留学’的整体环境是否有一定关联? 您可以进一步解释一下吗?

- Reflecting on your experiences in the UK higher education context, do you feel that the large number of Chinese students affects your psychological adjustment and wellbeing?
  - Is that effect positive or negative or both? Why?  
反思您的学习经历, 您觉得校园/专业里大量中国留学生是否影响了会影响您在英国的心理适应和健康吗? 这种影响是积极的还是消极的, 或者两者都有? 为什么?
- Considering that the culture of ‘neijuan’ (intense competition among students) is prevalent in Chinese higher education context, do you feel this culture has spread to community of Chinese international students in British universities?
  - If so, how do you perceive this situation? Does it bring additional pressure to you?  
在中国大学内, 内卷风气比较盛行, 反思您的学习环境和经历, 你觉得这样的风气是否已经蔓延到英国大学的中国留学生群体中? 如果有, 您如何看待这种情况? 这是否给你带来额外压力?
- Do you feel that fellow students are facilitators of your psychological adjustments and wellbeing? If so, why, and how? (This may have some overlapping with the previous questions) If not, what kind of supports (from the university, mentors, or others) do you feel are beneficial in supporting your academic adjustments?  
您觉得同胞(其他中国留学生)是您在英国大学学习过程中心理适应和健康的促进者吗? 如果是这样, 具体原因是什么以及他们是怎么怎么帮助您的? 如果没有, 您认为什么样的支持, 例如来自大学, 老师对支持您的心理调整和健康是有益的?

● **PART 5: Conclusion**

- Do you have any other comments or things you would like to discuss, relevant to this topic?

## Appendix E: CUREC 1B Form

### Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC)

#### CUREC 1B Application form for research projects in the social sciences and humanities with low-risk 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.

**This form is currently being piloted in the following Departments: Asian & Middle Eastern Studies (AMES), Computer Science, Education, Geography and Environment (SoGE), International Development (ODID), Linguistics, Philology, and Phonetics (LPP), Music and Sociology, and is not yet available to researchers in other Departments.**

Before completing this form, please refer to the [guidance](#) and [flowchart](#) on the Research Support website. To avoid delays, it is incumbent on applicants to apply using the appropriate form. Only type-written forms will be accepted. Applications are to be reviewed and approved by the student's supervisor (if student research) or by a senior colleague within the Department (if staff research). Once an application has been approved, the application form and supporting documents (such as the participant information sheet and consent form) must be emailed *either* to the [Departmental Research Ethics Committee \(DREC\)](#) (for applicants from Computer Science, Education, SoGE, ODID, or Sociology) or to [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk) (for applicants from AMES, LPP or Music) so that there is a record of the review and approval. Please contact your [DREC](#) or the [SSH IDREC](#) if you have any questions about completing this form or the review process.

SECTION A: Researchers			
1. Name of researcher or student	██████████		
2. Department or Institute	Department of Education		
3. Degree programme, if student research	MSc Higher Education		
Copy and paste the following four rows as necessary to complete for each additional researcher who will be involved in this study, including student(s).			
4. Name of <a href="#">Principal Investigator (PI)</a> (if different from the answer to A1), student's supervisor or other researchers	██████████		
5. Department or Institute	Department of Education		
6. Role in research	Supervisor		
7. The <a href="#">introductory core research integrity course</a> is compulsory for all University of Oxford research students (either on graduate taught courses or taking research degrees). There is also a <a href="#">refresher course</a> which may be more suitable for experienced University of Oxford researchers. Please confirm that all staff and research students have undertaken either the core or the refresher course, or that undergraduates have received suitable training.	<table border="1"> <tr> <td><b>Yes</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table>	<b>Yes</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Yes</b>			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			

<b>SECTION B: Filter questions</b>		
This section determines whether this CUREC 1B form is suitable for the research project.		
<b>Please indicate with an 'X'.</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
1. Does the research involve the <a href="#">deception</a> of participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. Are the research participants <a href="#">vulnerable</a> in the context of the research, or classed as <a href="#">people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question</a> ? For example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants younger than 16;</li> <li>• Participants aged 16 – 18 (refer to <a href="#">competent youths</a> for guidance);</li> <li>• <a href="#">adults at risk</a>;</li> </ul> Note the University's <a href="#">Safeguarding Guidance and Code of Practice</a> and its implications for researchers involving young people or adults at risk.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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 ( <a href="#">the Prevent Duty</a> ), which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism? <a href="#">Best Practice Guidance 07 on the Prevent Duty</a> provides further guidance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5. Does the research involve topics that could be considered <a href="#">sensitive</a> ?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
6. Are there any risks to the <a href="#">safety</a> and <a href="#">wellbeing</a> of the researchers or others involved in the project?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
7. Will participants be taking part in the research without their knowledge and <a href="#">informed consent</a> (e.g. <a href="#">covert observation</a> )?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
8. Is this international or collaborative research where there may be issues of <a href="#">local practice and political sensitivities</a> ?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
9. Are there any potential <a href="#">conflicts of interest</a> ?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10. Is permission from a <a href="#">gatekeeper</a> required for access to the participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
11. Are the researchers in a position of authority over participants, e.g. as employers, lecturers, teachers or family members?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
12. Will the research involve <a href="#">third parties</a> collecting data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
13. Is there scope for incidental findings, e.g. concerns for the safety or wellbeing of participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
14. Is the Principal Investigator based in a Department other than AMES, Computer Science, Education, SoGE, ODID, LPP, Music and Sociology?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If you answered 'No' to all the questions above, continue to <b>Section C</b> . If you answered 'Yes' to <b>any</b> of the questions above, please submit a <a href="#">CUREC 1A</a> or <a href="#">CUREC 2</a> form <b>instead of this form</b> .		

<b>SECTION C: The research project</b>
1. Title of the research project

Under the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’: Investigating Chinese international students’ transnational experiences in UK higher education	
2. Anticipated start date of the aspect of the research project involving human participants and/ or personal data (dd/mm/yy).	01/05/2024 or as soon as getting CUREC approval
3. Anticipated research end date (dd/mm/yy).	20/08/2024
4. External organisation funding the research and grant reference (if applicable)	
N/A	
5. Provide a brief lay summary of the aims and objectives of the research. (max 300 words)	
<p>This research aims to investigate the cross-border learning experiences for Chinese international students, specifically in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education. As a new buzzword in Chinese social media, the term ‘reverse studying abroad’ does not have a formal definition in existing literature. In simple words, it denotes a ‘new’ situation where certain programs in UK higher education have a predominantly Chinese student population and it gives rise to a sense of not truly ‘studying abroad’ for Chinese international students. In the previous literature, the cross-border learning experiences for international students is a popular topic in the field of higher education studies. However, with the impact of higher education marketization in the age of globalization, there has been a significant increase in international student mobility, leading to subsequent changes in student demographics within higher education systems of popular study-abroad destinations (e.g., the United Kingdom and the United States). In this regard, there is limited research available in exploring students’ transnational learning experiences in the new era of international higher education. Hence, this research aims to address the existing research gap by providing a more updated understanding of the opportunities and challenges encountered by Chinese international students in their cross-border learning/living adaptation.</p> <p>The intended <b>research question</b> of this study is:  <b>RQ:</b> What are the cross-border learning experiences for Chinese international students in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education?  <i>Sub-RQ 1:</i> In the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education, what are Chinese international students’ experiences in academic adaptation?  <i>Sub-RQ 2:</i> In the context of ‘reverse studying abroad’ in the UK higher education, what are Chinese international students’ experiences in sociocultural engagement?</p>	
6. Provide a brief lay summary of the research design and methods. What will research participants be asked to do? What data will be collected? (max 300 words)	
<p>This research takes a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the data collection protocol. Following the acquisition of participants’ informed consent, I will conduct individual online interviews through Microsoft Teams. Each interview is anticipated to last approximately one hour. Research participants will be asked to answer the following closed questions and make further elaboration in the open questions that I developed in the interview process.</p> <p><i>General interview questions that will be asked to participants:</i></p>	

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why you choose to study abroad?</li> <li>2. What are your aspirations when choosing to study abroad?</li> <li>3. What are your concerns when choosing to study abroad?</li> <li>4. Can you use three key words to describe your learning and living experiences in the UK? And why these three words?</li> <li>5. How do you find the adjustment to the teaching styles in UK?</li> <li>6. How do you find the engagement with other students when studying in the UK?</li> </ol>			
7. List any <a href="#">professional guidelines</a> that will be followed.			
British Education Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research			
8. List the location(s) where the research will be conducted, including any other countries. Clarify which parts of the research will be conducted in-person and which will take place remotely, e.g. <a href="#">online</a> .			
Online			
9. If your department requires a fieldwork risk assessment, please confirm that a risk assessment will be undertaken and authorised by your Department before the fieldwork is undertaken. Refer to guidance available from your Department, the <a href="#">Safety Office</a> , the <a href="#">Social Sciences Division</a> , and the <a href="#">Humanities Division</a> , and on <a href="#">travel for University business</a> . If you are travelling overseas, you are advised to take out <a href="#">University travel insurance</a> .		Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Not required	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10. Indicate which <a href="#">CUREC Best Practice Guidance</a> are relevant and which have been used to develop your research.	<b>Please indicated with an 'X'.</b>	<b>Relevant?</b>	<b>Used?</b>
	<a href="#">BPG 01 Researcher safety</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 02 Ethnographic and other types of qualitative research</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 03 Elite and expert interviewing</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 04 Competent youths</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 05 Payments and incentives in research</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 06 Internet-mediated research</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 07 Prevent Duty</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 08 Psychological distress</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 09 Data collection, protection and management</a>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 10 Conducting research interviews</a>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 12 Mobile app design</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<a href="#">BPG 14 Research in archives</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<a href="#">BPG 15 Ethics review of research with human tissue</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

	<a href="#">BPG 16 Social science research conducted outside the UK</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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<b>SECTION D: Research participants – recruitment and informed consent</b>	
1. Number of participants	22
2. How will potential participants be identified and approached?	
<p>This study aims to investigate the cross-border learning experiences of Chinese international students in UK higher education institutions in the context of ‘reverse studying abroad.’ The study is designed as a case study with a specific focus on ■■■, one of the UK higher education institutions that hosts the most Chinese international students (HESA 2022). In this regard, the inclusion criteria to identify potential participants are current Chinese international students studying at ■■■. Potential participants will be approached using both snowball sampling, relying on my personal contacts, and recruiting participants through social media platforms.</p>	
<p>3. Explain how <a href="#">informed consent</a> will be obtained from the participants and how this will be recorded. Make sure participants are aware of any limits to withdrawing their data, e.g. once the data has been anonymised or published.</p>	
<p><b>NB: For ethics applications using the CUREC 1B form, the information provided to participants and the consent form must be based on the <a href="#">University templates</a>.</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will send the information sheet to participants via email. Participants will be informed to read through the information sheet and sign a consent form before data collection takes place on a voluntary basis. Information in the following areas will be provided to participants:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.The purpose of this research</li> <li>2.The procedures of this research</li> <li>3.The benefits and possible risks of this research</li> <li>4.The instruction of the data use, analysis, and report</li> <li>5.Confidentiality and anonymity of participants’ information</li> <li>6.Voluntary participation and participants have the right to withdraw from the study</li> </ol> </li>   <li>• All consent forms, recorded interviews and transcribed scripts will be securely stored in my Oxford Nexus 365 OneDrive account, which provides a secure and encrypted file storage with daily backups. Interview recordings will be deleted after being transcribed.</li>   <li>• The participants can withdraw from the study the research before 20/07/2024 (two weeks before the final submission of the dissertation). All relevant personal information and data collected will be securely stored for three years, and will not be showed in the final dissertation report.</li> </ul>	
<p>Please submit copies of all participant-facing materials for review. E.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment material (e.g. emails, posters)</li> <li>• 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).</li> <li>• A document to record informed consent.</li> </ul>	

**SECTION E: Research 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](#).

1. Confirm that, during the project, research data will be stored according to <a href="#">University guidelines</a> ; i.e. on University servers or Nexus365 One Drive if possible, or on encrypted personal devices.	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
2. Participants must understand what information will be collected from them, how the data will be used, who will have access to the data and how identifiable they will be from the data and from the research outputs. Confirm that you will obtain participants’ informed consent for the use of their data.	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
3. Confirm that the research data will be stored according to <a href="#">University guidelines</a> for at least 3 years after first publication or public release and that <a href="#">any additional research funder policies</a> will be adhered to.	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
4. Please complete this section if your research involves the use of secondary (i.e. previously collected) personal data.	<b>Please indicated with an ‘X’.</b>	
	Are data access agreements in place for access to and use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
	Did the individuals agree that their data could be used for research purposes?	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
	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:  Given that this research is designed as a case study with specific focus on UCL, in order to make participants’ provided data less identifiable, the researcher will not directly mention the institution that I chose (UCL) in the dissertation. Instead, the research will the phrase ‘one of the institutions that enrolled the most Chinese international students in the UK higher education’ as a reference.	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>

**Either Section F** (for student projects) **or Section G** (for staff projects) will need to be completed.

## SECTION F: Endorsements and ethics approval (student projects only)

Please ensure this form is endorsed by

- i. the student
- ii. the student's supervisor (who is also [Principal Investigator](#))
- iii. the Head of Department (or nominee)

Endorsement may be provided [by email](#) or by signing the form.

The PI is responsible for ensuring a copy of the endorsed form is kept.

### Student signature/ endorsement

I confirm that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that I will submit a revised version of this form should changes become necessary.

Name of student	██████████
Student's signature	
Date	22 April 2024

### Ethics review by the Principal Investigator/ student supervisor

- I understand my responsibilities as the student's supervisor and Principal Investigator as outlined on this form and in the CUREC glossary and guidance.
- I understand that I must ensure that all researchers are suitably qualified and trained to conduct the research described, or are appropriately supervised until deemed qualified/trained.
- I will ensure that personal data collected from participants will be held in accordance with the requirements of the UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act and that the data collected is only used for the research for which approval has been given.
- I have reviewed the above application on behalf of the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (SSH IDREC) in accordance with the University's Research Ethics Policy. I confirm that the research is suitable for review under the CUREC 1B process, that the ethical issues have been identified and that suitable measures have been put in place to address the ethical issues. I agree to notify the DREC if the Principal Investigator changes. I agree to notify the DREC in writing immediately of any proposed changes to the research that would require review by the DREC.

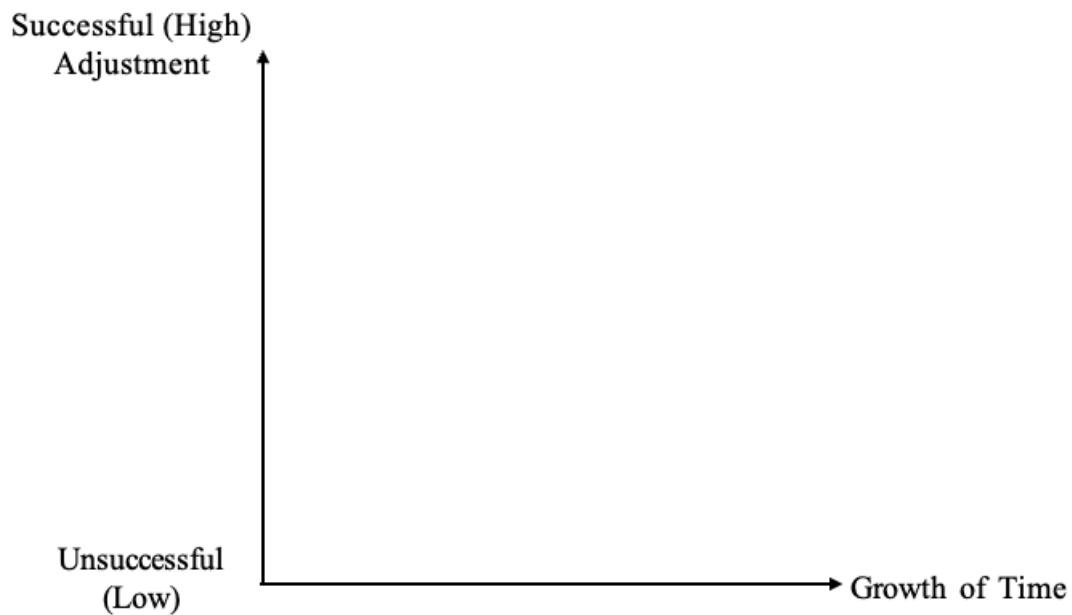
Name of Principal Investigator	██████████
Principal Investigator's signature	
Date	22 April 2024

**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, DREC Chair, 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;

## Appendix F: The Coordinate Diagram to Study Participants' Adjustment Trajectories



## Appendix G: Six-Phase Model of Thematic Analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006)

**Table 1** Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: (Braun & Clarke, 2006, P. 87)