Transition as Becoming: The Higher Education Experiences of Chinese Homeschooled Students

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MSc in Education (Higher Education), 2024

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Finally, to everyone I have met—thank you for shaping who I am today. I end with the words of one participant, in which I see their journeys and my own:

"I'm heading to a future with much grandeur, this is just the beginning."

Abstract

Homeschooling has increasingly become an alternative educational pathway in many parts of the world. A growing number of homeschooled students also entered or are preparing to enter higher education (HE). However, in mainland China (thereafter referred to as "China"), the legal status of homeschooling remains ambiguous, placing it in a regulatory "grey area". In addition, homeschooled students often face persistent stereotypes, such as being socially awkward or behaviourally unusual, which further marginalises their experiences. Limited empirical research has explored Chinese homeschooled students and their transition experiences into HE.

This study explores the Chinese homeschooled students' transition experiences in higher education by applying Gravett's (2019) framework of transition as troublesome, rhizomatic, and becoming. It draws on in-depth interviews with 14 participants with at least three years of homeschooling experience in China, all of whom had completed at least one year of university, either domestically or abroad. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participants' drawings of their educational trajectories, and past written diaries. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data.

The findings of this study revealed the diverse educational trajectories of Chinese homeschooled students. Participants had withdrawn from mainstream schools mainly due to the highly competitive educational environment in traditional Chinese schools or *neijuan*, which reflects the growing rivalry for career and educational prospects within China. Their choice to return to HE was rooted in the credentialism and a desire for broader exposure to the world, while study abroad has been viewed as a middle ground for homeschooled students to escape *neijuan* while still able to gain a recognised credential. The findings also illustrated the educational paths of homeschooled students as continuously negotiated and co-constructed journeys shaped by various factors.

Furthermore, participants commonly encountered academic, social, and emotional challenges during their transition into HE. Some of these difficulties, such as group work dynamics, language barriers, and anxiety, were shared with the broader student population. However, other challenges appeared to be specific to homeschooled

students, including limited experience with formal examinations and difficulties adapting to standardised curricula. Context-specific challenges were also evident in the Chinese setting, notably issues related to *xueji* (student registration status) and identity disclosure of homeschooling backgrounds. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated strong self-directed learning abilities, proactive help-seeking behaviours, and the capacity to adjust their strategies in response to new demands. Many also displayed notable resilience and optimism when navigating transitions. These reflect a high degree of student agency, which enabled them to establish a balanced and meaningful university life during ongoing transitions.

To sum up, this study foregrounds student agency and highlights transition as a fluid, situated, and personalised process. It also offers conceptual, empirical, and practical contributions to research and practice concerning Chinese homeschooled students and the broader field of transition studies in HE.

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List of Terms

ACT	American College Testing
COVID	Corona Virus Disease
GPA	Grade Point Average
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
SAT	Scholastic Assessment Test
STE	Self-Taught Higher Education Examination
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

Chapter 1 Introduction

This study explores the transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in higher education (HE). This chapter first provides the research context by examining global homeschooling trends and homeschooling in the Chinese context. It then outlines key features of the Chinese HE system and the emerging presence of homeschooled students. Following this, the chapter presents the rationale for the study and its research questions. It concludes with an overview of the outline of the current study.

1.1 Research Context

1.1.1 The Phenomenon of Homeschooling

Homeschooling around the World

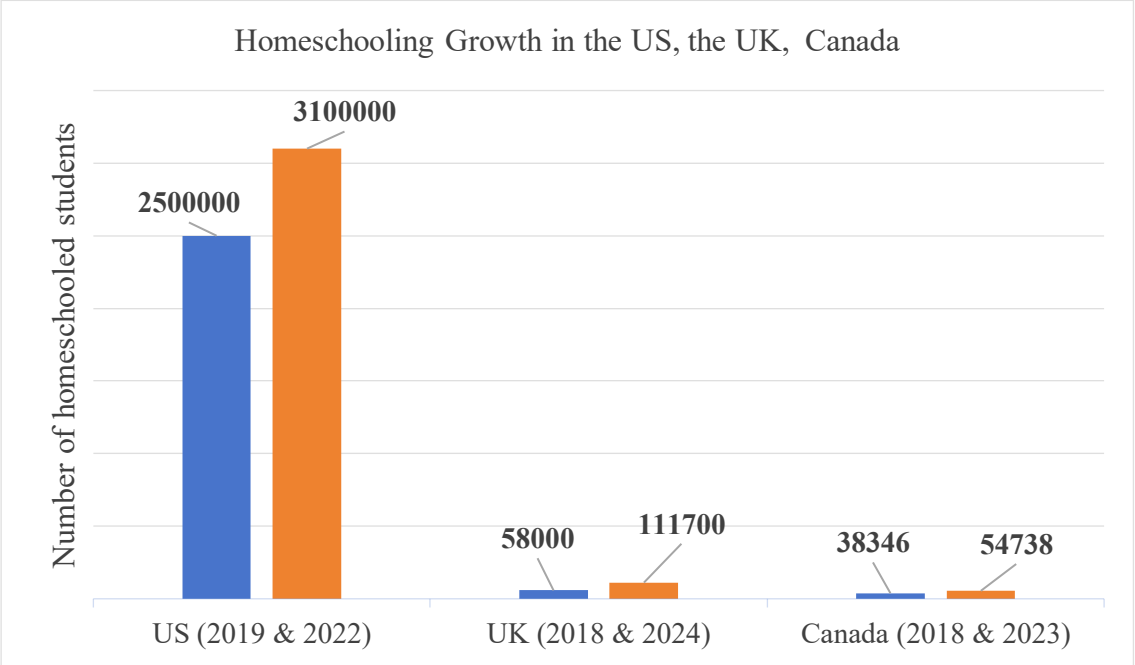
Parent-led home-based education, now known as homeschooling, referring to educating one's child(ren) or other child(ren) at home, is the earliest form of schooling in the history of humankind, which continues to this day (Brewer, 2021). Modern homeschooling emerged in the 1970s, driven both by religious families who viewed public school curricula as conflicting with their beliefs and by those seeking higher academic quality, and then it obtained significant momentum in the US during the 1990s through a social movement and rapid increase in families' participation (Isenberg, 2007; Ray, 2021).

Legal strategies for homeschooling vary significantly worldwide. As early as 1993, homeschooling was legalised in all 50 states of the US (Wang & Su, 2015). Since then, more and more families in the UK, Singapore, and Canada have gradually accepted this mode of education (Wang & Su, 2015). In some countries, families must notify or register with the government, while in others, there is no legal requirement for state contact (Ray, 2021). Conversely, homeschooling is prohibited or illegalised in certain nations, such as Japan, Korea, and China (Seo, 2023). These legal differences, along with regulatory challenges, make it difficult to obtain accurate figures on the number of homeschooling families and students around the world. Although some organisations (e.g. Home School Legal Defense Association) provide estimates of homeschooling

populations in different countries, verifying the accuracy and reliability of the data they provide could be challenging and time-consuming (Ray, 2020).

Nonetheless, available data show that homeschooling has steadily become popular worldwide over the past 40 years, particularly in the US (Ray, 2021). Figure 1 shows the growing number of homeschooled students in the US, the UK, and Canada. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the rise of homeschooling, with data indicating that its prevalence nearly doubled in several countries during this period (Office for National Statistics, 2020; Ray, 2025; Statistics Canada, 2024).

Figure 1: *The growing number of homeschooled students*



Note. Figure generated by the researcher; Data Sources: Ray, 2025; Department for Education, UK, 2024; Ofsted, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2024

Homeschooling in China (*zai jia shang xue*, 在家上学)

In many Asian countries, families have increasingly embraced homeschooling as an alternative to traditional schooling, educating their children outside of formal school settings (Seo, 2023). Unlike Western countries, the expansion of contemporary homeschooling in China is still in its infancy and is an isolated, small-scale, and parent-led endeavour (Sheng, 2014). The Chinese term for homeschooling, *zai jia shang xue*,

literally translates to “schooling at home”. In China, homeschooling has been more widely discussed in the media and on social media platforms than in academic literature. For example:

> “截至2016年2月,中国已有约6000人“在家上学”,全国约5万名家长有意尝试这一教育模式。”
>
> As of February 2016, about 6,000 people in China had been “home-schooled” and about 50,000 parents across the country were interested in trying the education model.[1]
>
> — News from Legal Daily (“法治网” *fa zhi wang*) by Zhou Jing, 5/3/2017

> “教育部目前只是表态称不得擅自在家学习,[…],并没有明确说明要介入制止或采取法律手段。”
>
> The Ministry of Education has only stated a few days ago that unauthorised home learning is not allowed, […], but there is no clear indication of intervention to stop or legal action to be taken.[2]
>
> — News from Legal Daily (“法治网” *fa zhi wang*) by Zhou Jing, 5/3/2017

> “在国内Homeschool,社会压力真的大的离谱。”
>
> The social pressure to homeschool in China is outrageous.[3]
>
> — Post Title from *Little Red Note (Xiao Hong Shu)* by User Naibalvshi, 21/10/2024

The case of China is distinctive for several reasons. First, the legitimacy of homeschooling is a complex issue in the Chinese context. In the Taiwan area, the

[1] Translated by the researcher
[2] Translated by the researcher
[3] Translated by the researcher

legislature passed a law in January 1999 that formally legalised homeschooling and placed it under local authority regulation (Liao & Xiao, 2017). However, in both mainland China and Hong Kong, homeschooling is prohibited, as the government enforces compulsory education (Eelings, 2019; Sheng, 2014). Since the *Compulsory Education Law* was enacted in 1986, a nine-year compulsory education system of six years of primary and three years of middle school has been implemented nationwide (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2009). Homeschooling thus seems illegal because it violates the *Compulsory Education Law*, which requires school-age children to attend school and adhere to its prescribed curriculum and teaching standards (Sheng, 2014). In 2017, the Ministry of Education stated that homeschooling might only be considered with official approval for medical reasons, placing it in a "grey zone" and reflecting the government's cautious stance (Liao & Xiao, 2017).

Second, homeschooling in China has evolved into several distinct forms, including individual families teaching their own children, often supported by mothers rather than fathers (Sheng, 2014), collaborative learning communities where several families educate their children together, and micro-school models, where some parents educate other children and develop the institutions into small school-like settings (Zheng, 2014). Due to the prevalence of small family sizes in China, homeschooling parents tend to send their children to communal learning spaces to avoid isolation, which are usually called *xuetang* (学堂) or *sishu* (私塾), operating typically without official government accreditation (Ren, 2015; Sheng, 2014). They are small in scale (Ohls et al., 2025) and are also classified by some researchers as "alternative education" (*ling lei jiao yu*, 另类教育) (Lin, 2024). In Taiwan, legislation passed in 1999 defined "non-school-based experimental education" to encompass alternatives beyond formal institutional schooling, including home-based self-education, experiments in independent learning, and other alternative education (Liao & Xiao, 2017). In mainland China, where no formal distinctions are made, any form of education is generally regarded as homeschooling if children's primary place of learning is outside the formal school system, typically without institutional teachers as the main educators (Sheng, 2014; Wang, 2012). Therefore, Chinese-style homeschooling (*zai jia shang xue*) aligns more with the "non-school-based experimental education" than with the common notion of parent-led home-based education.

Third, the content and orientation of homeschooling in China range from traditional Chinese learning to Western-style liberal arts, varying across individuals and micro-schools. Sheng (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019) links the growth of homeschooling in China, estimated at up to 25,000 families by 2017, to China's modernising reforms, particularly among middle-class, Western-educated mothers. Motivated by religious and educational concerns, many seek to prepare children for HE abroad. Chinese Christians and Confucians, in particular, are drawn to homeschooling out of a shared sense of nostalgia for traditional values such as filial piety and respect for elders (Sheng, 2015, 2019). As a result, the content and orientation of homeschooling in China vary widely. While some focus on classical and conventional Chinese education, others emphasise Western-style liberal arts education (Sheng, 2015, 2019).

Fourth, as Sheng (2014) outlines, parents choose homeschooling for diverse reasons, often reflecting dissatisfaction with conventional schooling's rigidity, exam focus, and neglect of moral education, creativity, and individual learning needs. This could also be related to the phenomenon of *neijuan* (内卷, internal involution), which indicates "the escalating competition for employment and educational opportunities" within China (Wang, 2024, p. 257). For some families, homeschooling is a reactive choice, responding to children's learning differences or psychological challenges. For others, homeschooling is an intentional form of educational investment, aiming to better prepare their children for elite global universities. Religious and cultural values also matter, particularly among Christian and Confucian families, who often view homeschooling as a means to pass on ethical beliefs and holistic moral guidance. As existing school-based education has often been unable to fully meet families' expectations, homeschooling continues to gain more attention. Between 2013 and 2017, the Chinese homeschooling population expanded at an average annual rate of approximately 30% (21st Century Education Research Institute, 2017). The COVID pandemic further accelerated this trend, prompting many parents to explore alternatives to traditional schooling (Lee, 2023).

Despite its growing trend, the complex nature of homeschooling in China—a growing practice that still inhabits a legal and social "grey area" and is subject to ongoing debate

and scrutiny—has been largely under-explored in academic research. The current study seeks to contribute to this emerging field by offering an in-depth examination of Chinese homeschooled students' pathways into and through HE. Studying Chinese homeschoolers is particularly valuable as it captures a diversifying group that challenges normative educational paradigms and remains marginalised within the education system, reflecting the evolving Chinese education landscape.

1.1.2 Homeschooled Students in HE: In China and Abroad

With the rise of homeschooling in China, an increasing number of homeschooled students are now entering HE institutions (HEIs). Thus, there is a need to understand homeschooled students in the context of Chinese HE.

In China, where the nine-year compulsory education is completed, the next stages comprise senior secondary schools, mainstream university undergraduate education, and technological colleges and other post-secondary education institutions (Chen, 2000; as cited in Sheng, 2014). Since the 1990s, the government has introduced a range of measures to expand access to HE, a process often referred to as the "massification" of HE (Jiang, 2017). However, the national college entrance exam in China, *gaokao*, is highly competitive and plays a central role in shaping access to HE within a deeply hierarchical system, one marked by regional disparities, provincial quotas, and intense competition for limited spaces at elite universities (Hamnett et al., 2019). Closely associated with *neijuan* is the term *run* (running away), which captures the trend among middle-class and affluent individuals who pursue opportunities overseas as a means of escaping the relentless pressures and competition within China's domestic environment (Huang, 2022). Rising outbound student mobility constitutes one of the key pathways of *run* (Li et al., 2021). Figure 2 shows an overall rise in Chinese students studying abroad from 2008 to 2019. Numbers fell sharply from around 703,500 in 2019 to 451,000 in 2020 due to COVID, taking four years to recover to pre-pandemic levels (Textor, 2025).

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The figure was sourced at CEIC Data. (n.d.). *China number of student studying abroad* [Chart]. Retrieved June 19, 2025, from https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/no-of-student-studying-abroad-and-foreign-student/no-of-student-studying-abroad

The phenomenon of homeschooling is situated against this increasing trend of studying abroad. As discussed earlier, for some Chinese parents who chose the homeschooling model for their children, they have been intending to send their children to study abroad or sought to incorporate Western educational ideas, resources, and practices to create a more holistic and enriching learning experience for their children (Liang & Lertlit, 2024; Sheng, 2014). In addition, *xueji* (学籍), which refers to a student's official enrolment status within the national education system, is a legal prerequisite for participating in the *gaokao*. Because homeschooled students typically lack *xueji*, they are largely excluded from domestic university admission via the *gaokao*, leading many to seek overseas education instead (Yang, 2024). Notably, with the absence of official statistics and dedicated organisations, the homeschooling population in China is difficult to track, but likely remains very small.

In general, homeschooled students in HE are still subject to several stereotypes. One of the most widespread stereotypes is that homeschooled students are "backward" and "on the fringe" (Drenovsky & Cohen, 2012), a perception often linked to concerns about their socialisation. Romanowski (2006) identified four common myths about homeschooling: that it produces social misfits, fails to prepare good citizens, hinders college entry, and is mainly motivated by religious reasons. In the Chinese context, the socialisation of homeschooled students is one of the most contested aspects. Researchers argue that, as these students are separated from conventional school environments and have fewer opportunities to interact with peers, their growth occurs

largely under adult supervision, which might limit their space for autonomous social development (Liao & Xiao, 2017). Although several existing studies have debunked common stereotypes about homeschooled students, such misconceptions persist, especially within the Chinese context, where the phenomenon remains largely under-researched—an area this study aims to contribute to.

1.2 Research Rationale and Questions

The rationale for conducting this research emerges from both the researcher's personal experience as a previously homeschooled student and a significant gap in the existing literature. Firstly, having been homeschooled myself and now studying at a UK university, I have encountered distinct feelings, perceptions, and challenges that differ from those of typically schooled students. In the Chinese context, homeschooling remains a relatively niche and largely misunderstood educational pathway, often surrounded by stereotypes. Yet, from my own experience and that of other homeschooled peers, reality is far more complex and individualised. This inspired me to explore the authentic and lived experiences of homeschooled students as they transition into HE.

Secondly, despite growing research interests in homeschooling worldwide, very limited research has addressed the experience of Chinese homeschooled students after entering HE. In most studies of Chinese HE, these students "disappear" within the wider university population, making their challenges and demands largely invisible. The sensitivity of the topic in the Chinese context further compounds this invisibility; many homeschooled friends of mine are reluctant to openly share their educational background, fearing stigma or misunderstanding. As a result, their difficulties and experiences in HE remain under-represented in the literature.

Therefore, this study aims to centre Chinese homeschooled students' voices and experiences, challenge prevailing stereotypes about them, and examine the academic, social, and emotional realities they experience as they navigate the transition into HE, thereby deepening understanding of this under-explored community.

The main research question is: *What were the transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in higher education?*

The study then unpacks the four sub-questions:

RQ1 Why did Chinese homeschooled students leave and return to the mainstream education pathway?

RQ2 What academic, social, and emotional challenges did they encounter during their transition to HE?

RQ3 How did they navigate their transitions?

RQ4 What is the impact of homeschooling on their transition experiences?

1.3 Thesis Outline

This research has nine chapters in total. Chapter 1 outlines the context of the study, introduces the researcher's rationale, explains the thesis outline, and presents the research questions. Chapter 2 discusses the existing research, identifies the key gaps this study seeks to address, and presents the theoretical frameworks. Chapter 3 details the study's research methodology, including the research design, data collection, analysis methods, and issues of research ethics and positionality. Chapters 4-7 present the research findings and discuss them with references to the literature: Chapter 4 explores participants' educational trajectories and their reasons for leaving and returning to the mainstream education pathway. Chapters 5 and 6 investigate their transition experiences to HE across three dimensions—academic, social, and emotional. Chapter 7 examines participants' reflections regarding their transition experiences. Chapter 8 summarises the research findings and outlines the contributions of the study and potential directions for future research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter presents a critical review of the existing research on homeschooled students and transition in HE. It begins by critically discussing existing studies and debates on homeschooled students, identifying significant gaps in the literature. It then examines how "transition" is conceptualised in the HE contexts, and introduces the theoretical framework of this study, which draws on the perspective of "transition as becoming" and incorporates three key dimensions of transition. This is followed by a review of empirical research about the transition experiences of homeschooled students in HE, drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles and relevant doctoral dissertations to provide a holistic and up-to-date overview. Finally, it concludes with a short summary and the research gaps.

2.1 Existing Studies on Homeschooled Students

A substantial body of literature examined the history, regulation, and reasons for homeschooling, and its impact on children's academic outcomes and socialisation in the US and other nations such as Canada and Australia (e.g., Abuzandah, 2021; Brabant et al., 2021; Gaither, 2021; Martin-Chang et al., 2011; Slater et al., 2020; Unger Madar & BenDavid-Hadar, 2021; Valiente et al., 2022). Many debates centred on the academic and social preparedness of homeschooled students. Several quantitative and qualitative studies indicated that they often match or exceed their non-homeschool peers in academic achievement, as measured by standardised tests such as the SAT and ACT (e.g., Bullock et al., 2016; Cogan, 2010; Crouch, 2024; Dolan, 2017; Dumas et al., 2010; Ray & Eagleson, 2008; Snyder, 2011, 2013). While early concerns questioned their social readiness for HE (e.g., Luebke, 1999; McCulloch et al., 2013; Jones & Gloeckner, 2004; Sorey & Duggan, 2008), more recent research challenged this, showing that homeschooled students demonstrated strong social competence, emotional intelligence, and civic engagement (e.g., Medlin, 2013; Murphy, 2014; Hamlin & Cheng, 2022). Studies also suggested that homeschooling's social outcomes largely depended on parental intentionality and the diversity of social experiences during the homeschooling period (e.g., Rothermel, 2012; Kranzow, 2013; Hamlin & Cheng, 2022).

However, with most studies focusing on K-12 settings, only a few studies examined homeschooled students' transitions into HE (e.g., Bolle et al., 2007; Drenovsky & Cohen, 2012). More recent qualitative studies on homeschooled students' HE transition were primarily doctoral dissertations rather than peer-reviewed journal articles (e.g., Johnson, 2021; Malavé, 2025; Salvo, 2018; Thomas, 2018), often authored by individuals with personal homeschooling experience. Nearly all the studies were about the US, with few, if any, conducted in other national contexts such as Romania (e.g., Mandel, 2023). There is thus a notable absence of research on Chinese homeschooled students' transition into HE.

Moreover, researching homeschoolers in HE involves several limitations (Ray, 2004, 2013; Snyder, 2021). Much of the research was rooted in the American context, where homeschooling is more common and often religiously motivated (Ray, 2010). Consequently, studies on homeschooled students' college experiences primarily focused on private, religious HEIs, predominantly Christian or Catholic in orientation (e.g., Gaither, 2009; Jones & Gloeckner, 2004; Kranzow, 2005; Lattibeaudiere, 2000; Smiley, 2010; Snyder, 2011), and hence failed to represent the wider diversity of the homeschooling group due to their concentration on White, middle-class Christian or Catholic homeschooled students in the US.

In the Chinese context, existing scholarship published in Chinese and English primarily addressed motivations, educational settings, and legal status of homeschooling, as well as comparing Chinese and foreign homeschooling practices (e.g., Lee, 2023, 2024; Liao & Xiao, 2017; Lin, 2024; Ren, 2015; Wang & Langager, 2023; Wang & Su, 2015). Sheng's (e.g., 2013, 2014, 2018) several empirical studies also mainly focused on the K-12 stage and involved parents and educators, rather than students themselves. Therefore, empirical insight into the lived experiences of Chinese homeschooled students, particularly within the HE context, is still limited. This could be partly attributed to homeschooling's ambiguous legal status in China as well as the difficulty of identifying and accessing a dispersed and often hidden population across HEIs. To date, no studies have directly examined Chinese homeschoolers in HE settings and their transition experiences.

2.2 Conceptualisations of "Transition"

2.2.1 Evolving Conceptualisations of "Transition"

The concept of transition has long been a major focus of HE policy, research, and practice (Gravett & Winstone, 2019). Gale and Parker's (2014) influential typology outlines three dominant conceptualisations of transition among the HE literature: transition as induction (T1), development (T2), and becoming (T3). These three models provide a structured foundation for understanding how student transition into HE is conceptualised.

The "transition as induction" (T1) perspective views transition as a step-by-step, linear process aligned with distinct educational phases, often focusing on the first year of university as the most critical (e.g., Javaid et al., 2024; Schütze et al., 2020). The "transition as development" (T2) perspective understands transition as a series of maturing stages, marked by identity shifts, largely grounded in developmental psychology (Erikson, 1994; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978) and commonly used in examining transitions from childhood or adolescence to adulthood. These two perspectives have been widely adopted in studies on student transition but critiqued for being largely institution-serving (Gale & Parker, 2014). T1 frames transition as a linear adaptation to existing academic norms, often through a deficit lens, while T2 highlights individual growth but still reinforces conformity to institutional expectations through resilience and identity development. Neither fully captures the complexity, multiplicity, and fluidity of students' lived HE experiences (Gravett & Winstone, 2019).

Compared to T1 and T2, the "transition as becoming" (T3) perspective offers a more nuanced and responsive view. Based on Gale and Parker (2014, p. 737), T3 views transition as a "perpetual series of fragmented movements involving whole-of-life fluctuations in lived reality or subjective experience, from birth to death." It emphasises a fluid and dynamic understanding of transition as well as resistance to settled identities or trajectories, while argued by Gale and Parker (2014) as holding the greatest promise as a socially inclusive and transformative strategy for student support in HE. However, it is less frequently engaged in institutional practice and with empirical research than T1 and T2 models (Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett et al., 2020). The "transition as

becoming" perspective informs part of this study's theoretical framework, which is introduced in the following section.

2.2.2 Theoretical Framework of the Current Study

Transition as Troublesome, Rhizomatic, and Becoming

Existing HE transition research predominantly drew on the induction (T1) and development (T2) perspectives (Gale & Parker, 2014). This study instead adopts the becoming (T3) lens to explore the HE transition of Chinese homeschooled students. Rooted in Heidegger and in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, "becoming" views the self as a dynamic and continuously evolving presence in the world (Hamshire & Jack, 2016; Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett, 2019). Building on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of the "rhizome" and "becoming" as well as Meyer and Land's (2005) notions of "troublesome knowledge" and "liminality", Gravett (2019) reconceptualised transition as troublesome, rhizomatic, and becoming.

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

The figure was sourced at Gravett, K. (2019). Troubling transitions and celebrating becomings: From pathway to rhizome. *Studies in Higher Education*, *46*(8), 1506-1517. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1691162

Gravett (2019, p. 1513) illustrated this conceptual shift in Figure 3, contrasting the traditional perspective of transition with the becoming (T3) perspective. The traditional framing (left) views transition as a problematic phase to be smoothed, bridged, or made

successful via institutional support, with quick and seamless adjustments as the ideal (Gravett et al., 2020). This narrative positions students as deficient, underprepared and in need of targeted support to become more focused and goal-oriented (Gale & Parker, 2014; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Murtagh, 2012). In contrast, Gravett's (2019) revised framing (right) perceives transition as rhizomatic, diverse, ongoing, and deeply personal. Students are not simply adapting to predefined norms, but engaging in complex processes of becoming, shaped by identities, values, and prior experiences. The revised framework rejects overarching grand narratives in favour of a more situated and granular understanding of transition, which is sensitive to the specificity, instability, and embodied nature of students' journeys. The current study adopts Gravett's (2019) framework of transitions as troublesome, rhizomatic, and becoming to explore Chinese homeschooled students' HE transition experiences.

Transition as Troublesome

Meyer and Land's (2005) theory of the threshold concepts offered a valuable lens for rethinking student transition as a potentially transformative, rather than merely problematic, process. They argued that "when students pass through this transitional space, it can be uncomfortable and troublesome, as students struggle to cross the threshold to their new, transformed state of understanding" (Gravett, 2019, p. 1510). The anthropological concept of "liminality", referring to "the ambiguous, unstable middle ground of a ritual where the individual has moved from one state but is yet to navigate the changes to move into the next state" (Baker & Irwin, 2019, p. 79), employed by Meyer and Land (2005), further framed student transition as a fluid, uncertain process characterised by ambiguity, instability, and potential transformation.

Their work also highlighted the positive role of "troublesome knowledge", where acquiring new and challenging knowledge often involved passing through a "liminal" space marked by confusion, emotional discomfort, and uncertainty (Meyer & Land, 2005). Building on this, scholars such as Gourlay (2009) extended the idea toward threshold practices, framing emotional struggle and indeterminacy as normal, even necessary, aspects of becoming a student. This contrasted with dominant narratives that seek to smooth transitions, instead recognising the generative role of discomfort, uncertainty, and risk in shaping meaningful educational change.

Transition as Rhizomatic

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome provided a valuable metaphor for reimagining student transition as non-linear, open-ended, and grounded in multiplicity. This view resists singular, staged narratives, emphasising fluidity, fragmentation, and the possibility of multiple entry points and trajectories. Applied to HE, it challenges dominant conceptions of transition as a rational, sequential process and rather understands it as emergent, affective, and relational (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). Taylor & Harris-Evans (2018) deployed the "rhizome" concept to rethink knowledge and knowing during transition, revealing that students' ways of knowing and decision-making were rarely pre-planned or calculated, but messy, recursive, and shaped by chance, relationships, emotion, and embodied experience. Knowledge and knowing, here, are not discrete, transferable units but enacted through complex webs of connection, immersion, and everyday life—what Deleuze and Guattari described as knowledge organised on "principles of connection and heterogeneity."

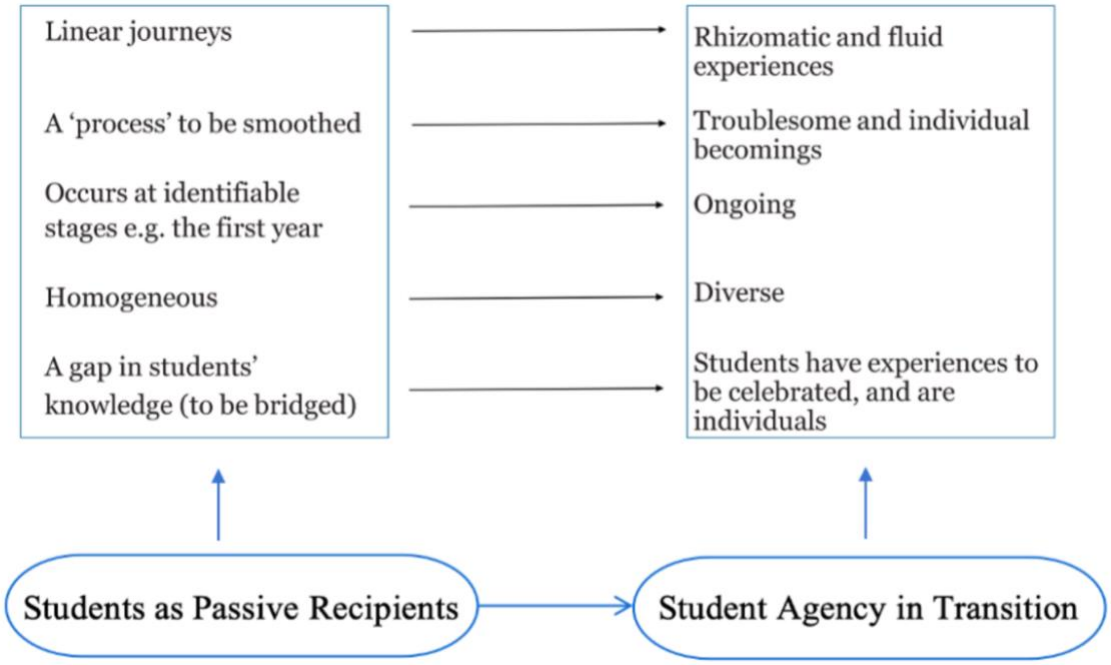
This rhizomatic approach foregrounds "knowing" as a continual becoming, an entangled, embodied process resisting binary models such as acquisition versus participation (Sfard, 1998). It shows how students assemble disparate elements into personalised constellations of meaning in ways that reflect their internal affective logic rather than institutional modularity (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). Learning and becoming, from this perspective, are not directional movements "from" one identity "to" another, but processes always "in the middle"—shifting, emergent, and situated within a network of unstable and interconnected forces (Gravett, 2019).

Transition as Becoming

The first two concepts contribute to understanding transition as a process of becoming. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 341-342) described a "line of becoming" as having "neither beginning nor end," capturing the idea of perpetual transformation. Gale and Parker (2014) proposed that the T3 perspective reflects the fragmented and fluctuating nature of lived experiences across the lifespan. Similarly, Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) suggested that this lens foregrounds the "granularity" of students' lived experiences and situates HE within broader life trajectories, rather than as a separate, bounded phase. Tett et al. (2017) also framed transition as an ongoing process involving repeated moments of change and adaptation, often accompanied by emotional upheaval,

shifts in identity, and evolving learning strategies. The becoming lens invites us to shift focus from achieving a successful institutional fit to recognising how students are constantly negotiating who they are with their learning and life circumstances as well as valuing their current identities rather than defining them by their future potential or expected institutional achievements (Gale & Parker, 2014). Becoming, then, is not just a theoretical shift—it is a call to engage with student transitions as emergent, situated, and deeply human processes (Gravett, 2019).

Figure 4: *A new framing of the "becoming" perspective with student agency*



Note. Figure generated by the researcher based on Gravett (2019, p. 1513)

Student Agency

While Gravett's (2019) rethinking of transition is compelling, it does not explicitly address the role of agency, broadly defined as "people's ability or capacity for action" (Ecclestone et al., 2010, p. 1). Drawing on Gale and Parker's (2014) definition of transition as the capability to navigate change, student agency could be understood as the capacity to engage with shifting educational contexts—often amid uncertainty, incomplete knowledge, and restricted control. Hviid and Zittoun (2008) described educational trajectories as person-centred, temporally unfolding processes punctuated by transitions, which are moments of rupture that catalyse reorganisation and a search

for renewed coherence. Transitions, from this perspective, are not just reactions to external change but reflective processes through which students restore continuity and construct meaning. This temporal framing situates student agency within a broader life narrative with continuous transitions, illuminating how prior learning environments, such as homeschooling, influence students' evolving sense of self and belonging in new institutional contexts. This agency in transition indicates how individuals continuously negotiate with the structural conditions and other actors, such as parents, teachers, and peers, when making decisions about entering, navigating, exiting and sometimes re-entering various transitional phases (Cuconato & Walther, 2015).

In Figure 4, student agency was incorporated into Gravett's (2019, p. 1513) framework, centring student agency in transition experiences to emphasise a shift from viewing students as passive recipients to highlighting their active role in shaping their own journeys. This new framing challenges deficit-based models and complements Gravett's (2019) framework via recognising students as active participants who navigate and co-construct their learning environments.

Three Dimensions of Transition

In addition, this study also adopts a tripartite framework—academic, social, and emotional dimensions—to examine transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in HE. While transitions were often conceptualised in academic terms, research increasingly recognised that learning and belonging are embedded in wider social and affective contexts (Briggs et al., 2012; Christie, 2009; Dias & Sá, 2014; McMillan, 2014; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). Studies on academic transition typically addressed students' adaptation to new learning environments, including increased autonomy, unfamiliar assessment formats, and shifting disciplinary expectations (Barros & Veiga Simão, 2018; Lin et al., 2023; Scott, 2013). However, academic success alone cannot fully capture the complexity of transition (Briggs et al., 2012). Several studies also concentrated on social transition, which involves developing relationships with peers and staff, navigating institutional norms, and cultivating a sense of belonging—factors shown to significantly influence students' overall engagement and persistence (Kantanis, 2000; MacFarlane, 2018; O'Donnell et al.,

2016). In addition to academic and social aspects, emotional/psychological experience was also highlighted, considering affective dimensions of students' HE experiences, including anxiety, self-doubt, resilience, and changing self-conceptions (Dias & Sá, 2014; McMillan, 2014; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). These three dimensions were often interdependent: academic struggles could trigger emotional stress; social integration could support learning; and emotional well-being shaped students' responses to academic and social demands (Kahu et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2004). By attending to the interplay between the three aspects, this framework enables a holistic understanding of homeschooled students' HE transition experiences.

Overall, this study applies Gravett's (2019) framework of transition as troublesome, rhizomatic, and becoming, while incorporating student agency in transition to offer inclusive and nuanced insights into Chinese homeschooled students' HE transition experiences. The academic, social, and emotional dimensions of transition are used to structure key findings and inform the following discussions on existing empirical studies.

2.3 Existing Empirical Studies on Transition in HE

2.3.1 Common Transitional Issues in HE

The transition to HE is widely recognised in academic literature as both a critical step in students' ongoing academic development and a particularly challenging phase (Briggs et al., 2012; Coertjens et al., 2017). The transition into HE is marked by a range of interrelated academic, social, and emotional challenges (Snyder, 2021). Most of the studies focused on the transition phase for first-year undergraduate students. Thompson et al. (2021) explored the experiences of psychology undergraduates in England and identified three dominant themes: the challenges of independent learning, the demands of independent living, and the dual role of peer groups as both sources of support and pressure. Similarly, Cameron and Rideout (2020) found that many first-year students were unprepared for the self-directed nature of university study. Although students gradually developed autonomy, by the end of their first year, many were still navigating how to be effective learners. This is echoed by Worsley et al. (2021), who emphasised students' struggles to adjust to independent living, especially for those leaving home

for the first time. Several participants experienced a stark contrast between their idealised expectations of university life and its more demanding reality, often characterised by feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and academic anxiety.

Other studies highlighted that the transition to HE is not merely academic but deeply embedded in broader changes to identity, routine, and social context. The shift from often structured secondary education to self-regulated and usually isolating environment of HE required multi-dimensional adjustment, which made institutional support, particularly in mental health, peer engagement, and academic skills, vital to student college success (Buckley et al., 2021; Li & Lee, 2024; Thompson et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2021).

As the current study focuses on Chinese homeschooled students, many of whom pursued HE as international students, the following sections present a dedicated review of relevant empirical studies on Chinese international student groups.

Common Transitional Issues for (Chinese) International Students

Chinese international students often face greater transitional challenges in HE than their domestic peers, particularly due to language barriers and cultural differences. Academically, several studies demonstrated that Chinese students often struggled with shifting from Confucian-influenced educational norms to Western pedagogies, including unfamiliar teaching styles, critical thinking, independent learning, and differing teacher-student relationships (Ching et al., 2017; Holliman et al., 2024; Huang, 2012; Wu & Hammond, 2011; Zhao, 2021). These mismatches could result in "learning shock" and psychological distress, such as anxiety and confusion (Tian & Lowe, 2012). Language proficiency, usually English, also played a critical role, influencing students' ability to comprehend lectures, engage with reading materials, and contribute during class (Zhang & Mi, 2009; Ching et al., 2017).

Moreover, for Chinese international students, the social adjustment during transition was often hindered by language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, and limited interaction with host nationals (Cena et al., 2021; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). Common barriers

included insufficient language proficiency (Kwon, 2013), experiences of discrimination and linguistic racism (Dovchin, 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2019), and local students' reluctance to engage outside existing social circles (Wang & Hannes, 2014). Consequently, many students turned to co-national peers for emotional and cultural support, which could provide comfort but might also limit broader social integration.

Mulyadi et al. (2024) highlighted the psychological toll of transition on international students, including culture shock symptoms, such as homesickness, anxiety, and identity confusion, often caused by dissonance between cultural expectations and the host environment, affecting academic engagement and well-being. While institutional support could ease these challenges, it is frequently inadequate or hidden (Alasmari, 2023; Lynch et al., 2023). In this context, transitions are shaped by cultural, institutional, and linguistic factors. For Chinese homeschooled students who also study abroad, this process might be further complicated by their dual identity, intensifying transitional challenges.

2.3.2 Existing Studies on HE Transition of Homeschooled Students

While homeschooled students might encounter common transitional issues, existing empirical studies on their HE transition experiences were predominantly qualitative and US-based. Although not all studies explicitly used the term "transition", they referred instead to related concepts such as "integration", "adaptation", or "adjustment", with greater success in adjustment or adaptation often associated with smoother transitions or integration into HE (Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Despite differing terminology, these concepts generally involve similar processes engaging academic, social, or emotional/psychological transformations. Therefore, those studies were also included in this review for their valuable insights into homeschooled students' transition into HE.

Academic Transition of Homeschooled Students in HE

Academic adjustment is a key aspect of the transition to HE, involving students' ability to meet new academic demands and develop appropriate learning strategies (Lan et al.,

2024; Coertjens et al., 2017; Vermunt, 2005). This includes adapting to greater workloads, independent study, and more complex assessment methods (Lan et al., 2024). Non-cognitive factors such as self-efficacy and self-regulation have been shown to support successful academic adjustment (Lin et al., 2023). These facets were particularly pertinent for homeschooled students, whose prior learning environments often emphasise independent thinking and self-paced learning (Salvo, 2018; Thomas, 2018).

Research consistently show that homeschooled students tended to enter HE with strong self-directed learning skills, intrinsic motivation, time management abilities (Crouch, 2024; Thomas, 2018; Johnson, 2021; Malavé, 2025), and help-seeking behaviours (Crouch, 2024), all of which facilitated their academic transition. Bolle et al. (2007) found that homeschooled students generally felt academically well-prepared, particularly regarding self-discipline and time management, although some encountered challenges with meeting deadlines, writing expectations, or collaborative tasks. Some research also suggested homeschooled students perform as well as or better than their peers on standardised tests and early college outcomes (Cogan, 2010; Ray, 2010; Rudner, 1999). However, outcomes varied depending on the structure and philosophy of homeschooling, which range from rigid curricula to unschooling models (Sheng, 2014; Gray & Riley, 2013; Gaither, 2009). For instance, homeschooled students also encountered challenges, including adapting to unfamiliar classroom norms, such as structured lectures and group work (Bolle et al., 2007). While some homeschooled students thrived in HE due to their self-regulated learning skills, others struggle with institutional demands, especially if their prior learning environments were unstructured (Bolle et al., 2007; Smiley, 2010).

In addition, academic adjustment was shaped by both personal competencies and the alignment between past learning environments and current institutional expectations (Bennett et al., 2018; Lubienski et al., 2013; Jansen & van der Meer, 2012). The higher the alignment, the smoother the transition was likely to be. For homeschooled students, their adjustment during transition into HE might rely heavily on their previous educational style as well as skills and competencies developed during homeschooling (Lubienski et al., 2013; Jansen & van der Meer, 2012).

Social Transition of Homeschooled Students in HE

Social transition in HE involves adapting to new environments, forming peer relationships, developing a sense of belonging, and participating in campus communities (Durkin, 1995; Wilcox et al., 2005). While traditionally schooled students often relied on familiar social scripts and shared schooling norms, homeschooled students' social integration varied, shaped by prior socialisation experiences, parental facilitation, and personal disposition (Durkin, 1995; Wilcox et al., 2005). Research showed many homeschooled students transition socially as well as, or better than, their peers. For instance, Saunders (2009) found that homeschooled students at Wheaton College reported strong communal and institutional connections, predicting social integration and persistence. Bolle et al. (2007) also found that, despite initial loneliness, identity development, and cultural adjustment, most first-year homeschooled undergraduates developed friendships and benefited from institutional support such as student organisations.

Mandel's (2023) case study of homeschooled students in Romania offered an important international perspective outside the US. These students, educated via flexible American and Hungarian curricula, transitioned successfully into universities across Europe and Israel. It highlighted homeschooled students' adaptability and social maturity in diverse university contexts. Sutton and Galloway (2000) reported active extracurricular involvement among homeschooled students, while Hamlin and Cheng (2022) stressed individual variation among them, influenced by personality, family values, and socio-religious context. However, Murphy (2014) cautioned that broader civic and social outcomes of homeschooling remain underexplored in rigorous, long-term studies.

Doctoral dissertations provided further insights. Johnson (2021) and Salvo (2018), using Tinto's Student Integration Model, found that homeschooled students overcame early challenges through strong communication skills, intrinsic motivation, independence, and family support. Both Salvo (2018) and Bolle et al. (2007) also noted initial struggles with peer group dynamics and stereotypes among homeschooled students, however, they ultimately built meaningful relationships with peers in universities. Furthermore, social identity also shaped homeschooled students' transition.

St. Aude (2020) and Sky Lark (2014) observed that strong familial and cultural support fostered a secure sense of identity among African American homeschooled students, which in turn supported their ability to navigate social environments within predominantly white institutions. While some participants encountered challenges in peer interactions due to differences in cultural background or educational experience, many adapted successfully through self-awareness and intentional efforts to engage socially.

Other studies emphasised active social participation. Thomas (2018) and Malavé (2025) found that homeschooled students' active involvement in campus groups, leadership roles, and community service fostered meaningful friendships building, peer connections, and personal growth. Snyder (2021) reported that while faculty initially perceived homeschooled students as shy, they often displayed strong interpersonal adaptability, respect for professors, and comfort in seeking help, possibly linked to some students' familiarity with close interaction with teachers or parents in teaching roles during homeschooling. Many students also balanced academic foci with selective but meaningful social engagement.

Emotional/Psychological Transition of Homeschooled Students in HE

Several doctoral dissertations highlighted resilience among homeschooled students during their transition to HE. Salvo (2018) found that homeschooled students demonstrated strong resilience to overcome academic and social challenges in HE by drawing on self-confidence, family support, and independent learning skills. Similarly, Thomas (2018) and Johnson (2021) reported that resilience via strong intrinsic motivation, adaptability, as well as community and family support enabled homeschooled students to navigate initial social challenges and structured academic environments while maintaining a sustained passion for learning. In addition, Malavé (2025) emphasised that resilience was a proactive trait cultivated during homeschooling, supported by self-discipline and problem-solving skills, aiding homeschooled students toward successful social integration and campus involvement. Riley's (2012) dissertation quantitatively compared the psychological needs satisfaction of 99 young adults (58 homeschooled, 41 traditionally schooled), finding that homeschooling might

better support intrinsic motivation by fostering a greater sense of personal efficacy and decision-making freedom.

Research also showed the interplay of resilience and emotion regulation in the transition process. Mandel's (2023) study further revealed homeschooled students' academic adaptability, vocational intentionality, and social thriving among peers sharing similar values, countering stereotypes about social barriers. Psychological studies underlined the importance of emotional intelligence, adaptability, stress management, and coping strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, in buffering transitional stress (Parker et al., 2004; Mastrokoukou et al., 2024; Mouatsou & Koutra, 2023; Teixeira et al., 2022). Guterman and Rodriguez (2024) suggested that homeschooling fosters environments conducive to optimism, autonomy, and well-being, although persistence of these traits in HE remains underexplored. However, Drenovsky and Cohen (2012) found no significant self-esteem differences but noted lower depression and higher academic satisfaction among homeschooled students compared to traditionally educated students.

Homeschooled students, in particular, demonstrated resilience, defined as the capacity to cope effectively and adapt positively under stress and challenges (Wu et al., 2013), which supported their successful adjustment during transition. Researchers increasingly recognised that students' emotional and psychological well-being is deeply connected to their academic and social success in HE (Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Pekrun & Stephens, 2012). Verkuyten et al. (2019) found that academic success is closely linked to a sense of belonging, positive self-esteem, and a perceived sense of control over one's surroundings. In addition, homeschooled students might initially experience self-doubt, isolation, and stress when negotiating unfamiliar environments and encountering stereotypes, but peers and extracurricular communities could be an important source of emotional support (Bolle et al., 2007; Cameron & Rideout, 2020; Worsley et al., 2021). Therefore, the emotional experience is largely influenced by the academic and social dimensions, and they are mutually dependent.

2.4 Summary and Research Gap

This literature review examined existing studies on homeschooled students' transitions into HE, conceptualisations of transition in HE, and the study's theoretical frameworks.

Key gaps were identified: most existing studies were US-based and focused on faith-based HEIs; there is currently no published research that directly explore Chinese homeschooled students' transitions into HE; and most adopted a "transition as induction" (T1) perspective, often using qualitative methods, including interviews and narrative inquiry, and Tinto's Integration Theory (e.g. Bolle et al., 2007; Johnson, 2021; Saunders, 2009; Salvo, 2018), which largely stands the T1 perspective. To address these gaps, this study adopts the "transition as becoming" (T3) lens and Gravett's (2019) framework, emphasising student agency and the fluid, situated, and individualised nature of transitions. It also incorporates creative methods alongside interviews to obtain richer insights into the experiences of Chinese homeschooled students, which will be explained in the following chapter, and contribute conceptually and empirically to both the literature on homeschooled students and transition research.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the philosophical stance and research design of the current study, provides demographic information about the participants, and details the processes of data collection and analysis. It also addresses trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the methodological challenges and limitations of this study.

3.1 Research Philosophy and Paradigm

The research philosophy of this study is underpinned by an interpretivist approach, which views individuals as actively constructing and assigning meaning to their social world (Phothongsunan, 2010). Firstly, based on Khatri (2020), ontology is about "the nature of reality or existence" (p. 1436). In this research, the ontological position assumes that reality is multiple and constructed through individual experiences. Thus, the HE transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students are understood as subjective, diverse, and shaped by individual educational trajectories and influential factors in academic, social, and emotional experiences. Secondly, epistemology is "concerned with how humans can come to know and understand those things" (Potter, 2017, p. 1). According to this definition, an interpretivist epistemological stance is adopted in this study, highlighting that knowledge is subjective and emerges through understanding individuals' life experiences (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This interpretivist stance suits this study by enabling the exploration of Chinese homeschooled students' lived experiences via their narratives, reflecting the belief in multiple subjective realities and a co-constructed understanding of knowledge (Khatri, 2020; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Moreover, epistemology informs the theoretical perspective that guides the research methodology, which serves as the overall strategy or plan of action for conducting the research (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Thirdly, the axiology relates to values and "the nature of ethical behaviour" (Killam, 2013, p. 6). The study is guided by an axiological stance that values participants' subjective meanings and centres their voices throughout the research process. These three foundational components of research philosophy are interconnected and aligned, collectively shaping the decision-making process of the subsequent research design.

3.2 Researcher's Positionality

Positionality refers to the researcher's personal background, with particular emphasis on the contextual factors that shape the researcher's identity, which influence how they perceive and interpret the social world (Bukamal, 2022). Continuous attention and reflection upon the researcher's positionality have a significant impact on the research process, including research design and later interpretations of findings (Bukamal, 2022; Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014; Folkes, 2022).

In this research, I adopt a dual positionality as both an insider and an outsider. On the one hand, as an insider, my background, such as race, culture, and educational experience, provides lived familiarity and prior knowledge of the community being researched (Holmes, 2020). I am Chinese, and I have experienced traditional and micro-school modes of homeschooling in mainland China since I was six, because of my parents' educational philosophies. I was deeply rooted and grew up in this unconventional, tiny community until I entered HE. Furthermore, I entered a Chinese university at the age of sixteen but later withdrew, subsequently completing A-level examinations and pursuing undergraduate studies in the UK. As such, I share the identity with many of my participants as being an international HE student having homeschooled experience in China. My familiarity with the researched community and research context informs the totality of the research process, including the framing of research questions, gaining participant access, rapport-building before and during data collection, as well as conducting analysis (Bourke, 2014; Holmes, 2020).

On the other hand, important differences exist between me and the participants, including variations in family socioeconomic status, personality, academic disciplines, and the locations where HE was undertaken. Also, differences in educational trajectories, in the stages at which individuals engaged in homeschooling, and in the forms of homeschooling further contribute to the diversity of our perspectives and experiences. These variations create an extent of objective space for more critical interpretation and reflection on the research context and findings (Musgrave, 2024; Yip, 2023). Therefore, in this study, I adopt dual identities as insider and outsider

simultaneously. The dual positioning presents both advantages and challenges, each of which shapes the research design and overall process (Parson, 2019).

3.3 Research Design

The research design aims to offer an appropriate and coherent framework for a study (Creswell, 2014). Although this study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design with an inductive approach, it is theoretically informed by sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954; Charmaz, 2006) related to academic, social, and emotional transitions, which shaped the interview design while allowing participants' voices to guide the analysis. Specifically, it uses a multiple individual case study design. The qualitative case study is a research strategy that involves an in-depth, contextual exploration of a single, clearly bounded unit, such as an individual or community. (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021; Denscombe, 1998). Case studies are characterised by methodological flexibility, depth of investigation, attention to development over time, and contextual embeddedness (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

In this study, the selection of this design is determined by several key considerations. Firstly, the case study design aligns with the study's ontological and epistemological stance by enabling an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of participants' perspectives. This is consistent with the interpretivist view that explores how reality is socially constructed and how people make sense of their experiences (Phothongsunan, 2010). Secondly, given the complex and context-dependent nature of homeschooling, the case study design offers the flexibility and depth needed to investigate how individual homeschooled students navigate and interpret their educational experiences. This approach is particularly effective for capturing the nuanced, subjective meanings attached to homeschooled individuals (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Thirdly, the case study design is proper for studying the small and often hard-to-reach homeschooling community (Yin, 2011), especially considering that homeschoolers typically come from varied backgrounds and follow highly individualised educational pathways. This design allows for a focused exploration of their unique experiences while accommodating the challenges of recruiting from a small and dispersed population.

Based on the above considerations, this study concentrates on a small number of participants and adopts an in-depth, multiple-methods approach to data collection, incorporating semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and creative methods (Phothongsunan, 2010), such as educational trajectory drawings and participants' previously written diaries, to obtain deeper insights into participants' authentic perspectives and their transition experiences into HE. Thematic analysis is employed in qualitative data analysis and interpretation to examine the research questions.

3.4 Participants

Participants were recruited via a combination of social media outreach and snowball sampling. The researcher initially posted a recruitment notice on *Little Red Book* (*Xiao Hong Shu*), a popular lifestyle-oriented social media platform widely used by young adults in China. The post briefly introduced the study and me as the researcher, outlined the criteria for participation, and invited homeschooled students who were either currently enrolled in or had recently graduated from HE to participate in the research. In addition, the researcher also adopted snowball sampling, using social networks to build initial connections with participants, and invited participants to recommend others who might be interested in the study (Parker et al., 2019).

Snowball sampling proved particularly effective for this study in reaching the desired number and profile of participants (Emerson, 2015), as it enabled the researcher to access hard-to-reach homeschooled individuals through trusted personal networks. Recruiting participants was challenging due to the very small size of the Chinese homeschooling community, its dispersed and hard-to-reach nature, and the sensitivity of this topic deemed by some potential participants. The researcher contacted significantly more individuals than were ultimately included in the study. Some declined to participate because of privacy concerns or uncertainty regarding the implications of discussing homeschooling, a practice that remains legally and socially ambiguous in the Chinese context. Others initially expressed interest, such as through responses to the *Little Red Book* post, but later withdrew or ceased communication after initial contact was established.

After sustained efforts for one month, fourteen participants were recruited, with the demographic information summarised in Table 5. These participants' locations of undergraduate studies spanned eight countries. Participants had two types of homeschooling experiences. Three were exclusively homeschooled on an individual basis, while the others attended micro-schooling settings. Additionally, some participants experienced both forms at different stages of their education.

Gathering complete information about participants' homeschooling environment was challenging, especially as some participants had experienced as many as seven different micro-school settings. However, through detailed descriptions from participants, the researcher was able to gain rich insights into their learning environments and educational styles. More information about the homeschooling environment was included in Chapter 4.

All participants had at least three years of homeschooling experience and were either currently enrolled at a university or had graduated within the past three years. To protect participants' identities, all names used in this study are pseudonyms. Each pseudonym was created by combining the first half of their family name and the second half of the participants' given name, ensuring anonymity while maintaining a degree of personal authenticity.

Table 5: *Demographic information of participants*

Participant Name	Gender (M/F)	Length of Homeschooling (Years)	Individual/Micro-school Mode of Homeschooling	Current Status	Major	Location of Undergraduate Study
Huan	M	3	Micro-school	Foundation Year for Undergraduate Studies	Portuguese	Mainland China
Lang	M	3	Micro-school	Graduated from Undergraduate Degree for 3 Years	Environmental Design	Mainland China
Lun	M	3	Micro-school	Year 1 Undergraduate	Business	Malaysia
Tin	F	3	Micro-school	Graduated for 2 years	Sociology & International Relationships	USA
Zhang	M	3	Micro-school	Graduated from Undergraduate Degree for 1 Year	Animation Design	Japan
Zheng	F	3	Micro-school	Year 2 Undergraduate	Health	Australia

Pong	M	4	Individual	Year 1 Masters	Comparative Literature	Macau
Xu	F	4	Micro-school	Year 2 Undergraduate	Psychology Counselling	Malaysia
Yu	M	4	Micro-school	Year 1 Undergraduate	Economics	Czechia
Zhan	F	6	Individual	Year 3 Undergraduate	Economics	Mainland China
Yue	F	9	Micro-school & Individual	Year 1 Undergraduate	Finance	Thailand
Zhao	M	9	Micro-school	Year 1 Masters	Education	Hong Kong
Zhi	F	9	Individual	Year 1 Masters	History & Archaeology	Canada
Chi	M	15.5	Micro-school & Individual	Year 1 Undergraduate	Business Analysis	Malaysia

3.5 Data Collection

Data collection took place online via Microsoft Teams between mid-May and early June 2025. Given that participants were spread across eight countries, online interviews offered a practical solution and enabled automatic transcription. Participants shared their drawings and diaries through WeChat. All communication, including interviews and materials sharing, was conducted in Mandarin to ensure more authentic and effective interaction. Each participant engaged in the process for an average of 1.7 hours via two to three types of data collection activities (see Table 6). Before each interview, the researcher engaged informally with participants for about a week to build trust and gain a deeper understanding of their backgrounds and personalities.

Table 6: *Data collection sections*

Sections	Activities	Average Length of Time
1	Self-introduction & Educational Trajectory Drawing	30 mins
2	Semi-structured Interview	60-120 mins
3	Diaries Sharing (Optional)	30 mins

3.5.1 Self-introduction & Educational Trajectory Drawing

Before the semi-structured interviews, participants were first invited to introduce themselves, facilitating mutual familiarity and providing key demographic information. They were then asked to draw a timeline illustrating different stages through their educational journeys, either digitally on tablets or by hand on paper; participants sent them to the researcher by screenshot or photograph.

This drawing activity was designed for several reasons. First, timelining is especially useful for examining sensitive or complex topics and is appropriate for homeschooled students, who's diverse and scattered educational experiences might be difficult to express verbally (Marshall, 2019). Second, it provides a visual aid that anchors the interview and helps focus participants on key elements (Baú, 2024). Third, educational trajectories emerge and develop differently, shaped by decision-making processes involving various actors and contexts—an approach

grounded in a life course perspective (Cuconato & Walther, 2015). This aligns with the "transition as becoming" perspective while providing nuanced, contextualised accounts of students' journeys into, through, and beyond HE (Baker & Irwin, 2019). To support this, a drawing prompt was provided (see Appendix E). Participants' explanations of their drawings were recorded to provide contextual depth, which is essential before moving to more abstract, reflective, and deeper questions. Examples of participants' drawings were included in Appendix E. The researcher also generated a composite graph to showcase all participants' educational trajectories in Chapter 4.

3.5.2 Semi-structured Interview

Interviews served as the primary data collection method in this study, which is broadly used and recognised as a fundamental protocol in qualitative research (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hopf, 2004). The interviews were organised in a semi-structured format, featuring a series of predetermined but open-ended interview questions (Brinkmann, 2014). These questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' transition experiences in university, while also allowing for spontaneous discussion of emerging themes. This format could allow researchers to maintain focus on relevant topics while retaining flexibility in how the conversation unfolds (Ruslin et al., 2022). In addition, semi-structured interviews were coupled with follow-up questions and probes to provide an opportunity to clarify, explore certain topics in depth, and develop new topics (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022; Robinson, 2023). This is consistent with the study's epistemological position, to obtain in-depth information pertaining to participants' experiences and viewpoints of their university transition experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview protocol was attached in Appendix D.

As part of interview preparation, two pilot interviews were conducted, one with a participant and one with a colleague who is also an international student and researcher. The aim was to identify flaws or weaknesses in the interview design and refine interview questions before formal data collection (Kvale, 2007). The pilot interview with the participant was included in the final dataset without being repeated. Although the colleague lacked homeschooling experience, their input helped assess the clarity and academic rigour of the questions. These two pilot interviews led to minor adjustments, including rephrasing leading questions, improving logical flow, and adding new questions to the interview protocol.

3.5.3 Diaries Sharing

Interviews can be supplemented with other data sources to enrich the understanding of participants' experiences and information gathering (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Diary writing has become a common way for individuals to document and reflect on personal experiences and broader societal events (Hyers, 2018). In this study, participants were invited to share diaries that were written during their transition or that could illustrate their transition to university life. With this method, diaries served as a rich source of first-hand testimony on many subjects and a powerful tool for personal self-expression (Hyers, 2018). This activity was entirely optional, as not all participants were willing or had a diary-keeping habit. Ultimately, four participants provided their past written diaries in paper or digital form. Verbal consent was obtained from each participant for the use of diary content in the study.

3.6 Data Analysis

After completing data collection, the researcher downloaded the interview transcripts, re-listened to the recordings, and corrected any errors caused by technical issues or audio instability. To minimise misunderstandings and ensure accuracy, both data collection and analysis were conducted in Chinese for greater clarity and convenience. The contents used in the study were translated into English by the researcher for the presentation requirements.

The focus of data analysis was the interview data, utilising thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns of meaning within the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2014). This widely used method helps to reduce the volume of raw qualitative data and distil complex qualitative data into easier-to-understand and accessible themes relevant to the research topic (Rivas, 2012). It also allows for the comparison of participants' diverse experiences and perspectives across data collected in various contexts and at different times (Alhojailan, 2012).

The thematic analysis process involved six key stages: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The initial coding phrase, often referred to

as open coding, involves assigning labels that capture the literal meaning of data segments (Rivas, 2012). As this stage typically produces a large number of codes, containing repetitions or seemingly unrelated elements, it becomes crucial in later phases to consolidate and categorise these codes into coherent themes (Rivas, 2012). Thus, thematic analysis seeks to highlight the most meaningful patterns of experience and interpretation reflected in the participants' narratives (Joffe, 2012).

The researcher manually conducted the coding using pen-and-paper and Excel spreadsheets. Interview transcripts were printed, and initial codes were highlighted with different colours to distinguish emerging ideas. These codes and their corresponding original texts were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet, organised around research questions and developed into overarching themes. A sample coding map was attached in Appendix F. Ultimately, the researcher identified and named several overarching themes, such as "academic transitional challenges," "social transitional challenges," and "emotional transitional challenges."

Moreover, educational trajectory drawings served as a contextual tool, offering an overview of each participant's educational background. Diaries were utilised to supplement and enrich the emerging themes. In addition, elements of autoethnography were incorporated into the data analysis, engaging self-reflection, qualitative inquiry, and meaning-making within and beyond the data (Chang, 2008). This strategy resonates with the dialectical view of life course and personal histories, highlighting how self-narratives, situated within institutional contexts, reflect the dynamic interplay between structure and agency, and exemplify biographicity, the capacity to critically reflect on one's identity and past experiences (Cuconato & Walther, 2015; Ellis et al., 2011).

3.7 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study is critically assessed through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability, qualitative equivalents to traditional quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability. This well-recognised framework helps to evaluate the rigour and quality of qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility concerns the accurate interpretation and presentation of data and participants' views (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023). To improve credibility, the researcher engaged with participants

informally for a week before formal data collection, building rapport and contextual understanding (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Data triangulation was also employed by combining creative methods, thus incorporating multiple data sources (Abdalla et al., 2018). Thick descriptions of methodology and participant quotes added rich, contextual detail and supported the findings' authenticity and transparency (Nowell et al., 2017).

Transferability, while not the primary aim, was supported via rich, contextualised accounts of Chinese homeschooled students' transitions into HE. Detailed descriptions of the research setting, data sources, and participant demographic information allow readers to make informed, context-sensitive judgments about the applicability of findings in other contexts (Drisko, 2024; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability refers to the consistency of findings over time (Bitsch, 2005). To establish dependability, an audit trail was maintained, documenting how data were gathered, recorded, and analysed, allowing all methodological decisions could be traced and validated (Bowen, 2009; Li, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher also included reflexive positionality and detailed records of data sources, data collection and analysis processes, to offer both critical self-reflection and methodological transparency. This approach helps ensure that the research process and findings are coherent, credible, and trustworthy.

Confirmability ensures that findings are grounded in data rather than researcher bias (Tobin & Begley, 2004). It was reinforced through the clear explanation of theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices, illustrating how and why decisions were made (Koch, 1994). When credibility, transferability, and dependability are improved, confirmability is also strengthened (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

3.8 Ethics

This research adhered to the ethical guidelines for educational research by the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2024) and was granted ethical approval from the University of Oxford's Central Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) (see Appendix A). Before data collection, all participants received a participant information sheet (Appendix C) detailing the purpose and scope of the study, with a consent form (Appendix B) confirming their agreement to voluntary participation. Because homeschooled families are not a large group in China,

anonymity and confidentiality are paramount in this study. Firstly, participants' names were anonymised, and pseudonyms were employed. Secondly, any information that could identify them, including the names of universities, was not shown to ensure confidentiality. Also, all photographs of additional material, recorded audio files and transcripts were securely stored in my OneDrive Nexus 365 account at the University of Oxford, password-protected and backed up daily to ensure data integrity and security. Only the researcher and the supervisor have access to the research data.

3.9 Challenges and Limitations

This study faces three main limitations. First, the dominant use of snowball sampling might raise concerns regarding the limited diversity of the participant pool and the potential influence of researcher bias in participant selection. In China, homeschooling is a sensitive topic; homeschooled students attending university might be hesitant to expose themselves to potential risk. This was evident during the participant recruitment process, when the researcher attempted to build rapport but was unsuccessful. Second, despite efforts to explore a range of experiences, it remains challenging to capture the full picture of homeschooled students' transition experiences and the nuanced variations between individuals—particularly given the 20,000-word limit of the dissertation. Third, some of the participants had graduated between one and three years ago, which means that their recollections about their educational trajectories and transitions into HE might be affected by memory distortion (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008), potentially influencing the authenticity and accuracy of the data.

Chapter 4 Stepping Out, Stepping Back: Educational Paths of Homeschooled Students

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the participants' educational trajectories and addresses *RQ 1: Why did Chinese homeschooled students leave and return to the mainstream education pathway?* It also explores their motivations for studying abroad, as well as the factors influencing their choices of destination and academic major.

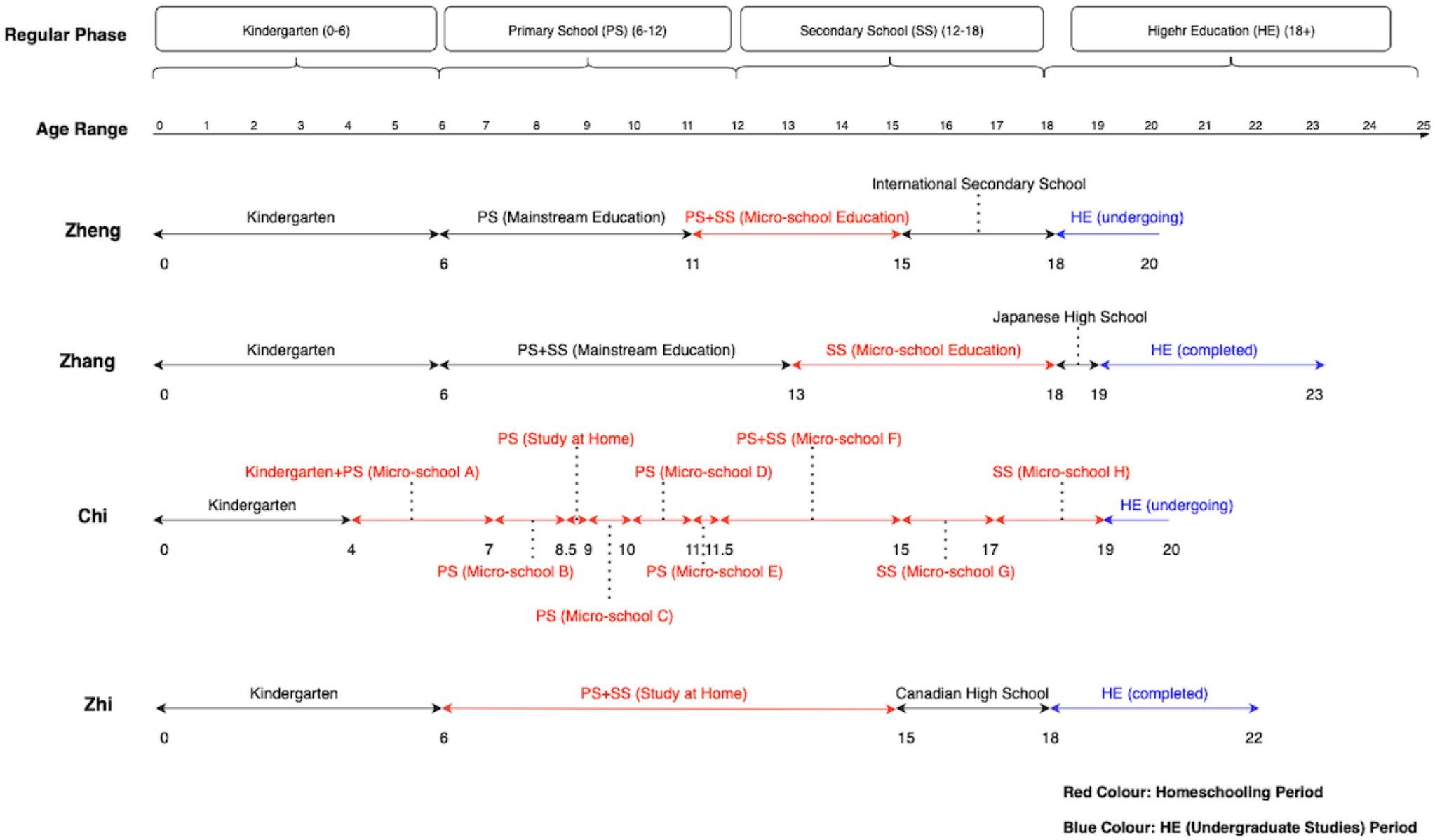
4.1 Participants' Educational Trajectories

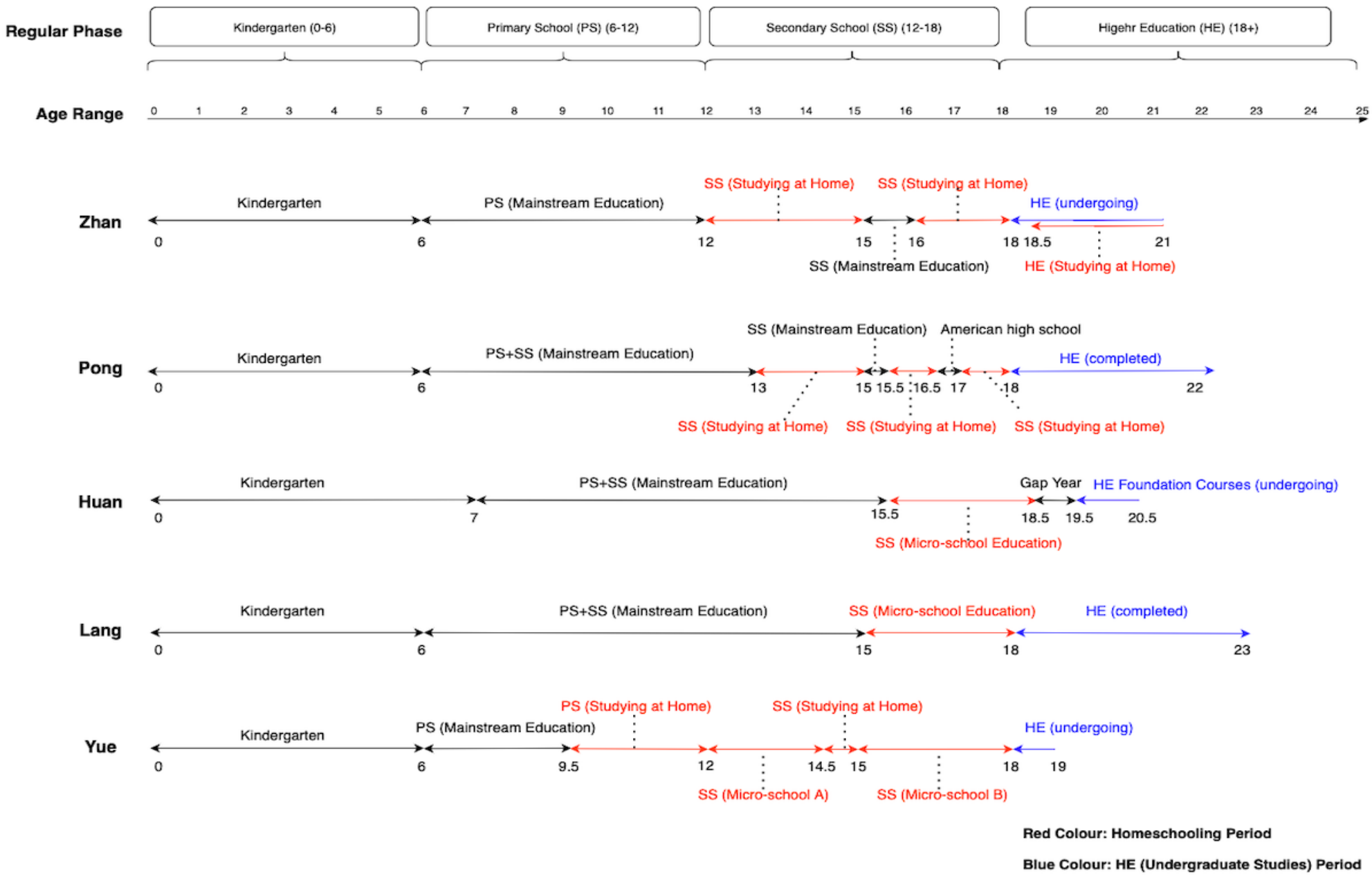
During interviews, participants were asked to draw a timeline illustrating their educational trajectories across different age stages. Based on these participant-generated timelines, I developed a parallel overview of each participant's educational trajectory (see Figure 7), highlighting the diversity of their pathways and key transitional moments from kindergarten through to HE. The figure reveals that most of the participants followed highly varied educational routes before entering HE. Among them, Chi stands out for having experienced the most transitions, nine in total, including homeschooling at home and in micro-school settings, since the age of four.

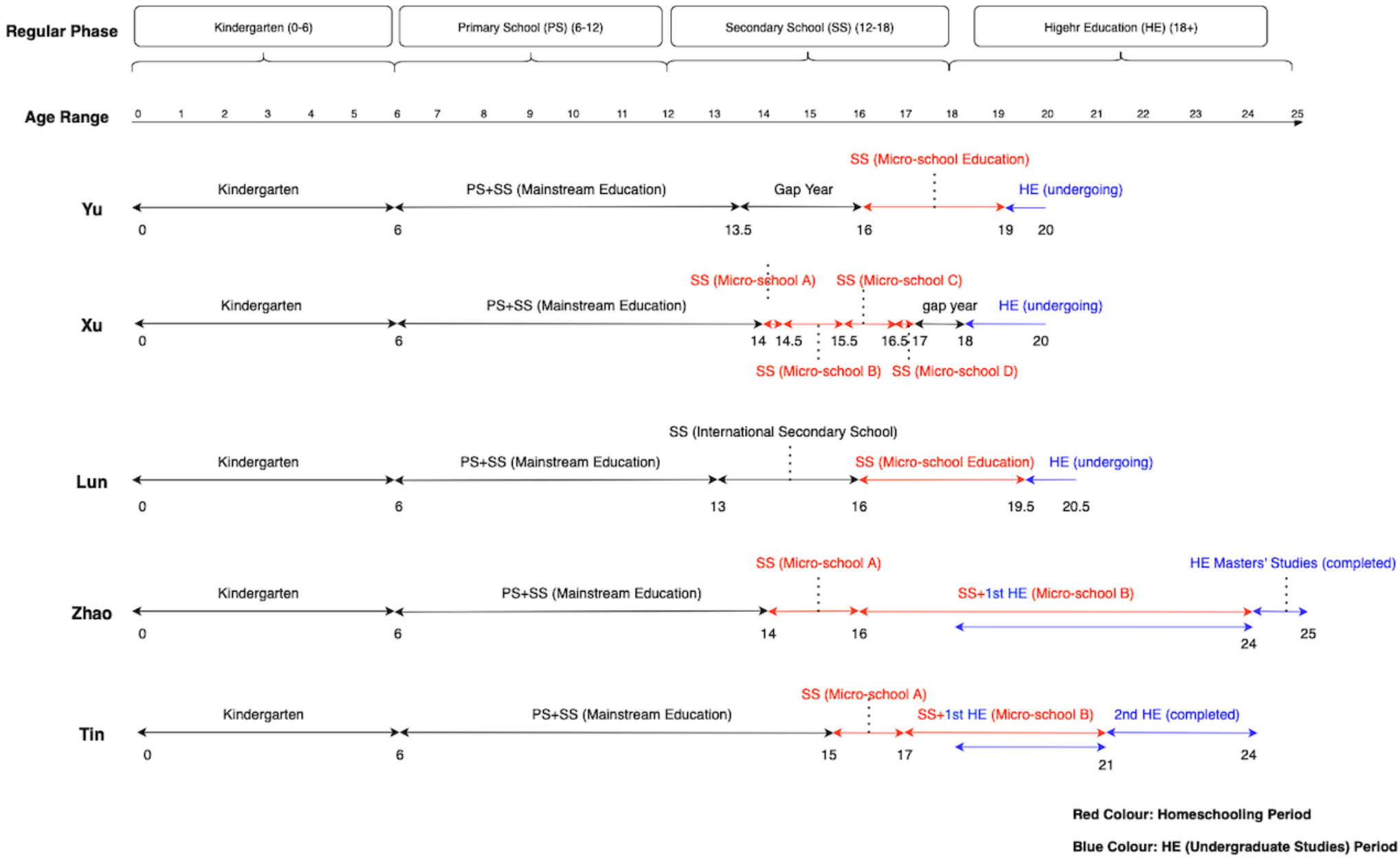
Notably, three participants—Zhao, Tin, and Zhan—continued homeschooling during their undergraduate studies. Zhao and Tin pursued the Self-Taught Higher Education Examination (STE) (*da xue zi kao*, 大学自考) in China, which is an open-access system that enables individuals to pursue HE through self-directed study and national examinations, providing a flexible alternative for those outside the traditional university system (Gao, 2002). Zhao successfully obtained an undergraduate degree via STE, later entered a university in Hong Kong for postgraduate study and is now about to graduate. Tin completed an undergraduate degree through STE but subsequently chose to re-enrol in undergraduate studies in the US. Zhan was officially enrolled in a Chinese HEI but did not attend classes; instead, she only sat for final exams.

Some participants also attended international secondary schools in China (Lun, Zheng) or completed part of their secondary education abroad (Pong, Zhang, Zhi). Of the fourteen participants, nine entered HE directly from a homeschooling context.

Figure 7: *The educational trajectories of participants*




Regular Phase
Kindergarten (0-6)
Primary School (PS) (6-12)
Secondary School (SS) (12-18)
Higehr Education (HE) (18+)
Age Range
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25
Zhan
Kindergarten
PS (Mainstream Education)
SS (Studying at Home)
SS (Studying at Home)
HE (undergoing)
0 6 12 15 16 18 18.5 21
SS (Mainstream Education)
HE (Studying at Home)
Pong
Kindergarten
PS+SS (Mainstream Education)
SS (Mainstream Education)
American high school
HE (completed)
0 6 13 15 15.5 16.5 17 18 22
SS (Studying at Home)
SS (Studying at Home)
SS (Studying at Home)
Huan
Kindergarten
PS+SS (Mainstream Education)
Gap Year
HE Foundation Courses (undergoing)
0 7 15.5 18.5 19.5 20.5
SS (Micro-school Education)
Lang
Kindergarten
PS+SS (Mainstream Education)
SS (Micro-school Education)
HE (completed)
0 6 15 18 23
Yue
Kindergarten
PS (Mainstream Education)
PS (Studying at Home)
SS (Studying at Home)
HE (undergoing)
0 6 9.5 12 14.5 15 18 19
SS (Micro-school A)
SS (Micro-school B)
Red Colour: Homeschooling Period
Blue Colour: HE (Undergraduate Studies) Period


Regular Phase
Kindergarten (0-6)
Primary School (PS) (6-12)
Secondary School (SS) (12-18)
Higehr Education (HE) (18+)
Age Range
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25
Yu
Kindergarten
PS+SS (Mainstream Education)
Gap Year
SS (Micro-school Education)
HE (undergoing)
0 6 13.5 16 19 20
Xu
Kindergarten
PS+SS (Mainstream Education)
SS (Micro-school A)
SS (Micro-school C)
gap year
HE (undergoing)
SS (Micro-school B)
SS (Micro-school D)
0 6 14 14.5 15.5 16.5 17 18 20
Lun
Kindergarten
PS+SS (Mainstream Education)
SS (International Secondary School)
SS (Micro-school Education)
HE (undergoing)
0 6 13 16 19.5 20.5
Zhao
Kindergarten
PS+SS (Mainstream Education)
SS (Micro-school A)
SS+1st HE (Micro-school B)
HE Masters' Studies (completed)
0 6 14 16 24 25
Tin
Kindergarten
PS+SS (Mainstream Education)
SS (Micro-school A)
SS+1st HE (Micro-school B)
2nd HE (completed)
0 6 15 17 21 24
Red Colour: Homeschooling Period
Blue Colour: HE (Undergraduate Studies) Period

4.2 Leaving Mainstream Education

During interviews, most participants identified *neijuan*, the intensifying competition for educational opportunities and employment in China (Wang, 2024), as the primary reason for withdrawing from mainstream education. In the context of *neijuan*, individuals are subjected to escalating academic pressure and perceive HE as the only viable route to upward mobility (Li, 2021). This finding is consistent with Sheng (2014), who observes that motivations for pursuing homeschooling often stem from broader concerns about the rigid and examination-oriented nature of conventional schooling. In addition to *neijuan*, participants also cited a range of other contributing factors, including school bullying, negative schooling experiences, unexpected health issues, parental divorce, and concerns about low teaching quality.

A finding in previous studies is the pivotal role parents play in the decision to pursue homeschooling in China (Sheng, 2015, 2017, 2019). This finding was largely echoed in the interviews. For example, Chi never entered mainstream education due to his parents' strong educational philosophy, and he continuously changed learning settings due to his parents' continued dissatisfaction with the way he was learning at the time. Furthermore, over half of the participants reported that their parents, particularly mothers, were initiators of the decision due to dissatisfaction with the pedagogical ideology and practices of mainstream schools. Instead, they sought more personalised, holistic, and less pressure-driven learning pathways for their children. The study of Sheng (2015) also supports this finding, who found that parents in Shanghai were primarily motivated to homeschool by disillusionment with the rigid, exam-oriented structure of mainstream education, and by a desire to provide an individualised learning environment rooted in Confucian values and cultural traditions.

However, students' willingness and autonomy in this decision to homeschool are often overlooked. In the current study, several participants emphasised their own role in shaping the decision. Zhao explained:

> *"I think the decision to be homeschooled was mostly because I didn't feel suited to the traditional education. So, my parents began helping me explore education outside the system."*

For Zhao, the choice to leave mainstream education stemmed primarily from his struggles, rather than a parental initiative. Similarly, Xu noted that while her mother held primary decision-making authority, she still sought Xu's consent, making it a joint decision. In contrast, Zhan chose to homeschool independently despite her parents' initial opposition. These accounts complicate the dominant narrative of parental control in homeschooling, particularly the concern that parents exert unilateral authority without oversight (West, 2009). Instead, the findings point to a more nuanced negotiation between parental influence and student autonomy. While parental authority explicitly played a decisive role in some cases, participants' own willingness and preferences also need to be noted in shaping this decision, which further shapes their subsequent educational trajectories.

Notably, all participants, whether homeschooled at home or in micro-school settings, described their learning environments as self-directed and driven by personal interests. Although some of these settings included teachers, their roles were largely supportive rather than directive, offering guidance only when participants actively sought it. As such, all the participants' educational experiences reflect a largely unstructured but student-centred form of homeschooling.

4.3 Returning to Mainstream HE

When asked what motivated their decision to enter HE full-time degree programmes, participants proposed three reasons for returning to this pathway: the pursuit of formal academic qualifications, a desire for broader exposure to the world, and common societal belief.

The majority of participants highlighted the importance of obtaining a recognised credential, particularly in the Chinese context, where formal university qualifications are often viewed as essential for employment and social mobility (Chan & Zhang, 2021; Mok et al., 2016). Participants expressed that securing a reputable, socially recognised qualification was necessary to gain a foothold in society and better employment opportunities. Lun described a mainstream HE degree as a "ticket to the mainstream society," emphasising its value in gaining social recognition. Similarly, Chi and Huan

highlighted the importance of qualifications for accessing future job opportunities. For Zhao and Tin, the limited recognition of STE credentials played a key role in their decisions to either pursue a full-time master's degree or to re-enrol in a full-time undergraduate programme in universities. Thus, credentialism, referring to the reliance on educational qualifications as the primary criterion for hiring or promotion decisions (Parr & Theofilopoulou, 2022), significantly affected participants' decisions to return to mainstream HE.

Beyond the pursuit of credentials, many participants expressed a strong desire to experience university life and to access the broader world. Yu and Lun stated that university represented more than a pathway to employment for them; it was also a meaningful space for intellectual growth, social connection, and exploration. As Lun put it, HE served as "a bridge to a bigger platform and more resources." Tin echoed this sentiment, stating:

> *"I wasn't simply looking for a diploma; I wanted to experience a more rounded undergraduate learning process, especially because I missed out on the mainstream school experience."*

This suggests that participants were not solely motivated by instrumental concerns such as job prospects, but also by intrinsic interests in experiencing university life and bridging to the broader world.

Furthermore, several participants reflected that they had internalised the widespread societal belief that attending university, preferably a prestigious one, is key to a successful future. This view was reinforced by peers, families, schools, and broader social messaging, illustrating how deeply credentialist ideology is embedded in society and how it shapes individual aspirations.

Therefore, participants' decisions to return to mainstream HE must be understood within the broader context of structurally embedded educational trajectories. Such transitions in educational paths are not simply the result of individual choice but are

shaped by complex interactions between personal autonomy and social structures (Cuconato et al., 2016; Cuconato & Walther, 2015). Based on these cases, while the decisions to return to mainstream HE appeared to be driven by personal preferences, they were nonetheless strongly influenced by structural factors such as labour market demands, prevailing societal expectations, and the limited recognition of alternative credentials.

4.4 Decisions for Studying Abroad

4.4.1 Motivations for Studying Abroad

A notable pattern among participants was the decision to pursue HE abroad. One frequently noted reason was the intense *neijuan* within China's domestic education system. Participants (e.g., Zheng, Huan, Yue) described it as excessively stressful and rigid. As Zheng stated:

> *"Competition among students in China is extremely intense, with a particularly severe degree of neijuan."*

This perception was further shaped by the exclusionary nature of the *gaokao*, China's highly competitive college entrance exam (Howlett, 2023). For many participants, studying abroad was seen as *run* (running away), a strategic escape from *neijuan*, gaining relief from the large pressures and competition within China's domestic environment while still having access to recognised HEIs (Huang, 2022). Participants like Tin and Yue noted that overseas HEIs, sometimes even more prestigious, were more accessible through alternative routes compared to China's domestic HEIs.

In addition to academic pressures, several participants (e.g., Lun, Pong, Yu) were driven by curiosity and a desire for international exposure. Others (e.g., Zhan, Huan), who remain in China, also expressed intentions to study abroad in the next step for similar reasons.

Moreover, structural barriers also played a role. The issue of *xueji* (学籍), or official student registration within China's education system, emerged as a factor causing the participants to study abroad. Most homeschooled students lacked *xueji*, which is a legal prerequisite for taking the *gaokao*, and therefore were excluded from domestic university admission (Yang, 2024). As a result, they view overseas study as their most possible route to HE.

In some cases, the goal of studying abroad was embedded in homeschooling from the start. Sheng (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019) also notes that this is especially common among middle-class, Western-educated mothers, particularly Christians and Confucians, who seek to align their children's education with traditional values and prepare them for HE abroad.

4.4.2 Destination and Major Choice

Participants' choice of study destination and academic major was determined by a complex interplay of personal interests, practical constraints, and structural conditions. Financial considerations played a central role in shaping participants' choices. Many opted for more affordable regions such as Southeast Asia (e.g. Chi, Yue, Xu, Lun), while others selected destinations based on academic specialisations (e.g., Tin, Zhang) or cultural familiarity (e.g., Pong, Zhao). However, international education was not an option at all due to financial constraints for some participants (e.g., Lang), who was also the only participant with a religious background, identifying as Buddhist. These diverse circumstances demonstrate that homeschooled students do not share uniform (affluent or religious) backgrounds, challenging the stereotype that they all belong to a single privileged class or background.

Furthermore, major choices similarly reflected a balance between passion, perceived employability, and academic strengths. For example, Lun explained that the reason for majoring in business was that he was not interested in the arts or social sciences and struggled with mathematics, which he perceived as a result of his lack of "systematic training" from traditional schooling. Business seemed more practical and offered better employment prospects.

Summary: A Continuously Negotiated Trajectory

This chapter examined the educational trajectories of homeschooled students across three key transitions: leaving mainstream education, re-entering mainstream HE, and pursuing study abroad. These paths emerged from ongoing negotiations between student autonomy, parental authority, and structural forces. While *neijuan* and parental dissatisfaction often initiated the move to homeschooling, credentialism drew many participants back to mainstream HE. *Neijuan* and exclusionary *xueji* policies also shaped decisions to study overseas, alongside some participants' intrinsic desire for exposure to the broader world. Choices were also shaped by affordability, career prospects, and personal interests, with studying abroad often serving as a *run* strategy—escaping *neijuan* while securing recognised credentials. Notably, financial constraints influenced both the feasibility and location of overseas study. Overall, these decisions are not fixed steps, but fluid, situated practices determined through evolving circumstances, identities, and interactions with structures and significant others (e.g., parents) (Cuconato & Walther, 2015). The educational paths of homeschooled students are best understood as continuously negotiated and co-constructed journeys shaped via interactions between autonomy, authority, social structure and context (Cuconato & Walther, 2015; Sewell & Shah, 1967).

Chapter 5 Transitional Challenges Encountered by Homeschooled Students

"After entering university, I stepped away from everything I knew. The confidence I once carried faded instantly, and the world became unfamiliar and unknown."

— Lun's diary, 20/5/2025

This chapter explores the transitional challenges faced by homeschooled students as they enter HE. It addresses *RQ 2: What academic, social, and emotional challenges did they encounter during their transition to HE?* and answers part of *RQ 4: What is the impact of homeschooling on their transition experiences?* This chapter is organised into three sections regarding academic, social, and emotional/psychological transitional challenges. Based on findings, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the concept of "transition as troublesome".

5.1 Academic Transitional Challenges

5.1.1 Gaps in Exam Experience and Subject Knowledge

During the interviews, some participants (e.g., Xu, Yu) identified academic difficulties rooted in their limited experience with formal exams. As Yu reflected:

> *"Because I have never experienced exam-oriented learning, nor have I experienced the high-intensity process of doing questions and coping with exams. So, after entering university, I was unfamiliar with and lacked training in this way of learning."*

This illustrates the challenges some homeschooled students faced in adapting to exam-driven academic environments, where standardised assessments and structured learning workloads dominated. This finding aligns with Lan et al. (2024), who suggest that academic transition commonly requires students to renegotiate previous learning habits to manage increased workloads and unfamiliar forms of assessment. However, for homeschooled students, their unfamiliarity with such practices made the adjustment to university assessments more challenging compared to their non-homeschooled peers.

A notable finding is that some participants reported gaps in subject knowledge compared to their traditionally schooled peers. As Huan stated:

> *"Because I mainly studied English and math during homeschooling [...] when others talk about some basic geography or history knowledge, I often couldn't follow."*

Huan's experience highlights how homeschooling, while flexible and often interest-led, could result in a narrow subject focus. This created additional transitional challenges for homeschooled students, as they not only had to adapt to new assessment formats but also catch up on disciplinary knowledge beyond their subject learning typically assumed at university entry. For some, these gaps directly influenced their major choices. For instance, Yu deliberately avoided choosing a STEM major due to limited training in mathematics and a lack of subject-specific preparation.

5.1.2 Adapting to Structured Learning

Participants (e.g., Huan, Zhao, Zhi) also reported difficulties in adapting to the structured format and pace of university curricula, particularly after experiencing a self-directed homeschooling environment. For example, Zhi expressed discomfort with the rigid classroom routine:

> *"It was difficult to sit through full days of classes from morning to evening, just listening the whole time. […] In the past, I also studied all day, but there were many breaks and chances to move around."*

Zhi's reflection shows how the shift from flexible, self-arranged learning to fixed schedules and instructor-led curricula in university could be both mentally and physically taxing for her. Similarly, Bolle et al. (2007) found that many first-year undergraduate homeschooled students struggled to adapt to structured lectures.

However, as Sheng (2014), Gray and Riley (2013), and Gaither (2009) note, the variety of structures and philosophies of homeschooling significantly influence students' academic habits and readiness for HE. Those from less structured or unschooling backgrounds might struggle more with typical university settings such as rigid pacing, standardised content, and tutor-directed instruction. In this study, all participants came from largely unstructured homeschooling environments, making this transition more challenging for them.

5.1.3 Troubling Group Tasks

Many participants identified group tasks as a major challenge during their transition to HE. While some participants (e.g., Lun, Xu, Yue) had prior group work experience in homeschooling, these were typically informal collaborations with familiar people, such as friends or siblings, unlike the random groupings in university settings. Participants often expressed discomfort with group work and anxiety when their performance depended on less-engaged peers. Chi described:

> *"I have to work with people who don't care much about the assignment. I think it is very torturous. [...] My grades are determined by others, and I don't like this feeling."*

Notably, the majority of participants expressed their preference for taking leadership roles when doing group tasks, aiming to ensure efficient task coordination and fair division of labour while allowing enough individual space for working. As Zhao explained: "This allows me to ensure the group remains efficient and on the right track."

The challenge of adapting to group work is also demonstrated in Bolle et al.'s (2007) study, and it is not unique to homeschooled students, as traditionally schooled students also face similar concerns. What stands out in the current finding is the homeschooled participants' active involvement in leadership roles, aligning with previous research (Malavé, 2025; Rothermel, 2012; Thomas, 2018), which found that homeschooled

students often possess well-developed leadership skills because of a greater demand for autonomy and responsibility during homeschooling.

5.1.4 Issues about Xueji

In China, *xueji* (学籍) is a national student identification system that records a student's official school enrolment (Yu & Crowley, 2023). For homeschooled students, extended absence from formal schooling results in blank periods in their *xueji*, raising institutional concerns. Lang shared his unease when he was a university freshman:

> *"I don't even know how to explain to my college advisor the blank of the three years of high school in my xueji record."*

Although his advisor did not pursue the issue further, the unresolved gap illustrates the ambiguous legal status of homeschooling in China, the lack of regulations and an institutional mechanism for its recognition (Liao & Xiao, 2017), and the disconnect between homeschooling and the mainstream system. While this issue was less relevant for participants studying abroad, the lack of formal recognition of homeschooling in China was one factor (e.g., Chi) motivating their decision to pursue HE overseas.

5.2 Social Transitional Challenges

5.2.1 The Lack of Like-mindedness

Beyond academic challenges, some participants identified social transition as a major difficulty, particularly due to a perceived lack of like-minded peers in university. Coming from homeschooling communities where people often shared similar values and goals, participants such as Lun and Huan experienced a sense of disconnection upon entering HE. Lun reflected:

> *"The challenges I faced were more about values. Before university, I was in a 'pure, focused, and positive' environment, where everyone*

aimed to grow. But in university, many were more into entertainment or studying just for the sake of it. […] This difference caused a big conflict in my first semester."

This sense of misalignment made it difficult to form meaningful relationships. This is consistent with the findings of Kranzow (2013), homeschooled students often notice different worldviews from non-homeschooled peers. Bolle et al. (2007) also suggest that some homeschooled students initially struggle with differing values but later find different values either enlightening or incomprehensible. However, in the current study, participants who reported such challenges were nearing the end of their first year, suggesting that their social transition situations might change over time with continuous navigation and negotiation between differences.

5.2.2 Language Barriers

Language barriers were more commonly associated with social, rather than academic, transitional challenges. This is likely because most participants had extensively studied English during homeschooling; for those studying in English-speaking countries or enrolled in English-taught programmes, they did not encounter significant language challenges in academic settings.

However, difficulties emerged for those studying in countries where the primary spoken language outside class was not English, such as Thailand (Yue), Malaysia (Xu), Japan (Zhang), and the Czech Republic (Yu). In these contexts, participants struggled to socially integrate or join extracurricular activities. Xu, studying in Malaysia, shared:

"I don't speak Malay. Malays are closer to each other, and I struggle to communicate with them. [...] Many clubs and events are only open to local students, which makes me feel excluded."

Thus, language barriers shaped participants' sense of belonging and constrained social engagement. The participants' experiences echo a broader pattern among Chinese international students. Newsome and Cooper (2016), Cena et al. (2021), and Kwon (2013) highlight how linguistic and cultural gaps could trigger feelings of isolation, culture shock, emotional stress, and limited interaction with host nationals, while local students might be reluctant to step outside existing social circles (Wang & Hannes, 2014). For homeschooled students in international HE settings, these barriers added a layer to the challenge of social transition.

5.2.3 "Forced" Adapting to Social Life

Around half of the participants, who identified themselves as introverted with low social needs, described feeling pressured to engage in group activities and build connections with unfamiliar peers in university. This "forced" socialisation often caused psychological discomfort and stress. Zhi stated:

> *"Sometimes, when I'm with classmates, I don't know how to communicate. There were times I felt pressured and forced myself to socialise and adapt to group life."*

Although these participants indicated that they were used to more independent or isolated learning environments, the university setting required them to engage in more frequent and sometimes unavoidable social interactions. This relates to Malavé's (2025) and Snyder's (2021) observations that homeschooled students often experience initial social challenges and might be perceived as shy or slow to adjust. Thomas (2018) also notes that adapting to the social norms of larger institutional contexts could require a steep learning curve. However, other participants (e.g., Yu, Lang), who identified themselves as extroverted and socially confident, reported no such difficulties, implying the variation in individual personalities and characteristics.

5.3 Emotional/Psychological Transitional Challenges

Many of the emotional or psychological challenges stated by participants were closely intertwined with their academic and social transitions. Academic stress, particularly related to exams, heavy workloads, and unfamiliar assessment formats, frequently triggered anxiety (e.g., Xu, Yue, Huan) and, in some cases, homesickness (e.g., Chi). Social difficulties, such as struggling to establish friendships or integrate into peer groups, led to feelings of loneliness, frustration, and even mild depression (e.g., Lun, Tin, Zhang). These were not isolated reactions, but reflections of the broader pressures students faced as they transitioned to novel academic expectations and unfamiliar social environments.

Some participants also spoke of missing the familiarity and emotional support provided by former homeschool tutors, teachers, or tight-knit peer communities that had crucially shaped their earlier experiences. As Lun wrote in his diary:

> *"After entering university, I stepped away from everything I knew. The confidence I once carried faded instantly, and the world became unfamiliar and unknown."*

This sense of emotional dislocation underscores the central role of psychological well-being in influencing students' transition experience. As Fischer and Manstead (2008) as well as Pekrun and Stephens (2012) suggest, emotional health is deeply tied to students' academic and social transition experiences. A diminished sense of belonging, unfamiliar cultural settings, or the absence of supportive networks could intensify the emotional strain of transition.

Summary: Transition as Troublesome—A Transformative Process

The findings suggest that most participants encountered transitional challenges upon entering university. Several participants described difficulties in navigating academic assessments, linguistic barriers, and social pressures. These experiences reflect the concept of "liminality" (Gravett, 2019), which describes the ambiguous, in-between

space where individuals have left one state of being but have not yet fully entered another. In this context, participants had exited their familiar homeschooling environments but had not yet fully adapted to the HE environment, leaving them in a state of flux and uncertainty.

This liminal phase was often accompanied by strong emotional responses. Chi expressed frustration over group tasks; Xu described exclusion from local student societies due to language barriers; Lun conveyed a profound sense of disorientation and loss. These accounts support Gravett's (2019) view that transitional spaces could be uncomfortable, as students grapple with uncertainty while moving toward a new academic and personal identity. Meyer and Land's (2005) notion of "troublesome knowledge" further illuminates this process. Such knowledge is not only difficult to grasp but also deeply transformative. It often triggers confusion, discomfort, and emotional resistance, but is ultimately crucial for deeper learning and meaningful change (Gravett, 2019; Meyer & Land, 2005).

Importantly, not all aspects of transition were experienced as troubling. Some participants, such as Yu and Lang, reported barely difficulty with social transition and attributed it to their extroverted personalities. For others, like Lun, the social dimension of transition proved more challenging than the academic. These differences highlight the individualised nature of transition experiences. Ultimately, emotional uncertainty and struggle are not only normal but may be essential parts of becoming a university student (Gourlay, 2009). For some homeschooled learners, such feelings were not new; they had long been navigating unconventional educational paths marked by uncertainty and self-direction.

Chapter 6 Navigating Transitions for Homeschooled Students

"In my first semester, second-year students organised a trip to welcome us. [...] They wrote us letters, sent us blessings, and tied ribbons around our wrists. I suddenly felt a sense of belonging."

— Yue's diary, 15/12/2024

This chapter examines how homeschooled students navigated their transition to HE. It addresses *RQ 3: How did they navigate their transitions?* and helps answer *RQ 4: What is the impact of homeschooling on their transition experiences?* It explores how they navigated academic, social, and emotional/psychological transitions in HE. Then, it engages the concept of "transition as rhizomatic" and student agency in transition to critically interpret the navigating experiences of homeschooled students.

6.1 Navigating Academic Transition

6.1.1 Self-directed Learning

When asked how they navigated academic challenges during the transition to HE, all participants consistently pointed to their strong familiarity with self-directed learning, a habit deeply rooted in their homeschooling backgrounds. While many first-year university students commonly struggle with the independent nature of university study (Cameron & Rideout, 2020; Thompson et al., 2021), homeschooled participants in this study expressed feeling well-prepared. They credited their homeschooling experience with facilitating their autonomy, initiative, and adaptability.

Participants (e.g., Chi, Pong, Tin, Zhan, Zhi) described being proactive in managing their learning and independently sourcing materials. Tin reflected:

> *"Because I was already good at arranging my own study and finding online study resources. […] I felt particularly comfortable searching and using various institutional and online resources."*

This account reflects the strengths that Crouch (2024) identifies in homeschooling, including time management, learner autonomy, and a strong sense of ownership over one's learning. While Vermunt (2005) and Coertjens et al. (2017) found that successful transition into HE often involves adapting and developing new learning strategies, participants in the current study largely continued the habits they had developed through homeschooling.

Some participants (e.g., Pong, Tin, Yue) also demonstrated strategic adaptability when encountering academic challenges. For instance, Yue initially struggled with assessments due to limited exam experience but responded by adjusting her approach:

> *"I immediately changed my study strategy, allocating more time to practice, and searched for extra materials online. By the next test, I did much better."*

Yue's experience illustrates self-awareness and academic resilience, non-cognitive traits strongly linked to academic success (Crouch, 2024; Lin et al., 2023). Notably, as Jansen and van der Meer (2012) observe, the benefits of self-directed learning depend heavily on the style of homeschooling. All participants in this study came from homeschooling environments that emphasised autonomy and self-direction, which likely explains the consistent finding about a strong self-directed learning skill and inclination among participants, which helped them better navigate academic transition.

6.1.2 Proactively Support-seeking

Beyond self-directed learning, a key theme was participants' proactive attitudes in seeking academic support. Participants described not only studying independently but also actively identifying and utilising institutional supports. According to participants, this behaviour took three forms: independently finding resources, collaborating with peers, and engaging with academic staff.

This aligns with Crouch's (2024) findings that homeschooled students often develop help-seeking skills via informal, socially embedded learning. Lang, for instance, linked his comfort with tutor interaction to his homeschooling experience:

> *"When I encounter something I don't understand, or after finishing work, I tend to proactively ask the tutor for feedback and communicate about my process. I think this has helped a lot at university. […] It's mainly because the learning atmosphere during homeschooling encouraged that kind of communication."*

Similarly, Snyder (2021) found that although homeschooled students often showed strong adaptability, respect for instructors, and ease in seeking help, likely shaped by previous close interactions with parents or tutors. That said, not all participants actively engaged with academic staff. For example, Chi and Xu reported minimal tutor contact, preferring instead to rely on peer support.

Participants' proactivity was often tied to clear academic goals, such as postgraduate aspirations, acquiring specific knowledge, or succeeding in HE. Almost all participants explicitly articulated such goals, supporting Lin et al.'s (2023) argument that goal orientation and motivation are critical in academic adjustment during transition. Notably, these goals were often shaped by broader social and cultural pressures. For Zhan and Pong, academic achievement was not only personal but also a way to validate homeschooling in a context where it remains marginal. Zhan explained:

> *"My mother said people criticised us for homeschooling, but my academic results shut them up. […] I've learned that without achievements, your voice is easily ignored."*

This reflects the arguments by Bennett et al. (2018) and Lubienski et al. (2013), who cautioned against attributing academic success solely positively to homeschooling.

Zhan's experience shows how the external social narratives and internal capacities intersect to shape her motivation and goal setting.

6.1.3 Dynamic Balance in Navigating Academic Transition

Not all participants aimed for full academic integration. When Yu found that the university curricula were fragmented and misaligned with his expectations and long-term goals, he shifted focus from formal study to building a travel-related business and expanding his social network off-campus:

> *"I realised this major wasn't useful for me. The content was too scattered and not very applicable. I'd rather focus on my own business and growing my side project."*

Rather than conforming to institutional expectations, Yu re-oriented his university life based on his own interests and values. His case underscores how students assert agency during transition, choosing personal relevance over institutional fit. It also indicates that student agency could significantly shape the transition experience.

6.2 Navigating Social Transition

6.2.1 Student Societies and Extracurricular Activities

The majority of participants identified student societies and extracurricular activities as vital to their social transition. Even those initially uninterested in socialising later identified student societies and extracurricular activities as transformative. Zhi, for instance, began university life claiming she did not need friends. But after managing a student-led concert, her perspective shifted:

> *"Just mentioning these is enough to make me proud, I really did it, we really did it, and I love everyone in my committee."* (Zhi's diary, 20/2/2024)

She later reflected, “That’s when I started to want to socialise and feel the joy that friends bring.” Her experience illustrates how campus involvement could catalyse personal growth, confidence, and social bonding. This also supports Thomas’s (2018) emphasis on the role of peer networks and co-curricular engagement in fostering belonging.

Others echoed similar sentiments. Lang cited the student union and table tennis club as enriching his university life, while Tin found a sense of cohesion through rowing, a sport built on collaboration and mutual trust. These findings align with Malavé (2025), who notes that while homeschooled students may initially struggle socially, they often adapt through active participation in campus life, activities, and leadership roles. Zhi’s transformation underscores this potential: through leadership and collaboration, her identity and sense of community were reshaped.

It is also worth noting the role of off-campus engagement. While Cena et al. (2021) found international students often felt more integrated within campus environments than in the broader local community, this study shows greater variation. Xu, for instance, found life purpose through volunteering at a local welfare home, while Yu developed a travel-related business that expanded his networks beyond campus. These examples highlight how homeschooled students navigated social integration on and off campus through personal agency and interest-driven choices.

6.2.2 Active Social Strategy Adjustment

Beyond participation in student societies and activities, many participants actively shaped their social integration through self-initiated strategies such as actively offering help, initiating conversations, and learning local languages. These behaviours reflect a high degree of social autonomy and adaptability.

Yu, for instance, built connections with local and international students by being proactive and helpful:

> *"Because of my attitude, people around me are more willing to communicate with me."*

Yue, facing initial language barriers in socialising, chose to learn Thai to better connect with local peers:

> *"I can communicate better and fit into their circles more easily. […] Now I can join groups that are mainly composed of local students."*

These efforts mirror Amundsen's (2019) findings that Māori homeschooled students often exercise agency in unfamiliar social environments. This finding also contrasts with broader studies (Cena et al., 2021; Kwon, 2013), which found that Chinese international students often struggle with integration due to language barriers and exclusion. In this study, however, participants (e.g., Yu, Lun) formed diverse friendships, highlighting the role of proactive strategies in expanding social horizons despite language and cultural obstacles.

6.2.3 Identity Disclosure and Acceptance

Disclosing a homeschooling background emerged as a sensitive and complex issue during the interviews. For many participants, it was not an identity they felt comfortable sharing, echoing wider research on how non-traditional students in HE navigate self-disclosure between authenticity and self-protection (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003).

Some participants (e.g., Zhan, Zhang) chose to remain vague or silent, while others (e.g., Yue, Yu) disclosed only when being directly asked. They also reported that their peers tended to show unfamiliarity and potential misunderstood with homeschooling. Zhi shared her background only with close and trusted friends. Concerns about being judged, misunderstood, or penalised were widespread among participants. Chi expressed an intense attitude:

"I would probably take it to my grave if it weren't for this interview."

Others, like Zheng and Lang, felt uneasy about how their non-traditional and legally ambiguous paths might be perceived, reflecting broader societal controversy and pressure around homeschooling in China.

In contrast, a few participants (e.g., Tin, Xu, Pong) who studied outside mainland China reported more positive disclosure experiences. Xu expressed pride in her background and felt supported by non-homeschooled peers. Tin attributed her peers' openness to homeschooling to its relative normalisation in the US (Stevens, 2003), suggesting how disclosure could be shaped by broader cultural contexts and perceived acceptance.

6.2.4 Dynamic Balance in Navigating Social Transition

Notably, three participants shared more complex or ambivalent experiences. For Zhan, the university did not facilitate lasting belonging; she eventually returned to homeschooling, feeling her academic goals could be met with less emotional strain outside institutional settings. Similarly, Zhang's early university years were disrupted by the COVID pandemic, limiting social opportunities. He shifted focus to academics, as isolation made peer connection difficult. Zhao, by contrast, showed little interest in socialising altogether, finding interaction emotionally draining and prioritising academic over social engagement.

These cases highlight that transition is not universally desired or uniformly defined. Instead, it is fluid, shaped by personal goals, contextual factors, and evolving definitions of value and belonging (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). Participation in university life, therefore, varies by individual agency and demand. Tin's experience further illustrates this nuance. In her first year, she mostly socialised within her dorm, later expanding to broader student groups. She initially joined a local society but ultimately found a stronger belonging in a Chinese student group. Her trajectory reflects how students dynamically recalibrate social strategies over time.

These experiences of participants call for a more differentiated, student-centred understanding of transition—one that values autonomy and individual pathways over uniform benchmarks of integration.

6.3 Navigating Emotional/Psychological Transition

6.3.1 Resilience and Optimism

Resilience and optimism emerged as key internal resources that supported participants in navigating their transition into HE. Many participants drew on formative homeschooling experiences, such as farming, endurance sports, or volunteering in remote areas, to frame university challenges as manageable. These activities cultivated what Parker et al. (2004) describe as proactive capacity, resilience built via lived experience. Chi captured this mindset succinctly:

> *"I don't feel like it's (transition) even a challenge for me. [...] Whenever I want to complain about group work or stress, I remind myself that sitting in an air-conditioned room and study is already a blessing."*

Such perspectives align with Thomas (2018) and Malavé (2025), who found homeschooled students often reframe academic stress as growth opportunities. Optimism, too, was described not merely as a personality trait but a conscious strategy. As Yu noted:

> *"No matter what difficulties I face, I always face them positively and take action."*

This attitude mirrors findings from Fischer and Manstead (2008) as well as Pekrun and Stephens (2012), who highlight the role of emotional regulation and growth mindset in successful transitions. Resilience here was less about eliminating hardship and more about reframing and enduring it constructively (Salvo, 2018; Malavé, 2025).

6.3.2 Emotional Ties Caused by Academic and Social Belonging

Emotional transition among homeschooled students was deeply interconnected with academic and social experiences. Breakthroughs in learning and moments of social connection often led to emotional turning points that strengthened motivation and belonging. Yu recalled one such moment:

> *"When I was with classmates who treated me sincerely and celebrated birthday together, I was really touched. A warm feeling came over me, and I thought, 'God, that's great to have them'."*

Moreover, most participants related their positive emotions to academic achievements. Such moments illustrate what Johnson (2021) found in his research on homeschooled college students, where academic and social milestones reinforce one another to support overall well-being. This is especially important for non-traditional students, who may arrive with unique expectations and challenges (Wu et al., 2013).

In addition, participants often turned to family, peers, and close friends for emotional support during times of stress, anxiety, or frustration, helping them regulate emotions and navigate challenges, echoing findings by Salvo (2018) and Johnson (2021) on the protective role of social ties during transitional periods for homeschooled students.

Summary: Transition as Rhizomatic—The Role of Student Agency

The findings in this chapter illustrate that academic, social, and emotional transitions are not separate but deeply interwoven processes. Participants frequently described moments of academic or social success and difficulty in emotional terms. Academic struggles sometimes prompted them to seek support, which in turn opened avenues for social connection. For example, Chi and Xu emphasised the importance of peer support, while Lang highlighted relationships with academic staff as critical to academic integration. Conversely, students like Zhi, Tin, Yu, and Yue recounted social

experiences, both connecting and isolating, as emotionally significant turning points. These patterns align with Taylor and Harris-Evans's (2018) "rhizomatic" view of transition, where students assemble friends, peers, families, emotions, knowledge, prior experiences, and institutional resources into fluid, evolving constellations of meaning. Knowing and becoming, then, are not isolated academic processes but emerge within relational, lived contexts.

However, while the rhizomatic concept captures this complexity, it risks underemphasising the agentive role students play in shaping their own transition experiences and trajectories. Many participants demonstrated strong self-direction, intentionally seeking support, adjusting social strategies, or reframing their goals, demonstrating strong capacity in navigating change (Gale & Parker, 2014). Yu, for instance, redirected his energy from academic study to entrepreneurial pursuits off-campus. Zhan chose to leave university and return to homeschooling in pursuit of emotional and academic alignment. Tin paced her transition, expanding her social world across multiple phases of university life. These examples show that even emotionally motivated decisions were grounded in reflective agency.

In some cases, rather than passive responses to external demands, transitions were often deliberate acts of meaning-making and self-construction. As Hviid and Zittoun (2008) argue, such transitions are shaped not only by institutional structures but also by individuals' efforts to restore coherence and pursue new directions. This could be exemplified by the clear goal setting among the majority of participants after entering HE. Similarly, Yue and Chi showed how psychological resilience and optimism enhanced their capacity to navigate social and academic spaces and to pursue their goals.

From this perspective, knowledge and identity development are embedded in students' relational worlds, where learning unfolds as a dynamic, continuous process (Gravett, 2019; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). For homeschooled students in particular, agency is not static but emerges as a flexible, context-sensitive capacity to navigate change, negotiate belonging, and align experiences with evolving personal goals during the ongoing transition process.

Chapter 7 Reflections from Homeschooled Students

"I'm heading to a future with much grandeur, this (university) is just the beginning."
— Zhi's diary, 20/2/2024

Building on the previous chapters, this chapter addresses the main research question: *What were the transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in higher education?* It begins by outlining when participants felt their transition began and how long it lasted. It then explores their reflections on their transition journeys, including three-word summaries of their experiences. Finally, the chapter draws on the concept of "transition as becoming" to critically discuss these reflections.

7.1 Timing and Duration of Transition

The timing and duration of transition into HE differed widely among the participants, which reflects an individualised process influenced by personal, institutional, and external conditions. For some, the transition was immediate or short-lived. Zhao, for example, stated that it took only two to three days to adapt to university life. Lang reported no clear sense of transition at all, suggesting a smooth and seamless entry into the university environment. Both attributed their ease of transition to personal traits such as personality and adaptability. However, their swift transitions might also be influenced by the geographical and cultural familiarity of their study environments, mainland China and Hong Kong, which likely reduced the degree of cultural or environmental disorientation typically associated with transitional experiences.

Other participants identified the first term or academic year as their main period of transition. For instance, Chi and Zheng reported transitioning within the first term, while Tin and Pong described their transition as unfolding across the entirety of their first year. Huan and Zhi also highlighted the initial few months as a critical phase of transition. These reflections partially align with studies that conceptualise the first year of HE as a distinct transition stage (e.g., Javaid et al., 2024; Schütze et al., 2020).

However, some participants described a more prolonged and continuous transition experience. Zhan viewed the entire duration of her undergraduate studies as a transition

period, whereas Xu, currently completing her first year of undergraduate studies, considered the process still ongoing and potentially extending throughout the whole university journey. Additionally, the COVID pandemic disrupted expected patterns of transition for some participants. Zhi noted that an authentic sense of transition only emerged in her second year, when in-person learning resumed. Also, Zhang, whose first two years of undergraduate study were entirely online, experienced a fragmented and extended transition that continued into the rest of his years of university.

These findings highlight the personalised nature of transition, shaped not only by individual readiness but also by external factors such as the pandemic. The diversity in timing and duration supports the argument of Gravett (2019), which challenges the assumption of transition as a fixed or uniform stage, instead suggesting it is a fluid, contextual, and evolving process that unfolds uniquely for each student.

7.2 Participants' Reflections on Transition

To better understand how participants perceived their transitions into HE, I asked two reflective questions during the interviews:
(a) *How would you define a successful transition experience?*
(b) *Do you consider your own transition successful?*

Responses revealed diverse and nuanced interpretations. For some participants, successful transition meant academic fitting in or having clear academic goals (e.g., Zhan, Chi, Yue); for others, it centres on emotional self-regulation, self-awareness, or finding one's place in a new environment (e.g., Tin, Lang, Lun).

Notably, several participants rejected binary notions of "success" or "failure", instead describing transition as ongoing, partial, or fluid (e.g., Xu, Zheng, Lun). Zhan, for instance, defined success as "gaining clarity about one's future goals and making steady efforts toward them during university". Xu and Lun viewed transition as a lifelong process of growth, arguing that it should not be reduced to a definitive outcome.

Most participants considered their transitions generally successful, marked by varying degrees of academic and social integration. Only two, Zhan and Yu, described their transitions as partially successful. Zhan eventually returned to homeschooling due to the huge stress of social interaction, while Yu withdrew from academic life despite remaining socially engaged.

To close the interviews, participants were asked to come up with three words that best captured their transition experience. These words—visualised in a word cloud (see Figure 8)—ranged from positive ("fulfilling," "luck," "hope") to negative ("repression," "anxiety," "confusion"), illustrating both the emotional complexity and diversity of their journeys. Some participants chose relatively neutral and philosophical phrases such as "I came, I saw, I left", which was explained by Yu as a reflection of his transient engagement with university life so far, marked more by observation than by deep and long-term attachment.

These reflections illustrate that transitions are neither uniform nor easily classified. For several participants, success was less about academic outcomes and more about developing clarity, resilience, emotional maturity, and a sense of self. For them, transition is not a fixed moment or stage but an evolving process that extends through university and beyond.

Figure 8: *Word cloud generated by the researcher about participants' three-word summaries*



Summary: Transition as Becoming—A Lifelong Process

The concepts of transition as "troublesome" and "rhizomatic" underscore the non-linear, affective, and individually situated nature of educational transition. Yet they also raise a deeper question: when, if ever, does change truly begin or end for students? This question resonates with several participants' reflections (e.g., Xu, Zheng, Lun) who viewed their journeys not in terms of success or failure, but as continuous, partial, and still evolving. Xu and Lun, for example, rejected the idea of a fixed endpoint, viewing HE as one stage in a much longer personal and educational trajectory. As Lun said in the interview, "I'm still on my way." This view echoes Hviid and Zittoun's (2008) framing of educational trajectories as person-centred, temporally unfolding processes punctuated by moments of transition, ruptures that prompt reorganisation and the search for new coherence. Based on this, transitions are not bound events but recurring processes that may span an entire lifetime. Higher education is only one piece of it.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) idea of a "line of becoming", a process without a clear start, end, or destination, this perspective moves beyond linear models of progression and instead emphasises ongoing transformation. Students are not simply moving between stable identities but continuously reshaping their sense of self in response to evolving academic, social, and emotional contexts. Participants' narratives in the current study also reflected this: their transitions were fragmented and unresolved, marked by constant negotiation rather than completion. Viewed through this lens, "becoming" invites a more fluid, human understanding of student transitions—one that foregrounds process over outcome (Gravett, 2019). It also encourages educators and researchers to recognise and value who students are in the present, not only who they are expected to become (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Chapter 8 Conclusions

This chapter offers a summary of the study to show how the research questions were answered and then addresses contributions to existing literature. Finally, it discusses limitations of the study and directions for future research.

8.1 Research Summary

This qualitative study explored the transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in HE. The study involved interviews with fourteen Chinese homeschooled students, either currently enrolled in full-time undergraduate programmes or having completed undergraduate studies within the past three years. Creative methods were also employed, including educational trajectory drawing and diaries. The findings answered the following research questions:

RQ1 *Why did Chinese homeschooled students leave and return to the mainstream education pathway?*

The findings indicated that Chinese homeschooled students typically followed diverse educational pathways. While *neijuan* and parental dissatisfaction often prompted the decision to homeschool, credentialism pulled many participants back to mainstream HE. Decisions to study abroad were influenced by *neijuan*, exclusionary *xueji* policies, and personal aspirations for global exposure. Their choices were also shaped by affordability, career prospects, and personal interests, with studying abroad usually perceived as a *run* strategy—escaping *neijuan* while gaining recognised credentials. Participants' educational trajectories were negotiated and co-constructed by the interplay of student autonomy, parental authority, structural constraints, and evolving aspirations.

RQ2 *What academic, social, and emotional challenges did they encounter during their transition to HE?*

Moreover, the findings revealed the multifaceted challenges homeschooled students faced when transitioning to HE. Academically, many participants struggled with limited exam-taking experience, gaps in subject knowledge, difficulties adapting to

structured curricula, and frustration with group work. Socially, they often found it hard to meet like-minded peers, faced language barriers abroad, and felt pressured to conform to unfamiliar social norms. These difficulties were frequently accompanied by emotional and psychological turbulence, including anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Drawing on Gravett's (2019) "transition as troublesome", this study showed that while these transitions were academically, socially, and emotionally demanding, they could also be transformative, enabling students to negotiate struggles, uncertainties, and new identities in HE.

RQ3 *How did they navigate their transitions?*

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that Chinese homeschooled students actively navigated their transitions, mainly attributed to self-directed learning developed during their homeschooling periods, active participation in student organisations and activities at university, their proactive efforts in seeking academic support and adjusting social strategies, as well as resilience and optimism. Based on Gravett's (2019) "transition as rhizomatic", their academic, social, and emotional transitions were closely interconnected, forming a dynamic relational interaction. Many participants showed strong self-direction, actively seeking support, or reframing clear goals to navigate change (Gale & Parker, 2014). Some participants exercised their agency in shaping their HE paths to suit their personal goals and circumstances. Therefore, throughout this process, student agency emerged as a flexible, self-focused, and context-sensitive capacity that helps them navigate change, create meaning, and find goals for growth in the new HE environment.

RQ4 *What is the impact of homeschooling on their transition experiences?*

Answers to the previous sub-research questions collaboratively informed RQ4. The findings suggested that homeschooling significantly shaped participants' transition experiences by facilitating strong self-direction, adaptability, resilience and optimism, but also presented unique academic, social, and identity challenges that required active negotiation and adaptation during their move into HE.

Building on the prior, finally, participants' reflections on their overall transitions revealed nuanced, authentic insights into their journeys. The findings emphasised an understanding of student transitions as ongoing, reciprocal, and individualised

"becoming" processes, in which individuals constantly negotiate and reshape their identities amidst the evolving environments throughout their lives. Together, they helped to address the main research question: *What were the transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in higher education?*

Notably, this study addresses a significant empirical gap by focusing on Chinese homeschooled students in HE—a group largely overlooked in existing research. While several findings align with the previous literature, this study identified notable contextual challenges and strong agency in transition among them. Two issues were found specific to the Chinese context. First, the lack of institutional continuity between homeschooling and mainstream education created what Lang called a "blank space" in his *xueji* record and reflected homeschooling's ambiguous legal status in mainland China. Second, identity disclosure and acceptance were also significant concerns. Even in regions where homeschooling is legal, many participants hesitated to share their homeschooling backgrounds because of fear of stigma and misunderstanding. Furthermore, participants demonstrated strong agency during their academic and social transitions. They actively employed various strategies that reflect resilience and built diverse friendships and networks with both co-nationals and local students, on and off campus—showing a high level of agency and self-direction that contrasted with common challenges faced by Chinese international students (e.g., Kwon, 2013). This also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the diversity within the Chinese international student group. Thus, this study provides one of the first empirical accounts of Chinese homeschooled students' transitions into HE, particularly through the "becoming" (T3) perspective, which, as noted by Gale and Parker (2014), significantly lacks empirical exploration.

8.2 Contributions of This Study

The current study makes several contributions to existing literature. First, conceptually, the current study extends the underutilised "transition as becoming" (T3) lens, which remains less developed in empirical transition research. Drawing on the findings, the study illustrates the critical role of student agency in shaping their transition experiences. For example, some participants' cases illustrate transition as fluid and

individually defined, shaped by personal agency, context, and changing priorities rather than uniform benchmarks of integration. Rather than being passive recipients of change, participants actively navigated their academic, social, and emotional challenges through self-directed strategies and reflective decision-making. This highlights the need to incorporate student agency in transition more centrally into Gravett's (2019) conceptual framework. Additionally, this research adopts the approach of educational trajectories, which aligns with the T3 perspective and addresses the research gap identified by Baker and Irwin (2019) concerning the lack of nuanced, contextualised accounts of students' journeys into, through, and out of HE.

Second, this study helps to challenge and nuance common stereotypes about homeschooled students as "backward" or "on the fringe" (Drenovsky & Cohen, 2012). While some participants did encounter social difficulties, such as linguistic barriers or unfamiliarity with social norms, most participants were able to actively navigate these challenges through active strategy adjustment, such as participating in student societies, seeking peer support, and then expanding their social networks. Importantly, the findings also highlighted the importance of individual differences. Social transition experiences varied widely, relying on personality, prior socialisation experiences, and other factors. The findings of this study challenged such stereotypes, showcasing the adaptive capability of homeschooled students and the diversity of their social transition experiences.

Third, the findings of the current study highlighted the need for a more fluid, situated, and person-centred strategy to understanding student transitions, particularly for those from non-traditional backgrounds such as homeschooled learners. For universities, families, and other stakeholders, this means creating environments that acknowledge the complexity and individuality of students' journeys. University support systems should not only focus on outcomes but also attend to who students are in the present, valuing their lived realities and providing space for them to reassemble their identities across time. Moreover, Lang's case illustrates a significant disconnection between the homeschooling pathway and mainstream HE in China, calling for the need for a more inclusive and flexible educational management system—one that acknowledges diverse educational backgrounds and ensures more supported transitions into university life. These student voices underscored the significance of agency, resilience, and openness

in navigating transitions and should be taken seriously in designing more inclusive and responsive educational support systems.

8.3 Limitations and Future Studies

The limitations of the current study primarily relate to its sampling strategy. First, due to the hard-to-reach nature of the homeschooled student population in China, most participants were recruited through the researcher's personal networks and snowball sampling. As a result, it was difficult to ensure consistency in participants' academic stages, which limited the potential for direct comparison across similar learning levels. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 25, with ranged from some having just completed their first year of undergraduate study and others having already graduated from undergraduate programmes for one to three years.

Second, it was challenging to achieve a balanced representation of homeschooled students studying in China versus those studying abroad. Although all participants shared a background of being homeschooled within the Chinese context, the majority were enrolled in or had graduated from overseas universities, with significant variation in their study destinations. This resulted in a limited sample of students currently studying in Chinese HEIs.

This study has laid a foundation for future research regarding Chinese homeschooled students' transition experiences in the HE context. Future research would benefit from more targeted sampling strategies to investigate more specific subgroups, such as homeschooled students studying domestically versus internationally, and from longitudinal studies that can capture how transitions develop and evolve.

Finally, this dissertation closes with a handwritten letter generated by the researcher (see Figure 9), which brings together the participants' voices and their suggestions for homeschooled students and their families, with a typed version available in Appendix G.

Figure 9: *A letter to homeschooled students and their families*

Dear homeschooled students and parents,

This letter represents the collective voices of the homeschooled students in this study. It was written by the researcher on their behalf, drawing directly from reflections, suggestions, and experiences they generously shared. Although each participant's journey was unique, their insights echoed common themes of resilience, growth, and care — offered here to support students and families on similar paths or considering homeschooling.

Be clear about your rationales and goals. (Chi, Peng, Xu, Yu, Zhan, Zhi)
Before choosing homeschooling, take time to reflect deeply: Why this path? What are your long-term goals? Homeschooling is not just an alternative; it's a serious commitment that requires a clear sense of direction. Some of us had families who invested heavily — emotionally, financially, and intellectually — in supporting us. If your families are considering this route, it's essential to evaluate the resources and sacrifices it may entail. It's not a decision to make lightly.

Prepare for transition — academically, socially, emotionally. (Zhi, Zheng, Xu)
University can be overwhelming at first, but challenges ease with time. Don't be afraid to try new things, even if they feel scary or uncomfortable. Join student societies early — they can be a great way to find community and ease into campus life. Be open about what you're not used to; people are often more willing to help than you expect, and your network will matter more than you realise. University demands managing not only your studies, but also your time, relationships, and emotions.

Make good use of the resources around you. (Pong, Zhao, Zheng)

Whether online platforms, peer networks, or social media groups, there is a wealth of information and resources available. Use it. Read about others' experiences, find communities of students like you, and prepare for the university environment in advance. Knowing what to expect, academically and socially, can ease your anxiety and boost your confidence.

Keep your mindset grounded and open. (Huan, Lang, Lun, Tin, Zhang)

Don't worry about competing with others. Everyone has their own strengths, and the real challenge is to grow into your own path. University is just one part of your life — it's a process of exploration, not a final destination. Stay open, curious, and grounded in what matters to you.

Final words.

Not all families have the same resources or freedom to take risks. If you're fortunate to have support, use it wisely. And if you're figuring things out as you go, that's okay too. Homeschooling is neither a shortcut nor a guarantee, but it can be a meaningful journey if you approach it with purpose, resilience, and a willingness to learn.

This letter reflects the collective wisdom of those who contributed to this research. May their words offer guidance, reassurance, and solidarity as you move forward.

With respect and hope,

Composed by the researcher, on behalf of the Chinese homeschooled students whose voices informed this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A: CUREC Approval



Education (Educ) DREC
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

Applicant: [redacted]
Principal Investigator: [redacted]
Department: Education

Study title: Breaking stereotypes: The higher education transition experiences of students from China's homeschooling micro-schools
(Version: 1.0)

Ethics reference: Education (Educ) DREC - 1400656

Dear [redacted]

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that the above research study described in the application and other supporting documentation submitted to the committee has been carefully considered on behalf of the Education (Educ) DREC in accordance with the University's regulations and policy for ethics approval of research involving human participants, human tissue and/or personal data. The opinion is as follows:

Opinion of Research Ethics Committee: Favourable Opinion

Subject to the following conditions:

Decision Date: 20 Apr 2025, 23:17

Opinion End Date: 20 Oct 2026

If favourable, insurance-provided indemnity arrangements will be in place between the decision date and opinion end date and you may now commence your study activities. Should you plan to continue the research beyond the end date above, it is your responsibility to ensure that you request, and receive, an extension (via amendment) from the committee for indemnity to remain in place. You may be required to provide a justification.

Please note the following:

Amendments: Should there be any subsequent changes to the reviewed study, applications for amendments can be made via the Oxford Ethics Application System (Worktribe Ethics).

Reports: Studies considered by OxTREC are expected to submit an *annual progress report* on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed. An end of study report is also required.

Audit: This study may be selected for audit at the discretion of the Research Governance, Ethics and Assurance Team.

Data safety: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all data collected during the course of the study is stored and transferred safely and securely in accordance with University requirements. Further guidance and advice are available from the Research Data Team. Additional information is available at https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics

Yours Sincerely

Education Ethics Officer

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (CUREC)

Ethics Application

Application: Breaking stereotypes: The higher education transition experiences of students from China's homeschooling micro-schools

ID: 1400656

Risk:	Low
Submitted Date:	12 Mar 2025, 14:44
Applicant:	[redacted]
Submitter:	[redacted]
Principal Investigator:	[redacted]
Org Unit:	Education
Project Title:	Breaking stereotypes: The higher education transition experiences of students from China's homeschooling micro-schools
Project Duration:	25 Feb 2025 - 15 Aug 2025
Funder:	
Project Description:	This project aims to explore the higher education transition experiences of students from homeschooling micro-schools in China. Using creative methods and semi-structured interviews, this research intends to provide insights into the challenges or unique experiences encountered by those students and refresh stereotypical narratives about homeschooling students.
Student Project:	Yes - Taught Masters
Supervisor:	[redacted]
Module Code:	

SCOPE	
Is this research:	Yes
Not research:	
Human Participant Involvement:	Yes
Research does not involve participants, tissue or personal data:	
Researcher division:	Social Sciences
Taught student module:	No
SSH Minimal Risk:	No
Any secondary data:	
Secondary data only:	
Anonymised secondary Data:	
External ethics review required:	
Identify NHS staff involvement:	
Biological samples:	
Biological samples yes:	
Drug or medicine:	
Foodstuffs or supplements:	
Medical device:	
OxTREC Scope:	
OxTREC minimal risk:	

RESEARCH TEAM	
Principal Investigator:	[redacted]
PI Research Integrity Training:	a. Research Integrity Core Course (New researchers & students)
1a. Research Integrity Core Course Date Completed:	
1b. Research Integrity Refresher Course Date Completed:	
1c. Other Date Completed:	
1c. Other Course Title:	
Is there a student:	Yes
Student Researchers:	Array
Researchers and Training:	Array
External collaborator:	No
External collaborator details:	
Medically qualified collaborator:	No
Medically qualified collaborator details:	
Conflict of Interest:	No
Conflict of Interest Details:	

METHODOLOGY	
Short title:	
Research Summary:	
Location:	
Location Permission:	
Location Permission Details:	

Taught module conflict of interest yes:	
Taught module ethics issues:	
Taught module data storage:	
Taught module participant aware:	
Taught module data after research:	
Taught module secondary data:	
Taught module data access:	
Taught module data agreement:	
Taught module linkage:	
Taught module linkage further info:	

MINIMAL RISK	
MR Short title:	Higher education transition experiences of students from China's homeschooling micro-schools
MR Lay Summary:	This research aims to explore the higher education transition experiences of students from Chinese homeschooling micro-schools, challenging prevailing stereotypes about their performance and behaviour when entering higher education. While homeschooling remains a niche and usually misunderstood educational pathway in China, micro-schools, as small, community-driven learning modes, have emerged as an alternative to mainstream schooling and conventional homeschooling. However, the topic of how students from these backgrounds navigate university life is underexplored. There is a need to study this particular group of people who have left the mainstream pathway but have been reintegrated into it at the higher education level. Especially given that this group operates outside the government's oversight, their situation and demands need to be noted and explored. The objective of this research is also to gain insights into the academic, cultural, social and emotional adjustments these students encountered when they entered higher education. The research seeks to examine their journey, the skills and challenges they bring to the university, and how they perceive and experience the transition. Additionally, the research aims to investigate the factors that influence the self-perception and experiences of homeschooled students during their transition to higher education. Most significantly, this research aims to bring this neglected group of students into the limelight while offering a

	more updated understanding of the challenges and opportunities encountered by homeschooled students in their transition to university. The proposed research question: What are the higher education transition experiences of students from homeschooling micro-schools in China? Sub-RQ 1: What are the reasons for homeschooled students to reintegrate into mainstream educational pathways? Sub-RQ 2: How does students' homeschooling experience impact their higher education experiences? Sub-RQ 3: What are the academic adaptation experiences of homeschooled students in higher education? Sub-RQ 4: What are the social adaptation experiences of homeschooled students in higher education?
MR design and methods:	This research adopts a qualitative approach and a case study design, using creative methods and semi-structured interviews as the data collection protocol, to capture participants' transition experiences from homeschooling micro-schools to university. Participants will engage in three research activities: timeline drawing, poem creation/photo sharing, and semi-structured interviews. Data collection will be conducted in three phases per participant to ensure that each phase remains focused and manageable, thereby reducing participant fatigue and maintaining the quality of the data gathered. Firstly, participants will be invited to draw a timeline to visually map key moments or stages in their educational journey, highlighting challenges, achievements, and significant transitions. This method provides an overview of participants' educational backgrounds and serves as a visual tool to identify critical phases for deeper exploration during subsequent interviews. Secondly, poem creation or photo sharing will involve participants writing a poem about themselves in the transition period or sharing photos that are considered important to their transition experiences. Poem writing/photo sharing offers a reflective and expressive medium for participants to articulate their identities, emotions, and personal journeys, providing deeper insights into their lived realities. Through this method, the research aims to gain the richness and depth of participants' individual experiences and emotional landscapes. Thirdly, participants will take part in semi-structured interviews. The interviews will be guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about their transition from homeschooling micro-schools to university, while also allowing for spontaneous discussion of emerging themes. This method enables participants to share their stories in their own words, offering rich insights into their perceptions, challenges, and adaptations during the significant life change. It not only complements the

	visual and creative methods but also provides a platform for participants to reflect on and articulate their experiences in a conversational and meaningful way.
MR Location:	This research will be conducted entirely online via Microsoft Teams to facilitate the process of data collection and participant-researcher interaction. Participants will engage in research activities remotely. For drawing and writing, they may choose to use physical paper or electronic devices to complete these activities, take photos, and share them with the researcher via Microsoft Teams chatbox, Whiteboard, social media, or email. They can also sharing photos through those platforms.
MR fieldwork risk:	Not Required
MR Best Practice Guidance:	BPG 02 Ethnographic and other types of qualitative research BPG 06 Internet-mediated research BPG 08 Handling distress in participants BPG 09 Data collection, protection and management BPG 10 Conducting research interviews
MR participant numbers:	This research will be a case study, and selecting approximately 5-10 participants will be appropriate to ensure an in-depth exploration of their experiences while maintaining a manageable and meaningful analysis.
MR participant approach:	Potential participants will be identified through targeted sampling by collaborating with homeschooling micro-school networks, university student associations, and online communities focused on homeschooling transitions. This research concentrates on individuals who are in their second year of undergraduate studies or beyond, or who have graduated. Meanwhile, they had completed their entire high school education in homeschooling micro-schools before transitioning to higher education. Participants will be approached mainly via social media messages that outline the research purpose, activities, and participation requirements. Additionally, snowball and convenience sampling strategies will be used, considering that this is a small community not easily approached. Potential participants will also be reached out through my personal contacts. All communication will include a clear explanation of the research, ethical considerations, and instructions for expressing interest or opting out.
MR consent:	Participants will be given a clear, concise, and accessible Participant Information Sheet that outlines the purpose of the research, what participation involves, potential risks and benefits, and how their data will be used and stored. The Participant Information Sheet will be tailored to the research, ensuring it is neither too lengthy nor overly complex, to encourage participants to read and understand it fully. In addition, key details, such as the voluntary basis of participation, the right to withdraw, and any limits to withdrawing data, will be prominently highlighted. Also, Participants will have the opportunity to ask questions about the

	research before providing consent. This can be done via a discussion with the researcher. Informed consent will be obtained by using a Consent Form that participants will sign to confirm their agreement to participate. This research undertakes remote studies, electronic consent will be used. The Consent Form will include an explicit statement confirming that participants have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, had the opportunity to raise questions, and agree to participate voluntarily. Signed Consent Forms will be securely stored in a password-protected digital file, accessible only to the researcher. Moreover, a record of consent will be maintained separately from the research data to ensure confidentiality. Participants will be explicitly informed during the consent process about any limits to withdrawing their data. The participants can withdraw from the research before 15/07/2025. The information will be clearly stated in both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form to make sure participants are fully aware before agreeing to participate. Furthermore, the consent process will adhere to ethical guidelines to ensure that participants are not coerced or unduly influenced to participate. The language used in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form will be non-technical and easy to understand in order to avoid jargon to make it accessible for all participants. By following this process, participants will be fully informed about the research and their rights, enabling them to make a voluntary and informed decision about their participation.
MR data storage:	Yes
MR participant aware:	Yes
MR data after research:	Yes
MR secondary data:	No
MR data access:	
MR data agreement:	
MR linkage:	
MR linkage further info:	

Appendix B: Consent Form



Consent to take part in Breaking stereotypes: The transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in higher education
打破陈规： 中国在家上学学生的大学过渡经历研究知情同意书

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference
中央大学研究伦理委员会批准文号: Education (Educ) DREC - 1400656

Purpose of Study: This research aims to explore the transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students to higher education, with a specific focus on the challenges and opportunities that they encountered in their academic, social and emotional adaptation when transitioning to university.
研究目的：本研究旨在探讨中国在家上学学生向高等教育过渡的经历，特别关注他们在向大学过渡时在学业、社交和情感适应方面遇到的挑战和机遇。

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement 如果您同意该声明，请在每个方框内签上姓名首字母
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. 我确认已阅读并理解上述研究的研究参与者须知。 我有机会考虑了相关信息，提出了问题，并得到了满意的答复。	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **15/07/2025** without giving any reason. 我明白我的参与是自愿的，在 **2025 年 7 月 15 日**之前，我可以随时退出，无需说明任何理由。	
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. 我了解谁有权访问所提供的个人数据、数据的存储方式以及项目结束后数据的去向。	
I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications. 我明白，我的身份将无法从任何出版物中识别。	
I consent to being audio recorded. 我同意被录音。	
I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs. 我了解录音将如何用于研究结果。	

I gave permission for the researcher to display the photos, drawings, diaries, and other materials I shared in the presentation of the research findings.
我同意研究人员将我分享的照片、绘图、日记以及其他作品展示在研究结果中。 ☐

I understand how the photos, drawings, diaries, and other materials I shared will be used in research outputs.
我了解我分享的照片、绘图、日记以及其他作品将如何用于研究结果。 ☐

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. ☐
使用引号：请注明您的偏好（*请选择一个选项*）：
a）我不希望被引用。**或**
b）我同意在研究成果中被使用引文，前提是无法识别我的身份。

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.
我允许您再次联系我以澄清信息。 ☐

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.
我了解如何提出问题或投诉。 ☐

I agree to take part.
我同意参加。 ☐

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant 参与者姓名	Date 日期	Signature 签名
[redacted]	[redacted] dd / mm / yyyy	[redacted]
Name of person taking consent 征得知情同意人员姓名	Date 日期[1]	Signature 签名

[1] 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: Participant Information Sheet





Breaking stereotypes: The transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in higher education

打破陈规：中国在家上学学生的高等教育过渡经历

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

研究参与者须知

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference

中央大学研究伦理委员会批准文号: Education (Educ) DREC - 1400656

1. Introductory paragraph 导言段

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 me 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.

我们邀请您参加此次研究项目。在您做出决定之前，重要的是要了解为什么要进行这项研究以及研究的内容。请花时间仔细阅读以下信息，并与他人讨论。如果有任何不清楚的地方，或者您想了解更多信息，请向我询问，决定您是否愿意参与。

2. Why is this research being conducted? 为什么要开展这项研究?

This research aims to examine the transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students, with a particular focus on the challenges and opportunities that they encountered and experienced in their academic, social and emotional adaptations to university.

本研究旨在考察中国在家上学学生的大学过渡经历，尤其关注他们在学术、社交和情感适应方面所遇到的挑战和机遇。

3. Why have I been invited to take part? 为什么邀请我参加?

You have been invited to participate because you have experienced at least three-year homeschooling education before entering the university and have firsthand experience transitioning from this learning environment to a mainstream university.

之所以邀请您参加，是因为您有至少三年以上的相关的在家上学经历，并拥有从这种学习环境过渡到主流大学的第一手经验。

4. Do I have to take part? 我必须参加吗?

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. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is ***15/07/2025***. If you decide to withdraw, any data collected up to that point will be securely deleted and will not be used in the research unless you have given explicit consent for its retention.

您可以自行决定是否参与研究。您可以退出研究，无需说明理由，也不会产生不利影响，只需将此决定通知我即可。您可以在 **2025 年 7 月 15 日**这一截止日期前撤回您为研究提供的任何信息。如果您决定退出，在此之前收集到的任何数据都将被安全删除，除非您明确同意保留，否则这些数据将不会用于研究。

5. What will happen to me if I take part in the research? 如果我参与研究，会发生什么?

If you are willing to participate in the research, you will be invited to attend online activities and one-to-one interviews via online meeting. You will be asked to take part in online sessions with the researcher three times. Please see the table below for more detailed information on the activities and contents of each session. The specific time and date of the three sessions will be determined based on your preference. Each session should take approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. With your consent, the three sessions will be audio-recorded and transcribed for follow-up data analysis. You can ask to pause or stop the research activities at any time. After the transcription, you will have the opportunity to review and revise the content if you wish. If you are still willing to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form or give verbal consent.

如果您愿意参与研究，我们将邀请您参加在线活动，并通过线上会议进行一对一访谈。您将与研究人员一起参加三次在线会议。有关每次会议的活动和内容的详细信息，请参见下表。三次会议的具体时间和日期将根据您的偏好决定。每次会谈大约需要 30 分钟到 1 小时。在征得您的同意后，我们将对这三个环节进行录音和转录，以便进行后续数据分析。您可以随时要求暂停或停止研究活动。转录后，如果您愿意，您将有机会审阅和修改内容。如果您仍然愿意参与，我们将要求您签署同意书或口头同意。

Three sessions 三次会面	Activities 活动	Contents 内容
First session (30-60 minutes) 第一次(30-60 分钟)	Timeline drawing + Interview 绘制时间线 + 访谈	You will be asked to draw a timeline of your educational journeys so far, and then give an explanation. You will be asked questions related to your drawing. 您需要绘制迄今为止的**教育历程时间表**，然后作出解释。您将被问到与您的绘画相关的问题。

Second session (60-90minutes) 第二次(60-90 分钟)	Interview 访谈	You will be asked questions related to: 1. your motivations for pursuing higher education 2. the impact of your homeschooling experience on your university journey 3. your academic, cultural, social and emotional adaptations upon entering university 我们将向您提出的问题涉及： 1. 您接受主流高等教育的原因 2. 在家上学经历对您大学经历的影响 3. 您在进入大学后在学业、社交、和情感方面的适应情况
Third session (30-60 minutes) 第三次(30-60 分钟)	Images / Notes/ Diary Sharing/Other materials + Interviews 图片/随笔/日记/其他作品分享 + 访谈	Share your previous photographs/diary/notes/other materials, describing how they exemplify the transition experience as you enter university. Alternatively, you may share photos/images that you feel are meaningful to your transition experience. 分享您**以前的照片/日记/随笔/其他作品**，描述它们如何体现出了您进入大学后的**过渡经历**。或者，你们也可以分享自己认为对过渡经历有意义的照片/图片。

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part? 参与活动可能有哪些不利因素和风险?

Considering the online nature of this research, no potential physical harm or risks have been identified. However, as the research explores the emotional dimension of adaptation, emotional discomfort may appear when discussing your transition experiences, especially challenges, stereotypes, or difficulties. To ensure your well-being, you can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable answering and can pause or withdraw from the research at any time without consequence. Additionally, participation involves a time commitment across three sessions. To minimise disruption, flexible scheduling options will be provided. As this research is a case study, concerns regarding privacy and identifiability may arise. To address this, all data will be anonymised, and you will be assured that no personally identifiable information, such as names or specific institutions, will be included in the research output. Pseudonyms will be used in any published materials. All collected data will be accessible only to the researcher and securely stored with password protection.

考虑到本研究的在线性质，没有发现任何潜在的身体伤害或风险。不过，由于本研究探讨的是适应的各个层面，因此在讨论您的过渡经历，尤其是挑战、成见或困难时，可能会出现情感上的不适。为了尊重您的意愿与感受，您可以跳过任何让您觉得不舒服的问题，也可以随时暂停或退出研究，不会有任何不利后果。此外，参与研究需要投入一定的时间。为了尽量减少干扰，我们将提供灵活的时间安排方案。由于本研究是一项个案研究，因此您可能会有关隐私和可识别性的担忧。为了保护您的隐私安全，我们将对所有数据进行匿名处理，并向您保证研究成果中不会包含真实姓名或具体机构等具体个人身份信息。任何发表的资料都将使用化名。所有收集到的数据只有研究人员才能访问，并通过密码保护进行安全存储。

7. Are there any benefits in taking part? 参加活动有什么好处吗?

While there are no immediate benefits for individuals taking part in the research, it is hoped to raise public awareness of students who have experienced homeschooling by showcasing their real experiences in the university and challenging existing stereotypes about homeschooled students. By bringing attention to this group, future students from similar backgrounds might benefit from the findings and suggestions of this research, helping them navigate their transition to university more smoothly. Moreover, this research also wishes to encourage universities to better support this minority group, creating a more inclusive learning and living environment on campus.

虽然参与研究的个人不会立即受益，但我们希望通过探索在家上学学生在大学的真实经历，提高公众对他们的认识，并挑战现有的对在家上学学生的刻板印象。通过对这一群体的关注，未来有类似背景的学生可能会受益于本研究的发现和建议，帮助他们更顺利地过渡到大学生活。此外，本研究还希望鼓励各大学为这一少数群体提供更好的支持，在校园中营造更具包容性的学习和生活环境。

8. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives? 哪些信息会被收集，为什么收集这些信息与实现研究目标有关?

Overall, I am interested in your homeschooling experiences as well as transition and adaptation experiences when learning at your university. First, I intend to collect information about your educational background, including learning methods and environments in the homeschooling stages, academic and social status during your homeschooling years. And then, I am also interested in what made you want to go back to the mainstream educational pathway (full-time bachelor's degree), from the niche educational pathway (homeschooling). In addition, I intend to explore your transition experiences after entering your university in terms of academic, social, emotional challenges you faced, supports available to you, and adaptation strategies you used to overcome challenges. The information you provide will help us better understand the transition experiences of Chinese students with homeschooling experiences to answer my main research question: What are the transition experiences of Chinese homeschooled students in higher education?

All photographs of the drawings, diaries, notes, other materials, and shared photos, recorded audio files, and transcribed scripts will be securely stored in my Oxford OneDrive Nexus 365 account, the university's approved storage platform. This platform offers secure, encrypted file storage with daily backups to ensure data integrity. Throughout the research process, only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor will have access to the research data. The findings will be written up in a dissertation. After the final submission, all the data will be permanently and securely destroyed. The collected data will not be reused.

我对您的在家上学经历以及在大学学习时的过渡和适应经历很感兴趣。首先，我打算收集您的教育背景信息，包括在家上学的学习方法和环境、在家上学时期的学习和社交情况。然后，我

还感兴趣的是，是什么原因让你想从原来的小众教育途径（在家上学）回到主流教育途径（全日制学士学位学习）。此外，我还想了解您进入大学后的过渡经历，包括您在学业、社交、情感适应方面所面临的挑战、获得的支持、为克服挑战而采取的适应策略。你们提供的信息将帮助我更好地了解中国在家上学学校学生的过渡经历，从而回答我的主要研究问题： 中国在家上学学生的大学过渡经历是怎样的?

所有绘画、日记、随笔和其他作品的图片和共享的照片、录制的音频文件和转录的脚本都将安全地存储在我的牛津大学 OneDrive Nexus 365 账户中，这是大学认可的存储平台。该平台提供安全、加密的文件存储，并提供每日备份，以确保数据的完整性和安全性。在整个研究过程中，只有直接参与研究的人员可以访问研究数据。研究结果将撰写成论文。论文完成并提交后，所有数据将被保存三年后永久安全销毁。收集到的数据不会被再次使用。

9. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?研究是否会发表？能否从任何出版物或其他研究成果中确定我的身份?

The findings from the research will be written up in a dissertation and deposited as an open access document. It might be developed into publications and conference presentations. The participants will not be identified from the outputs. Photographs that contain people or materials that contain personal information will not be shown, only content of dialogue will be included in the research outputs. I would like your permission to use direct quotations and to credit you without identifying you in any research outputs.

研究成果将写成论文，并作为开放存取文件保存。研究成果可能会被编入出版物或在会议上发表。参与者的身份将不会从成果中得到确认。研究成果中将不展示任何包含人物的照片或包含个人信息的作品，只包含对话内容。我希望得到您的允许，在任何研究成果中使用直接引文并注明您的姓名，但不透露您的身份。

10. Data Protection 数据保护

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 website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

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11. Who has reviewed this research? 谁审查了这项研究?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference:Education (Educ) DREC - 1400656).

这项研究已获得牛津大学中央大学研究伦理委员会下属小组委员会的伦理批准。（伦理序号：Education (Educ) DREC - 1400656)

12. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain? 如果我对研究有疑虑或想投诉，该与谁联系?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact [redacted] and I will do my best to answer your query. 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 University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on +44 (0)1865 616480.

如果您对本研究的任何方面有疑问，请联系[redacted]，我将尽力回答您的问题。我会在 10 个工作日内回复您的问题，并告知您将如何处理。如果您仍不满意或希望正式投诉，请联系牛津大学研究治理、伦理与保证 (RGEA) 团队：

电子邮件 rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk　　电话 +44 (0)1865 616480

13. Further Information and Contact Details 其他信息和联系方式

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

如果您想事先（或事后）与他人讨论研究内容，请联系：

[redacted]

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Background Information 背景信息

- Which university do you attend, and what is your major? Are you currently studying or have you already graduated? 请问你就读于哪所大学？什么专业？在读还是已经毕业？

  (If you are still studying, what year are you in? If you have graduated, how many years ago was it?)（在读的话今年大几，毕业的话毕业几年）

- Could you please draw a timeline of your educational experience prior to entering university, either on a tablet or on paper? 可以请你在平板电脑或者纸上画出目前为止的教育经历线吗?

- Could you describe your educational experience in more detail? 可以请你更具体地解释一下你的教育经历吗?

- Why did you choose homeschooling at the time? What was the main reason? 你当时为什么选择在家上学？最主要原因是什么？

- How did you feel when you first began homeschooling? Were there any memorable experiences? 你当时进入在家上学后你有什么感受呢？你有什么印象深刻的事情吗?

- How would you describe the learning environment and teaching methods during your homeschooling experience? 你会怎么描述你在在家上学经历中的学习环境和教学方式?

Reasons for Reintegrating into the Mainstream Education Path 重新融入主流教育路径的原因

- Why did you decide to transition from homeschooling to the mainstream education path (full-time bachelor's degree)? 你为什么决定从在家上学进入主流教育路径（全日制学士学位）？

- Have you ever received encouragement or persuasion to pursue mainstream education—for example, from family, peers, or society? 你有接受过任何让你接受这种主流教育路径的声音吗？比如来自家庭，同龄人，或社会上的声音。

- Did you encounter any challenges that limited your reintegration into the mainstream education path? Could you give specific examples? 是否有遇到任何挑战限制了您重新融入主流教育路径？有具体的例子吗？

- Apart from a full-time bachelor's degree at a mainstream university, did you consider other options (such as vocational training or an online degree)? 除主流大学中的全日制学士学位外，您是否考虑过其他选择（如职业培训、在线学位）？

  - 如果有的话，为什么你仍然择了主流高等教育途径？If so, why did you ultimately choose mainstream higher education?

- Compared with other educational paths, what different kinds of value do you think a mainstream higher education degree offers? 与其他教育途径相比，您认为主流高等教育学位有什么不同的价值？

- How did you decide whether to pursue higher education in mainland China, in another region, or abroad? 你是如何决定在中国（大陆）接受高等教育还是（去大陆外的地区）或出国留学的?
  - Which factors had the greatest influence on your decision? 哪些因素对你的决定影响最大?
  - Have you ever regretted this decision? Why? 你有没有后悔过这个决定，为什么?
- Why did you choose this particular major? 你为什么决定选择这个专业呢?

Transition in University 大学过渡

- Are you familiar with the term "university transition period"? 你知道"大学过渡期"是什么吗?
  - How do you understand it? 你是如何理解它的?
- Do you think you are currently experiencing, or have previously experienced, a transition period during university? Why or why not? 你觉得你正在/曾经在大学时经历过过渡期吗？为什么?

Impact of Homeschooling Experience on Higher Education 在家上学经历对高等教育经历的影响

- What skills and knowledge did you gain from your homeschooling experience? 你从在家上学经历中获得了哪些技能和知识?
  - ◆ Did these prepare you for higher education? 这些是否为你接受高等教育做好了准备?
  - ◆ If yes, how? 如果有，为什么?
- Which aspects of your homeschooling experience were particularly helpful in adapting to higher education? 在你的在家上学经历中，有哪些方面对你适应高等教育特别有帮助的?
- Which aspects of your homeschooling experience posed challenges in adapting to higher education? 在你的在家上学经历中，有哪些方面对你适应高等教育造成了挑战性?
- Do you think your homeschooling background has influenced your study habits, learning style, or approach in higher education? 你认为你的这段教育经历对你在高等教育中的学习习惯/风格/方法有什么影响吗?
- Have you ever shared your homeschooling background with anyone at your university? 你是否有向你所在的大学的任何人介绍过你的在家上学的教育背景?
  - ◆ If yes, why? 如果有，为什么?
    - Did this disclosure change your life or have any impact on you? 别人知道这件事使你的生活发生了什么变化或有什么影响吗?

◆ If no, why not? 如果没有，为什么？

- Do you plan to share it with others in the future? 你将来是否打算与他人分享?

● Has anyone at university ever misunderstood or held preconceived notions about your educational background? 在大学中，有没有人对你的教育经历有误解或者产生过成见?

◆ If yes, did this affect you or your university experience? 如果有，它对你和你的大学经历造成了影响吗?

Academic Experience 学术经历

● When you first entered university, what were your initial academic expectations? 进入大学时，你最初的学业期望是什么？

● How did these compare with your actual experiences during the transition period? 你觉得这与你在过渡时期的实际经历相比如何？

● What academic challenges did you encounter during your transition to university (e.g., adapting to courses, exams, group projects, grading systems)? 在向大学过渡的过程中，你遇到了哪些学业上的挑战（例如，适应课程、考试、小组项目、评分制度）？

● How did you adapt to the academic demands of university? What strategies did you use? 你是如何适应大学的学业要求的？采取了什么应对策略呢?

- Did you receive any academic support from the university or from others (e.g., tutoring, academic counselling)? 你是否从大学或其他人那里获得过任何关于学业的支持（例如辅导、咨询）？

  ◆ If yes, how helpful was it? 如果有，有多大的帮助？

- To what extent did your homeschooling experience help or fail to help you meet the academic demands of university? 你认为你的在家上学经历多大程度上帮助你/没有帮助你应对大学的学术/学业要求？

Social Experience 社交经历

- When you first entered university, what were your initial expectations for your social life? 进入大学时，你最初对社交方面有什么期待？

- How did these expectations differ from your actual experiences? 这些期待与你的实际经历相比，有什么不同？

- During your transition to university, what social challenges did you encounter (e.g., making friends, communicating with peers from traditional schooling backgrounds, participating in campus activities)? 在过渡到大学阶段的过程中，你在社交方面遇到了哪些挑战（例如，交朋友、与接受传统教育的同龄人交流、参与校园活动）？

- How did you adapt to the social environment of university? What strategies did you use? 你是如何适应大学的社交环境的？采取了什么应对策略呢？

- During this transition, did you join any clubs, organizations, or social groups? 在这个过渡过程中，你是否加入了任何社团、组织或社交团体?

- Did they help with your transition? Why or why not? 它们对你的过渡经历有帮助吗？为什么?

- Did you experience any psychological stress or adjustment issues related to social life? 你是否感受到来自社交方面的心理压力或心理适应过程?

  ◆ If yes, how did you cope with them? 如果有，你是如何应对这些情况的?

- Do you think your homeschooling background has influenced your social interactions or relationships at university (e.g., in building connections with others)? 你认为你的在家上学教育背景对你在大学中的社交互动或者人际关系有什么影响吗（例如，在与他人建立联系方面）?

- During your university transition, did you receive any social support from family, friends, or the university? 在大学过渡过程中，你是否从家人、朋友或大学获得了与社交相关的任何支持?

  ◆ If yes, how helpful was it? 如果有，有多大的帮助?

Emotional/Psychological Experience 情感/心理经历

- Do you think you faced any psychological or emotional challenges during your university transition? 你认为在你大学过渡的经历中，在心理或情感方面是否遇到过任何挑战?

- During this time, did you have any ways to express or release these psychological and emotional feelings (such as suppression, maladjustment, disappointment, happiness, excitement, or enthusiasm)? 在这段时间内，你是否有任何方式去表达或宣泄这种心理和情感方面的（压抑/不适应/失望/开心/兴奋/激动）？

- During this process, did you receive any support related to this from your family, friends, or university? 在这个过程中，你是否从家人、朋友或大学获得了与这方面相关的任何支持？

Questions about additional materials provided by participants (diaries, photos, essays) 针对参与者提供的额外材料(日记/图片/随笔）的提问：

- Could you describe in detail the drawing, diary, or photo you shared with me? 详细地介绍一下你分享给我的画作/日记/图片吗？

- Why do you think it reflects your state during the university transition period? 你觉得为什么它体现出了你在大学的过渡时期的状态？

Reflection Section 反思部分

- Please describe your university transition period in three words. 请用三个词来形容你在大学阶段的过渡期。

- How long do you think this “transition period” lasted? Or is it still ongoing? 你认为这个“过渡期”持续了多长时间？或者它仍在继续吗？

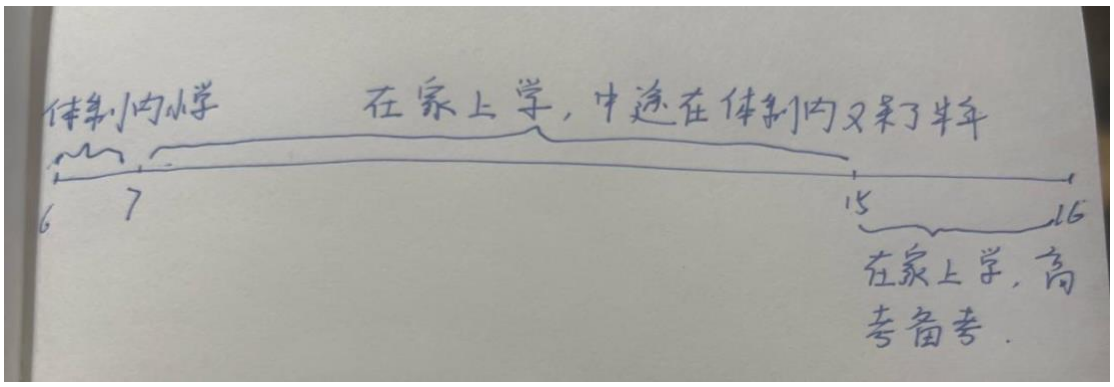
- Looking back, what preparations do you think could have been done better to help you transition more smoothly to university? 回顾一下，你觉得当初有哪些准备如果做得更好能让你更顺利的过渡到大学?
- How would you define a successful transition experience? 你会怎么定义一次成功的过渡经历?
- Do you consider your own transition successful? 你觉得你进入大学的过渡过程是成功的吗?
- If a family is considering homeschooling as a pathway, what advice would you give them? 如果有家庭正在考虑选择在家上学这条路径，你会给他们什么建议?
- What advice would you give to homeschooled students preparing to enter university in the future? 你会给未来准备进入大学的在家上学的学生什么建议?

Closing Question 结束提问

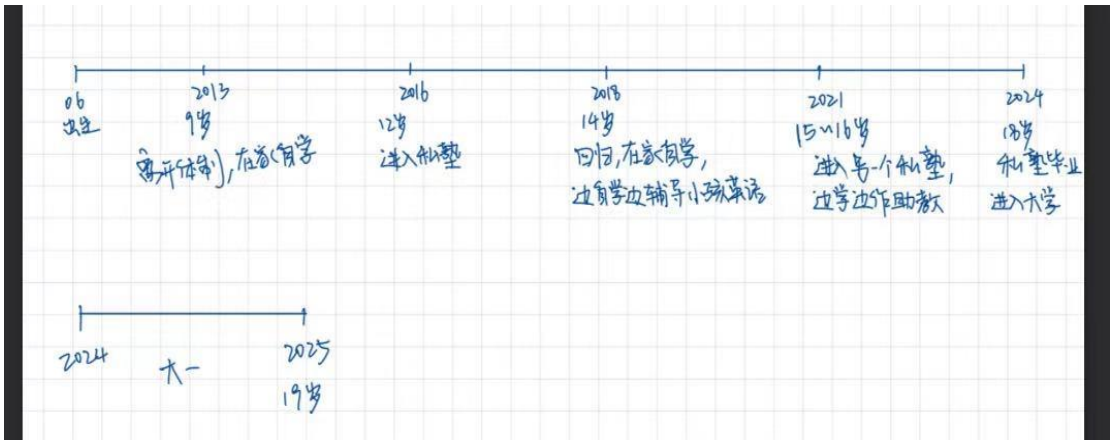
- Is there anything we haven't covered yet that you would like to share about your experiences or thoughts? 还有什么我们尚未提及，但你希望分享的相关经历或者想法吗?

Appendix E: Drawing Prompt and Examples of Participants' Drawings

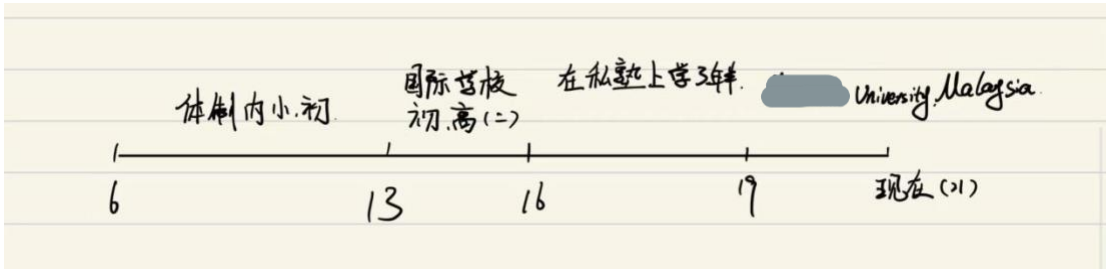
Prompt drawn by the researcher:



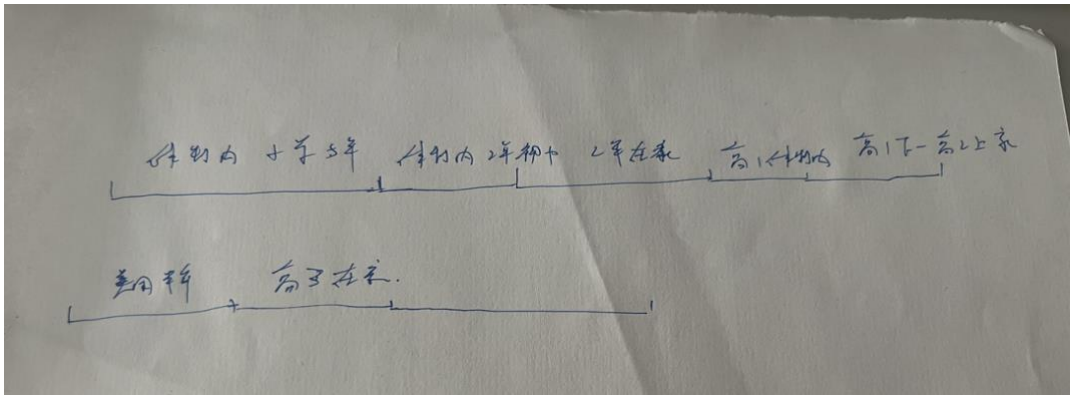
Examples of Participants' Drawings:



(Yue)



(Lun)



(Pong)

Appendix F: Example of Coding Map for Data Analysis

Theme	Code	Description	Example of Data Excerpts
Academic transitional challenges	Insufficient exam-taking experience and subject knowledge	Struggling with exam-based learning and gaps in general knowledge	"Because I have never experienced the kind of exam-oriented learning, nor have I experienced the high-intensity process of doing questions and coping with exams. So, after entering university, I was unfamiliar with and lacked training in this way of learning." Yu
			"Because I mainly studied English and math during homeschooling, [...]. So, when communicating with other students, I sometimes encountered problems in terms of knowledge. [...] When they talk about some simple geography knowledge, I have no idea. And history, such as visiting a museum or reading a history book, I can't keep up with others' sharing." Huan
	Difficulty in adapting to the curriculum and learning pace	Difficulty adjusting to structured, teacher-led learning and long, passive class style	"I'm no longer used to the kind of learning where everything is arranged by the teacher, and I prefer to arrange my own learning progress." Huan
			"It was difficult to sit through full days of classes from morning to evening, just listening the whole time. […] In the past, I also studied all day, but there were many breaks and chances to move around." Zhi
	Troubling and unmanageable group tasks	Frustrating group work due to unequal effort and lack of control over outcomes	"I have to work with some people who don't care much about the assignment. I think it is very torturous. [...] My grades are determined by others. I don't like this feeling. I don't like it at all." Chi
			"The biggest challenge is group work. Many people don't do anything, they are free riders. I can only do everything by myself." Xu
	The blank space in the student record	Struggling to explain gaps in the official student records (xue ji) due to homeschooling	"I don't even know how to explain to my college advisor the blank of the three years of high school in my student xue ji record." Lang
Social transitional challenges	The lack of like-mindedness	Feeling of isolation in university due to differing values and a lack of like-minded peers	"The challenges I mentioned are more about values. Because prior to university, I was in a relatively 'pure, focused, and positive' environment, and people around me shared a common drive to improve themselves. But in university, I found most of my classmates were more focused on entertainment, while others studied for the sake of studying. […] This difference caused a considerable conflict in my first semester, to the point where I considered dropping out and returning to a more focused, resonant learning space [...]" Lun
			"Socially, there were definitely (more challenges), [...] the feeling of loneliness of not being surrounded by kindred spirits, not being surrounded by people who were going through similar experiences to me." Huan
	Language barriers	Language and cultural barriers that limited social integration in the university	"I don't speak Malay. Malays tend to be closer to each other and I would be more limited in communicating with them, making it more difficult to cross this language and cultural divide. [...] Many associations and activities only allow local students to participate, and there can be a sense of exclusion." Xu
			"I made a lot of friends. [...] But because a lot of the clubs were mainly Thai students, communication was in Thai, and I didn't speak Thai at all at first, so I wasn't able to fully integrate." Yue
	"Forced" adapting to social norms	Struggling with adapting to group life after coming from isolated or self-directed homeschooling environments	"When I was in homeschool, I was in a relatively isolated environment. And when I got to university, I was forced to fit into group life, which I personally actually disliked very much." Zhan
			"I'm not very good at socialising. Sometimes, when I'm with classmates, I don't know how to communicate. There were times I felt pressured and forced myself to socialise and adapt to group life." Zhi

Appendix G: A Letter Generated by the Researcher (Typed Version)

Dear homeschooled students and parents,

This letter represents the collective voices of the homeschooled students in this study. It was written by the researcher on their behalf, drawing directly from reflections, suggestions, and experiences they generously shared. Although each participant's journey was unique, their insights echoed common themes of resilience, growth, and care—offered here to support students and families on similar paths or considering homeschooling.

Be clear about your rationales and goals—Chi, Pong, Xu, Yu, Yue, Zhan, Zhi

Before choosing homeschooling, take time to reflect deeply: Why this path? What are your long-term goals? Homeschooling is not just an alternative; it's a serious commitment that requires a clear sense of direction. Some of us had families who invested heavily—emotionally, financially, and intellectually—in supporting us. If your family is considering this route, it is essential to evaluate the resources and sacrifices it may entail. It's not a decision to make lightly.

Prepare for transition—academically, socially, and emotionally—Zhi, Zheng, Xu

University can be overwhelming at first, but challenges ease with time. Don't be afraid to try new things, even if they feel scary or uncomfortable. Join student societies early—they can be a great way to find community and ease into campus life. Be open about what you're not used to; people are often more willing to help than you expect, and your network will matter more than you realise. University demands managing not only your studies, but also your time, relationships, and emotions.

Make good use of the resources around you—Pong, Zhao, Zheng

Whether online platforms, peer networks, or social media groups, there is a wealth of information available. Use it. Read about others' experiences, find communities of students like you, and prepare for the university environment in advance. Knowing what to expect, academically and socially, can ease your anxiety and boost your confidence.

Keep your mindset grounded and open—Huan, Lang, Lun, Tin, Zhang

Don’t worry about competing with others. Everyone has their own strengths, and the real challenge is to grow into your own path. University is just one part of your life—it’s a process of exploration, not a final destination. Stay open, curious, and grounded in what matters to you.

Final words.

Not all families have the same resources or freedom to take risks. If you’re fortunate to have support, use it wisely. And if you’re figuring things out as you go, that’s okay too. Homeschooling is neither a shortcut nor a guarantee, but it can be a meaningful journey if you approach it with purpose, resilience, and a willingness to learn.

This letter reflects the collective wisdom of those who contributed to this research. May their words offer guidance, reassurance, and solidarity as you move forward.

With respect and hope,

Composed by the researcher, on behalf of the Chinese homeschooled students whose voices informed this study.