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International Education in Hong Kong: Paradoxes in Intercultural Communication, Adaptation, and Acculturation Strategies

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Abstract

Countries in East Asia that have traditionally been sources of international students are now being regarded highly desirable destinations for higher education. Yet little is known about the experiences of international students in East Asia as most research focuses on those in the Anglophone West. In this study, we explored the intercultural communication, adaptation, and acculturation strategies of international students in Hong Kong. We conducted in-depth interviews with international students from other Asian countries (n=14) and Western countries (n=10). Our findings identified a paradox between the international students' enthusiasm to engage with students from other backgrounds and a lack of interactions and friendships with local students. First, cultural and language differences were perceived to create a wall separating them from the local students, inhibiting a cosmopolitan learning environment. Second, international students primarily identified with peers with a shared national or cultural background who could provide a readymade community. Third, international students often reported sociocultural adaptation challenges and feelings of being outsiders, potentially exacerbating psychological adaptation problems. Based on our findings, we propose a framework depicting interactive and responsive relationships among intercultural communication, adaptation, and acculturation. We conclude by putting forward initiatives aimed at realising the benefits of international student mobility for both international and local students.

Keywords: International students, Intercultural communication, Acculturation strategies, Cross-cultural adaptation, An integrative framework, East Asia

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Introduction

International student mobility has increased substantially over recent years. Over six million students were studying abroad in 2020, approximately threefold the figure twenty years earlier (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Accordingly, international student mobility has emerged as an important field of study and international students have become a pressing policy concern for governments (Brooks & Waters, 2022). There have also been *qualitative* changes characterised by rising competition between traditional and emerging higher education destinations to attract international students. Higher education systems in a minority of Western countries continue to draw most international students. “Western” universities and the credentials they confer have been widely accepted as the “gold standard” (Kim 2016; Marginson, 2016), contributing to well-established inflows of international students from around the world: Australia, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, accounted for 36 percent of internationally mobile students for tertiary or higher education in 2020 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022).

At the same time, the global landscape of international student mobility is changing (de Wit and Altbach, 2021). In Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic, geo-political conflicts, and concerns over racism/discrimination have led more students to reconsider attending universities in the West (Yang, 2022a). By contrast, traditional “sending” countries of international students in Asia have emerged as increasingly desirable international student “destinations” for higher education. The rise in global standings of Asian universities (Mok & Kang, 2021), geo-political ties in a post-colonial era creating new networks of international student mobility (Mulvey, 2021), and proximity to home and perceived safety (Mok, Xiong & Ke, 2022) have all contributed to the growing interest in students studying in contexts such as Hong Kong. Despite this, little is known about the experiences of international students in East Asia as they adapt to living and studying in a new environment.

Research on the acculturation strategies and/or sociocultural adaptation of international students has mainly focused on those in the Anglophone West. Consequently, there is a risk of “missing out important geographies” and “perpetuating the myth that ‘the international’ can be equated to Anglophone,

Western locations and thereby enacting a form of neo-colonialism” (Brooks and Waters. 2022 p. 22). By contrast, the current research builds on Yu and colleagues’ work (e.g., Yu, 2021; Yu, Mak, & Bodycott, 2021; Yu, Vyas, & Wright, 2020) to explore intercultural communication, adaptation, and acculturation experiences among international students at a Hong Kong university. Overall, we put forward the case that there were paradoxes between the international students’ enthusiasm for engaging with students from different backgrounds on the one hand and a lack of interaction and friendship with local students on the other hand. We further discuss the reasons for this paradox, the strategies students adopt in response, and the implications for their academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation. In particular, the research sought answers to the following two research questions:

1. What are the intercultural communication and adaptation challenges international students face in Hong Kong?
2. What acculturation strategies do they employ most to overcome the challenges?

A Higher Education Hub in Hong Kong

Higher education participation in Hong Kong began to expand in the early 1990s. There are eight public-funded universities in the territory that provide places for approximately 100,000 students (University Grants Committee, 2022). Most degree programmes operate with an English medium, which relates to a British colonial legacy and the continued institutional role of English in Hong Kong society. In recent years, Hong Kong’s public universities have become internationally recognised for “world-class” standards. As a proxy for high quality and reputation, The University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong are positioned at the upper reaches of global university rankings (e.g., top 100 by *World University Rankings*, 2022). Yet higher education participation at public universities has stayed at around 16 to 18 percent of the age cohort, creating intense competition for admission (Wong, 2017 p. 167), and there is a well-established tradition among Hong Kong’s affluent middle-class to send children to universities in Western countries (e.g., Waters, 2006). At the same time, higher education in Hong Kong is becoming more internationalised. In

2004, the University Grants Committee (2004) published the *Hong Kong Higher Education: To Make a Difference To Move with the Times*. The policy document outlined ambitions for the higher education sector to serve as a higher education hub by building stronger links with mainland China and the broader Asia region. Since the publication, there has been a wide range of initiatives to attract more non-local students (the term “non-local students” includes students from mainland China as well as other countries). This included a doubling of the non-local student quota to 20 percent for public-funded programmes, removal of restrictions on non-local students for postgraduate programmes, scholarship schemes to attract talented non-local students, and rights for graduates to seek employment after graduation (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021; Vyas, 2018). Significantly, Lo, Lee & Abdrasheva (2022) note that higher education leaders have become increasingly aware of how Hong Kong’s higher education system may benefit from mainland China’s flagship policy agendas, such as the Belt and Road Initiative that is pursuing greater economic integration and cooperation with 149 countries across the Eurasia landmass and into Africa.

Accordingly, there has been a steady expansion of non-local students in Hong Kong. In 2000/01, non-local students made up only 2 percent of the student body at public universities. In 2021/22, this figure had increased to 20 percent or over 20,000 students (University Grants Committee, 2022). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the majority (73 percent) of these non-local students come from Mainland China (University Grants Committee, 2022). Although the share of non-local students from the rest of the world has increased in absolute terms, as a proportion stands at 23 percent from other parts of Asia and only 4 percent from other continents (University Grants Committee, 2022). The relative under-representation of non-local students from outside mainland China underscores the difficulties of establishing a truly global or regional education hub (Lo, 2015). This point underscores the importance of research that sheds light on the needs, experiences, and outcomes of non-local students outside the Chinese mainland so as to inform policy to expand the reach and impact of Hong Kong’s higher education hub status.

International Student Mobility

A growing body of research has demonstrated how the experiences of studying abroad are associated with a range of potential benefits for societies and students. Yang (2022b) sought to conceptualise on a macro-level how and why governments engage with inward flows of international student mobility to (re)produce, extract, or accrue capitals that benefit the host society. First, international students provide economic capital most directly through tuition fees. Second, international students can provide human capital through the inflows of educated and skilled young people who may contribute to the economy post-graduation. Third, international students can promote the symbolic capital of the host society and its universities on the global stage by promoting “goodwill”, prestige, and status. de Wit and Altbach (2021) add that there has been a trend away from viewing international students as a source of revenue to recognising their more comprehensive contributions to societies. All these points underscore the rationale for governments to formulate policies to attract international students.

From the student perspective, Roy et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review of 75 studies on the outcomes of international student mobility programmes, identifying three stands of benefits for students. First, “cultural outcomes” included promoting cultural awareness, cultural intelligence, global-mindedness, cultural sensitivity and empathy, cultural adaptability, language skills, intercultural communication skills, and intercultural competence. Second, the reviewed studies illuminated “personal outcomes” such as a greater understanding of moral and ethical issues, improved academic performance, personal development, and self-efficacy. Third, study abroad experience was found to influence “career outcomes” including professional development, perceived employability, career choices, and transition into international careers. Significantly, the skills, knowledge, and dispositions combined with the credentials accumulated from studying abroad represent a valuable form of “cosmopolitan” cultural capital that can present students with advantages in their futures over domestically educated students (Igarashi and Saito, 2014; Kim, 2016; Wright & Lee, 2019).

Other research has highlighted challenges with international student mobility. Commenting on the body of research, Teichler (2017) cautioned that: “The findings altogether do not support the view that international mobility is a more or less perfect success story” (p. 206-207). Teichler further discussed how the potential difficulties faced by international students include:

Funding, administrative issues at the host institution or in the host country, finding appropriate accommodation, getting along with the host country culture, getting in touch with host country students and other host country nationals, coping with the teaching and learning styles at the host institutions, meeting the academic standards of the host study programme, adjusting to the climate and food (p. 200).

It is noteworthy how international students are often stereotyped as either “academic elites” or “struggling foreigners” (Tannock, 2018). Most often, they are portrayed from a “deficit perspective” (Heng, 2018) and considered to be a “problem” group for higher education (Abdullah et al. 2014) characterised by a: “Lack of critical thinking, poor language competence, failure to integrate, tendency to plagiarise” (Jones, 2017 p. 394). In some cases, the negative portrayals of international students have resulted in concerns about quality control at universities. Benzie (2010) highlighted growing fears over the English language proficiency of international students in Australia, especially as more students sought employment in the country after graduation. Yet, the vast majority of these studies have focused on the experiences of international students in Western contexts. This is a problem as the landscape of international student mobility is evolving, and more internationally mobile students are attending universities in Asian higher education systems such as Hong Kong.

Among the limited work in Hong Kong, most research has focused on non-local students from mainland China. Li and Bray (2007) discussed the appeal of Hong Kong’s universities to mainland Chinese students stemmed from an internationalised education environment, English-language instruction, and the quality of universities. Other studies have found that high-achieving mainland Chinese students felt that studying in Hong Kong did not live up to the expected

career advantages (Xu, 2017) or that language barriers in English and the local Cantonese dialect could impede students' academic adaptation (Yu, Mak & Bodycott, 2021). Even less is known about the experiences of international students in Hong Kong. Wright and Lee (2019) note that students from international high schools are increasingly choosing top universities in Hong Kong as they are viewed as on par with leading universities in the West and offer the opportunity in an advanced "global city". Yet Yu and Wright (2017) illustrate that some international students face challenges adapting to unfamiliar assessments, teaching/learning styles, and classroom dynamics at Hong Kong universities. Nonetheless, the communication and adaptation challenges faced by international students in Hong Kong and their acculturation strategies remain under-researched.

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical basis for this study is situated within two fields: cross-cultural psychology (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) and social psychology of language (Clément, Baker & MacIntyre, 2003). In the bilingual context of Hong Kong, international students are caught up in a situation where sociohistorical factors mean that the language of university teaching is English, and the daily communication language is mainly Cantonese. A lack of metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness in this complex environment has the potential to exacerbate the challenges in international students' adaptation at Hong Kong universities. Second language (L2) acquisition is often described as one of the most effective means of producing and strengthening intercultural communication (Clément et al., 2003). As a result, L2 communication is a key component of the body of knowledge surrounding intercultural interaction, adaptation, and acculturation. The Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model is often employed as a measure of language use in the context of inter-cultural interaction, as it can capture the impact of L2 use as a tool for communication in a genuine sense, rather than as a skill in and of itself (Clément et al., 2003). WTC describes the likelihood that an L2 user will voluntarily initiate an exchange with another person, rather than have that exchange due to external pressure to do so. The most effective predictive factors for WTC are the L2 speakers' confidence, and perceived strength in their ability to communicate

effectively in the second language, as well as communication anxiety and perception of competence (Clément et al., 2003).

To bridge these theoretical gaps, this research presents an interactive and responsive model that links acculturation strategies, L2 WTC and adaptation that expands on work conducted by the authors and others (e.g., Yu, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2021; Yu, Mak & Bodycott, 2021; Yu, Vyas & Wright, 2020). It is innovative since it is the first study to incorporate L2 WTC, acculturation and adaptation to research international students. It explores the inter dynamics among intercultural communication, adaptation, and acculturation strategies of international students in Hong Kong. Specifically, it considers the differences in how and why international students across different cultural backgrounds communicate and acculturate when two or more cultures come into contact. Moreover, it will examine whether different L2 WTC and acculturation strategies will lead to different adaptation outcomes. For practical implications, this research presents recommendations (1) for universities to accommodate the needs of international students; (2) for administrators to design activities to enhance cultural and linguistic understanding between local and international students; and (3) for students with different cultures (local and international) to better communicate with each other. The research can, therefore, contribute to creating a culture of learning that benefits all students.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 international students at a university in Hong Kong. The case university was chosen due to its high position in global university rankings and relatively large population of international students. The students were recruited by posters placed around the university campus. The sample included fourteen students from Asian countries (including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, and Sri Lanka) and ten students from Western countries (including Australia, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Half of the students were undergraduates, and the other half were pursuing a postgraduate degree. Also, 13 students were male, and the other 11 students were female. The interviews aimed to illuminate the students' intercultural communication, academic, sociocultural, and

psychological adaptation experiences, and acculturation strategies. Each interview lasted for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The questions covered (1) the purpose and expectations of studying in Hong Kong, (2) the challenges of living and studying in Hong Kong, (3) inter-cultural communication with local and international students, (4) strategies employed to adapt to living in Hong Kong, (5) psychological adaptation (e.g., feelings of homesickness or loneliness), (6) how the university could better support international students, and (7) post-graduation plans. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Following this, interview transcripts were analysed following a three-step process for thematic analysis informed by Miles and Huberman (1994). The first step involved line-by-line “open” and “axial” coding of data into emerging themes. Large quantities of data were reduced and categorised into smaller quantities of units based on recurring perceptions and experiences. For the second step, core relationships among the themes were identified by constructing a “coding scheme”. Step three involved drawing conclusions from interview data by identifying common responses of participants relevant to the research questions. To ensure coverage of the most pertinent issues, the discussion will be limited to themes identified in five or more of the 20 interviews. Below, these themes are discussed under the following headings: (1) perceived barriers to interactions and friendships with locals, (2) acculturation strategies and, (3) academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation.

Research Findings

Although the participants came from diverse backgrounds, most international students had limited interactions with local students at the university. They frequently expressed motivation, interest, and perceived benefits of interacting with students from other parts of the world. Indeed, a major motivation for choosing Hong Kong as a higher education destination was the opportunity to live and study in a cosmopolitan city where “East meets West”. For instance, Vihaan explained how interactions with students from different backgrounds could promote inter-cultural understanding: “If I’m surrounded only by Indian people, then my thinking will be limited, so I won’t be able to understand what other people do and how they think” (Postgraduate, India). At the same time, most of the international students discussed a lack of interactions and

friendships with local students from Hong Kong. As an example, Kemala described: “It’s really hard to mingle with the locals; I mean to get into the circle of local students” (Undergraduate, Indonesia). Put differently, there seemed to be a paradox between the international students’ hopes and their experiences. In the below section, we report the reasons for this paradox, the strategies students adopt in response, and the implications for their academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation.

Theme 1: Barriers to interactions and friendships with local students

Perceived cultural differences

Perceived cultural differences stood out as one of the most critical factors that led to a lack of interaction or friendships between international and local students. For instance, the international students frequently discussed cultural differences with local students. First, there was a perception that local students were less open to meeting international students. For example, Geethan discussed how local students: “Seem kind of conservative, and they don’t really express all their feelings” (Undergraduate, Sri Lanka), and David perceived that: “Hong Kong people tend to be a little bit more reserved” (Postgraduate, Australia). Other participants perceived those local students had little motivation to interact with international students due to already having a network of friends and family in Hong Kong. Furthermore, as some examples, there was a more general perception of cultural distance with local students related to activities, interests, dispositions, and perspectives. As Gust discussed, cultural differences could be a barrier to forming friendships:

Our worlds are very different, which is kind of cool, but you have to be open to that. You have to be open to having friends that maybe you don’t fully understand, or they don’t really get you either. You actually might enjoy each other because you’re different but that doesn’t mean you can’t really sit down together and have deep conversations about everything because you just don’t really connect that much, so you end up with people who are more similar than you and those international people (Postgraduate, Netherlands).

Low motivation to learn Cantonese and low confidence in speaking English

The language was one explanation for the lack of interactions and friendships with local students. All students are required to demonstrate English language proficiency for admission to the university. Despite this, the participants highlighted a language divide between international and local students. As Alice observed: “I would say that there is a group of English speakers and there is a group of Cantonese speakers, and we don’t necessarily interact that much” (Undergraduate, France). On the one hand, they described how local students typically speak Cantonese outside of classroom settings. At the same time, there was also a perception that local students often lack confidence in speaking in English. On the other hand, most international students were not motivated or did not perceive it to be feasible to become proficient in Cantonese. Instead, most of the participants only learnt a few words and phrases. As Joyo explained: “We learn very basic words, like, ‘hello’, ‘thank you’. It’s just the very, very basics to survive in Hong Kong, but not enough to communicate better with locals” (Undergraduate, Indonesia). As an explanation, some international students noted insufficient opportunities to learn Cantonese. More common, however, was a lack of motivation to learn Cantonese. The international students discussed the high level of difficulty of learning a tonal language, the ability to “get by” in Hong Kong by speaking in English, the English medium of instruction of the university, a preference for learning Mandarin (e.g. for career prospects), and intentions to leave Hong Kong after graduation. As Gust noted, there was a common perception that learning Cantonese was not “worth” the time and effort required:

If you make a cost-benefit analysis, how much effort would it be for me to actually learn Cantonese? How much benefit do I get from that? It’s very clear. The benefit is not worth it (Postgraduate, Netherlands).

Outsiders in an “internationalised” university

The international students discussed institutional factors as an explanation for limited interactions with local students. Quite a few participants were sceptical about the extent of internationalisation at the university. As Sophie explained: “The university really profiles itself as international but at least, however, on the

student level you cannot see that” (Postgraduate, United Kingdom). First, the international students described barriers to participation in extracurricular activities at the university. The student associations and orientation events were perceived to be primarily aimed at local students, and most of the activities were conducted in Cantonese. Although extracurricular activities were ostensibly open to everyone, international students often felt excluded. As Chloe explained: “They had events for everyone, but they’re all in Cantonese so I just felt like why do I have to be here because I cannot understand anything” (Undergraduate, France). Second, some international students described being marginalised as a minority group on campus. The university was characterised as a tolerant space and free of discrimination. However, many of the participants described feelings of being “outsiders”, detached from the university and society. As one illustration, they explained how local students often presume incorrectly that all international students are short-term exchange students, rather than a more established part of the university community. As Jim said:

Many of the locals just ignore foreigners, right, especially us non-Asian foreigners. They kind of count us out because they think they are going to leave soon anyway. It’s kind of like the first question oftentimes people ask, are you on exchange? (Undergraduate, United States).

Theme 2: Acculturation Strategies

Identification with other international students

The process of acculturation into society is shaped by the motivation of students to build ties with the host culture and desires to preserve ties with one’s native culture (see Berry, 1997). Interview findings revealed that most international students identified with other international students, rather than building ties with the host culture. Specifically, the participants described how friendship groups were typically based on shared nationality, language, religion, and/or ethnicity. In many cases this involved close-knit student communities with co-nationals, especially among Asian student groups. Most of the participants discussed friendships with international students of different nationalities. As Tala explained: “I have friends from Pakistan, India, Nepal. I guess the ethnic

minorities just stick together” (Undergraduate, Philippines). Nevertheless, their closest friendships were mostly with co-nationals. As Tala added: “Well, I think it’s like a common thing that you will be really, really close to people with the same nationality”. Indeed, Andrew described international student sub-communities based on national lines:

You have Indians, even though they all speak English they tend to cluster with other Indians. The Malaysians, mainland Chinese people, and Koreans, they all cluster together, but they’re not like cold. I have friends with individual people, but I guess there are a lot of very country-specific activities and kinds of things (Undergraduate, United States).

As an explanation, most participants discussed the importance of a shared culture, interest, and experiences that makes it “easier to connect” with co-nationals (Postgraduate, Myanmar). As Kemela mentioned: “Sometimes we make jokes about history or politics in Indonesia, TV shows, that kind of thing. Other students may not get it” (Postgraduate, Indonesia). Also, international students from non-English speaking countries often noted a strong preference for speaking in their mother tongue. As Joyo described:

It’s because we’re from the same region so it’s easier for us to connect. Also, one other reason is that I speak Indonesian. Most of the places I go to, like people will be speaking Cantonese everywhere and it’s like you’re not understanding what they’re saying. It just feels like you want to speak your own language that...Basically, you miss your mother tongue and you end up looking for Indonesians who speak Indonesian (Undergraduate, Indonesia).

These participants discussed how they joined student communities with co-nationals at the university. As an example, international students often met co-nationals in classes or student accommodations. However, it was also described that there were established communities that students could join upon starting degree programmes. In quite a few cases, the students had contacted communities before arriving in Hong Kong. As Vihaan explained: “Before I arrived some people told me there’s a Facebook group and you can

just join in” (Postgraduate, India). The communities acted as a readymade support network that provided an alternative to building close connections with local students and the host culture. Indeed, the student communities provided students with ample advice and guidance about living in Hong Kong. As Jenab explained: “It’s very easy for them to get used to Hong Kong because of the Malaysian student association. It’s such a tight and supportive community, and everyone just gets to know everyone” (Undergraduate, Malaysia). The communities also provided a potential group of friends and organised regular activities. As Niloy explained:

I think the Bangladesh community is kind of nice here. Like the Bangladeshi have their own festivals and things like that. They have that group. They go camping, they go hiking (Postgraduate, Bangladesh)

Co-national and Western identification

It was noteworthy that not all international students had the same opportunities to join student communities organised according to a shared nationality. Participants from countries under-represented at the university most often discussed not being part of a close-knit student community. In particular, this included international students from Western countries such as Australia, France, the Netherlands, the United States, and the United Kingdom. As Sophie explained: “The university seems quite international, but I don’t actually know any British people” (Postgraduate, United Kingdom). Also, Jim explained how most of the students from Western countries are on short-term exchange programmes, rather than full-time students: “There is no full-time American community. They’re all exchange students. I wouldn’t say there is an American community” (Postgraduate, United States). As a result, some students discussed how they did not have a community “to go to” upon joining the university. As Kevin explained:

I think the story is very, very different for example an Indian student or a Korean student where they have really strong pre-existing communities as supposed to someone like me or someone who doesn’t speak Cantonese and who doesn’t really have a community to go to (Undergraduate, United States).

Instead, these international students formed a university social group at the university based upon a shared “Western” identity. As Sophie noted: “Most of my friends are Westerners, or they’re quite international in a way” (Postgraduate, United Kingdom). This Western group often included Asian students who had an experience of living in Western countries or studying at international schools. Significantly, connections among Western students were characterised as more informal and loose rather than operating through established student communities. In particular, Western students commonly perceived themselves as being more “international” and having the capacity to interact with English language speakers from diverse nationalities. As Hugo described:

These people are drawn to each other because they have shared values, their English is better, and they are more likely be more aware of international affairs in politics and have an opinion about it. They’re just more self-aware in terms of other cultures and national identities (Postgraduate, Portugal).

Theme 3: Academic, Sociocultural, and Psychological Adaptation

Academic adaptation

Starting a degree programme typically requires students to go through a process of academic adaptation. Most clearly, students need to adapt to a higher level of academic standards compared to prior levels of educational attainment. The process of academic adaptation can be more complicated for international students due to needing to adapt to an unfamiliar academic environment. Nonetheless, most students in the current research were satisfied with the academic components of degree programmes. The courses were described as high-quality and internationalised in content. However, a few participants noted a few challenges to academic adaptation related to the Hong Kong context. On the one hand, some students from Asian countries discussed the challenges of adapting to the university’s English-medium-of-instructions. On the other hand, international students from Western countries most often discussed challenges in adapting to unfamiliar educational approaches and styles. The most commonly cited examples included teacher-centred teaching,

limited classroom discussion, more rote learning, and greater weight given to examinations. As Andrew reported:

I think the classroom dynamics are a little bit different. I think a lot of times in the U.S., it's much more interactive between the professors and the students. During the lecture, the students here are just slouching and doing their own stuff, and when a professor asks a question, nobody responds (Undergraduate, United States).

Sociocultural adaptation

An important finding was how the international students described more significant challenges with sociocultural adaptation in Hong Kong, as compared with academic adaptation. In other words, the participants typically discussed more difficulty with “fitting in”, acquiring culturally appropriate skills, and interacting in the new environment. It was this that led to their feelings of being “outsiders” at the university and society. A few students described some experiences of engaging with the community outside of the university, for example, through part-time private tutoring of local students, community service projects, and organisations such as the church. Nonetheless, most international students characterised their experience as detached from society. The lives of international students were often focused on interactions with other international students and limited to the university campus, whereas few of the participants had developed strong connections outside the university. As Ines explained: “I don't know many local people outside the university. My life is quite centered in the university campus” (Undergraduate, France). As an explanation, some international students noted how their primary objective was to focus on academic studies and complete their degree programme, rather than integrate into society. Other participants perceived difficulty “fitting in” as a foreigner in Hong Kong. As Gust described:

A lot of people move to another country and say, “I'm going to make lots of local friends and learn the language and everything”. But you will never fit in. You will always be a foreigner, and that's okay if you are okay with that (Postgraduate, Netherlands).

Psychological adaptation

The international students discussed psychological adaptation in Hong Kong, including emotional or affective aspects of adaptation, such as levels of well-being and satisfaction. Many of the participants mentioned feelings of homesickness and loneliness upon starting their degree programmes. These issues were most common among undergraduate students, especially as many had not experienced living away from family and in another country. As a response, the international students stressed the importance of support networks of other international students. As Tala said: "It's important to get to know them so that you have a support group so that you don't feel lonely and you can 'survive', even if you have a hard time" (Undergraduate, Philippines). To this end, the Asian students discussed how close-knit student communities with co-nationals acted as a readymade support network. As Geethan described regarding the Sri Lankan student community: "Yes, they helped me a lot. When I first came here, I didn't know a lot about Hong Kong, and also about food and all that. My seniors who live here, they were really helpful" (Undergraduate, Sri Lanka). By contrast, other students, particularly those from Western countries, did not have such a support network. That is, they lacked socio-cultural adaptation into the local society and did not have a readymade community of co-nationals to join at the university. Without a support network, these students could be most vulnerable to difficulty with psychological adaptation. As Leon explained:

There's no one who asks me, "Let's go to do something." There's no one who really wants to hang out with me and there are actually not that many people whom I want to hang out with to be honest. That has to do with language, with culture and these kinds of things (Undergraduate, Switzerland).

Discussion

Unlike previous studies on international students that have primarily focused on those pursuing overseas studies in the Anglophone West, this study investigates the intercultural communication, adaptation, and acculturation strategies of international students at a Hong Kong university. To recap, we identified a paradox between the international students' enthusiasm to engage

with students from other cultural backgrounds, which often underscored their reason for choosing Hong Kong as a higher education destination, and a lack of interactions and friendships with local students. First, we demonstrate how perceived cultural differences, language barriers, and feelings of being “outsiders” at the university created barriers with local students. Second, the international students primarily identified with groups of students with a shared national, linguistic, religious, and ethnic background who could provide a “readymade” community upon joining the university. Third, the international students generally reported greater sociocultural than academic adaptation challenges, and those who lacked integration into a university or broader community were most vulnerable to difficulties with psychological adaptation. Below, we discuss each of these themes in more detail.

A “wall” separating international and local students

International students have much to offer universities, underscoring efforts to develop higher education hubs. On the one hand, international students can provide economic capital through fees and other expenses, human capital through inflows of talented young people, and symbolic capital through goodwill, prestige, and status globally (de Witt & Altbach, 2021; Yang, 2022b). On the other hand, international students can enhance the learning of local students through a form of “internationalisation at home” (Nilsson, 2003). For example, their presence in classrooms and campuses can promote “cosmopolitan learning” (Soong, 2020) through a space for meaningful intercultural dialogue. Put differently, these interactions provide opportunities for both local and international students to “Harness their innate skills, produce critical knowledge of their place in the global world, and hone their intercultural awareness and competence, to becoming ‘global citizens’ in a cultural sense” (Soong, 2020 p. 123). By so doing, *all* students can have greater opportunities to accumulate the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to prepare them to thrive under globalisation (cf. Igarashi & Saito, 2014; Kim, 2016; Wright & Lee, 2019).

However, we want to argue that all this is conditional on international students having sufficient interactions and indeed friendships with their local peers. In the current research, we found that although international students in Hong Kong typically had a strong willingness to communicate with local students, a

mismatch of language awareness and perceived cultural differences could form a “wall” between them that prevents international students from integrating into the university and wider society, often resulting in feelings of being “outsiders”. While the findings are similar to research findings of Asian international students in English-speaking Western universities (e.g., Yu & Moskal, 2019), the barriers were arguably greater in Hong Kong owing to a linguistic environment where the language of university teaching (English) is different to the language of daily communication (Cantonese). This resulted in the international students having minimal interactions or friendships with local students in the classroom or extracurricular activities as well as limited integration into the host society. The fundamental point here is that the mere presence of international students, without the facilitation of deep engagement with local students, is unlikely to realise the full benefits of inward flows of mobile students for universities.

Acculturation strategies: identifications with co-nationals and other international students

In our study, most international students ended up socialising with their peers from the same or similar cultural backgrounds. International students from countries with a large number of co-nationals at the university (e.g., India) often described how they found it easier to connect and build friendships with students who came from the same national background due to shared cultures, languages, lifestyles, and values. Interestingly, “Western” students perceived themselves as a separate international student group on campus, which often included ethnically Asian students who had lived abroad. These students’ “Westernised” cultural background and capacity to communicate freely in English have highlighted an important marker of being “international” and “different” to local students.

To help explain these findings, Ward and Kennedy (1994) demonstrate that strong co-national identification can be accompanied by a lower level of psychological stress in the acculturation process. For instance, the communities formed by co-nationals could serve as support networks, or mediators, through which international students could get to learn about and experience the host culture. Also, the Western students perceived differences

with local students led them to rely upon each other for a sense of belonging and mutual support. These strategies could reduce the burden for them to face the challenges of the new culture on their own. That is to say, the international students' interactions and friendships with co-nationals or those from Western backgrounds could be conceptualised as an acculturation strategy to alleviate stress and promote adaptation to a new cultural environment.

Nonetheless, Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) argue that those who adopt a separationist approach in the host culture are likely to experience the highest level of difficulty in sociocultural adaptation, while those who assimilate into the host society would experience the least amount of difficulty. In other words, students need to balance their relationships with co-nationals and other cultural groups to facilitate their acculturation process. The international students' strategies may, in turn, restrict their successful acculturation. According to the L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model, if international students do not actively use L2 (i.e., Cantonese) in their study or daily life and do not feel strongly motivated to use it, they might not see much improvement in their Cantonese communicative competence (Masgoret, & Ward, 2006). Therefore, the perceived cultural differences with local students combined with linguistic differences between Cantonese and English, if not overcome, could become barriers to these students' acculturation. As a result, students may feel "marginalised" rather than "integrated" into the university and society.

Sociocultural adaptation over academic adaptation challenges

In terms of adaptation types, sociocultural adaptation stood out as the major challenge. The degree programmes were described as high-quality and internationalised, which facilitated academic adaptation. A teacher-centred pedagogy posed challenges to students accustomed to a more student-centred approach (Wright & Lee, 2022), whereas others faced difficulty adapting to an English medium of instruction. Nonetheless, most students were satisfied with their courses and successfully adapted to the academic environment. It was the socio-cultural adaptation that stood out as the major challenge, leading many to describe themselves as "outsiders" with few interactions with local students or integration into society. As Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) state, sociocultural adaptation is closely linked to "length of residence in the new culture, language

ability, cultural distance, and the quality of contact with host nationals” (p. 424). This point underscores the importance of students developing networks or quality relationships in the host society. However, while desirable, the capacity of international students to realise this was challenged in our study by the perceived cultural and linguistic differences.

A lack of resources as newcomers to cope with “fitting in” issues seemed to lead some students towards a separationist strategy. The students reported how they would centre their life around the university campus and interact only with other international students. As research (e.g., Valencia-Garcia et al., 2012) shows, individual-level social capital is closely linked with acculturation and positive mental health. Having local friends or host communities to turn to can play a key role in sociocultural adaptation. Our findings highlight that these issues are especially important for the adaptation of international students who do not have a “readymade” community of co-nationals to join, including many of those from Western backgrounds as a minority group at the university. Importantly, if unresolved, these students can be most vulnerable to psychological adaptation difficulties related to well-being and satisfaction. Overall, we believe that if students are directly or indirectly offered the opportunity to engage with the local students and communities more closely, their sociocultural, as well as psychological adaptation, could be enhanced.

A Proposed Framework

We wish to propose a framework informed by our findings. As discussed above, intercultural communication and adaptation are closely related: a bilateral understanding and mastery of each other’s culture and language can be a crucial step for both international and local students. An effective acculturation strategy is another crucial factor determining the success of intercultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation. With this in mind, we believe that universities should invest more resources to enable and encourage more interactions between international students and their local student peers. Over time, both groups can develop more identification with each other’s culture, beliefs, language, and customs, thereby supporting the adaptation of international students and creating a cosmopolitan learning environment that benefits local students. In summary, L2 WTC, linguistic confidence, and

acculturation strategies (i.e., host-national identification) provide the basis for international students' adaptation to a different culture by interacting more with the local community.

As shown in Figure 1, the framework depicts the dynamics of the interactive and responsive relationships among transnational communication, acculturation, and adaptation. Specifically, this framework displays the interplay of L2 WTC, linguistic confidence, and acculturation (i.e., identification with the L2 group) and their effect on adaptive outcome variables (academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation). Based on this model, it is proposed that future studies can be conducted to explore the nuance of the multi-dimensional cross-cultural adaptation issue experienced by international students and to test the interrelationships among academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation.

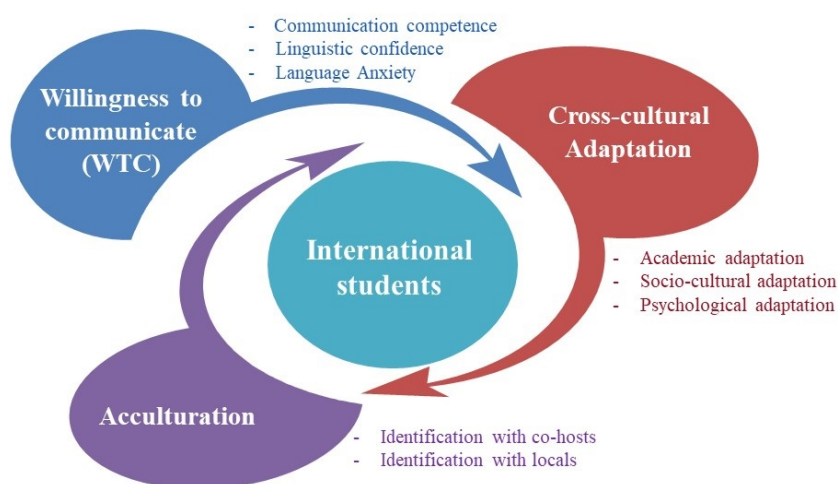


Figure 1. An integrative model between L2 WTC, Acculturation Strategies, and Cross-cultural Adaptation

Implications

Universities can play pivotal roles in facilitating communication between local students and international students. To respond to the paradoxes identified in the study, we wish to conclude by proposing a series of activities that could be initiated or expanded as part of higher education hub initiatives. Although the focus here is on higher education in Hong Kong, the activities are applicable to

universities in other contexts. The key point is that the activities help connect international students with their local peers at the university and broader communities: (1) A more comprehensive student orientation programme aimed at providing newcomers with the essential skills, knowledge, and contacts to survive in daily life; (2) Practical and dialogue-oriented Cantonese classes for international students that instil at least a basic proficiency to communicate with locals; (3) Cultural and language exchange pairs between local and international students with the objective of building inter-cultural understanding, building friendships, and extending social networks; (4) Curriculum development aimed at expanding learner-centred pedagogy, expanding opportunities for classroom discussion, and offering more assessments such as group projects that require international students to collaborate with their local peers; (5) Inclusive student clubs or societies that target both local and international students, especially by ensuring that international students are not excluded from any activity; and (6) Workshops and seminars on Hong Kong's societal issues aimed at triggering international students' interest in learning more about Hong Kong's social life and also to equip them with relevant cultural and social knowledge to integrate. Overall, we believe that close attention to these proposals is crucial for universities to realise the benefits of international student mobility for both international and local students.

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