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Existentialist internationalisation and the Chinese student experience in English universities

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Much of the ‘internationalisation’ that is currently observed in English universities is driven, whether directly or not, by economic and financial rationales associated with a particular neo-liberal discourse of globalisation into which higher education has been subsumed. This is particularly true for the recruitment of international students into English universities. We present a case for the recasting of the higher education internationalisation agenda in terms of Sanderson’s existential internationalism. Such an agenda promotes inter-cultural understanding over financial motives and demands a focus on personal engagement with the Cultural Other. We report on the findings of two studies of Chinese students studying at English universities to examine the extent to which their experiences reveal evidence of a context that could support such a personally transformative internationalisation. We find that, far from illustrating the potential for development of genuinely international communities, these students’ accounts are commonly of marginalisation, indifference and ‘otherisation’ that lead instead to social and cultural withdrawal into national groups and a heightened sense of national identity.

Keywords: higher education; globalisation; international students; existentialist internationalisation; intercultural understanding; Chinese students

Introduction: rethinking ‘internationalisation’

This paper examines the experiences of a relatively small but diverse sample of Chinese students in seven different English universities in terms of their interaction with the host society and culture on and off campus. Their presence at these universities is the most visible manifestation of the ‘internationalisation’ of British higher education that has received much recent attention in the academic literature, the media, government policy statements and institutional strategy documents, but about which we wish to raise some fundamental questions. Our paper therefore begins with a – necessarily selective – review of the considerable literature on higher education internationalisation as a background to the presentation and discussion of our empirical data. We wish to highlight a view of internationalisation that focuses on the actual experiences of students rather than on institutional strategy, but which we feel has important implications for such strategy and ensuing practice. This view of internationalisation has been labelled ‘transformative’ or ‘personal’ (Turner and Robson 2008) or (in a slightly different context) ‘deep’ (Appadurai 2001), although the term

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that appeals to us most, as we shall discuss below, is ‘existential internationalisation’ (Sanderson 2004).

Part of the problem in researching and writing about the internationalisation of higher education is that the concept itself is so variously interpreted and commonly conflated with other similar ideas, notably those of globalisation and multiculturalism. One influential definition is that from Knight (1997, although variously restated and ‘updated’ – see Knight 2004), who begins by suggesting that internationalisation in higher education is a response to the impacts of globalisation, thereby ascribing a cause and effect relationship to the two phenomena. We have a difficulty with this in that it makes our understanding of internationalisation contingent on an interpretation of globalisation, which is itself contested. We prefer Gacel-Avila’s (2005) position that globalisation is a contemporary context for internationalisation, which we feel opens more space for an independent conceptualisation of internationalisation and offers greater scope for it to be seen as a possible corrective for less desirable manifestations of globalisation. Although Sidhu (2004) ascribes ‘the will to internationalise’ among Australian universities to the influence of globalisation, she also points out that globalisation should be treated not as an objective ‘given’ but as a discourse that may be and is variously constructed in the ‘conjoint relations between knowledge and power’. In this respect, Cline et al. (2001, cited in Dixon 2006) suggest that ‘globalisation has been irretrievably lost to the neoliberal discourse’, although Dixon herself suggests that a dilemma remains in globalisation between the neo-liberal ‘dominance of economic imperatives and Westernisation in the creation of one world over the peaceful and productive interaction between nations’ (2006, 331). For Jones (1998), this is not so much a dilemma as the basis for distinguishing between globalisation and ‘internationalism’, a concept which offers an alternative foundational ideology for internationalisation to that of a Western hegemonic neo-liberalism. Jones himself, while rejecting an economic reductionist view of globalisation, is clear that the underlying logic of globalisation is ‘the creation of a new world economic order’ (1998, 145). This he contrasts with internationalism’s focus on the ‘promotion of global peace and well-being’ (1998, 143). Given the status that Jones goes on to ascribe to UNESCO as the institutionalisation of the ideals of internationalism in education, it is interesting to note that although UNESCO (2003) itself recognises globalisation more broadly as a ‘set of economic, social, technological and cultural structures and processes’, it is afforded an essentially economic basis in that these arise ‘from the changing character of the production, consumption and trade of goods and assets that comprise the base of the international political economy’. Similarly, Altbach and Knight (2007) recognise ‘economic, political and societal forces’ of globalisation but their discussion in relation to globalisation’s impact on the internationalisation continues in terms of ‘global capital’ and ‘knowledge industries’.

When we look at studies of the internationalisation of higher education at the systemic or institutional level, whether in terms of strategy or practice, two broad conclusions commonly emerge. The first is that international student recruitment is the most significant internationalisation activity in terms of visibility, scale and institutional impact (see Toyoshima 2007 and Haigh 2008 on the UK; or Matthews 2002 on Australia). The second is that the dominant motivation behind internationalisation activity is economic. Toyoshima (2007) suggests that elite universities in the UK play down the economic motive for internationalisation, whilst those more recently established and with less of a research orientation are more prepared to recognise its importance. Bolsmann and Miller (2008) similarly found a range of discourses
around the recruitment of international students in their study of 16 British universities but concluded that the economic competition rationale is dominant. Even when university authorities express their motivation to internationalise in terms of gaining international reputation this must be interpreted in the context of a positional competition into which universities have been thrust under the pressures of a neo-liberal discourse of globalisation, the knowledge economy and competitive advantage. Haigh makes the point more brutally: ‘In theory, internationalisation is a process for the education of planetary citizens … In practice, internationalisation is about income generation for cash-strapped higher education institutes’ (2008, 427).

An important distinction between globalisation and internationalisation lies in the role and significance accorded to the nation state (Daly 1999; Gacel-Avila 2005). Daly argues that, from an economic perspective at least, globalisation demands ‘the effective erasure of national boundaries’, although Carnoy and Rhoten (2002), from the perspective of globalisation as a ‘force reorganizing the world’s economy’, argue that nation states retain importance but are compelled to focus more on economic growth promotion than on the protection of national identity. Internationalisation, on the other hand, is premised on the continued significance of nations as ‘still our basic locus of community and unit of policy’ (Daly 1999) but with a concern to promote better relationships of mutual respect and understanding between nations (Jones 1998). It can be argued that globalisation’s influence on national governments to be less concerned with ‘national identity’ provides fertile ground for the attendant project of Western cultural hegemonic assimilation (Sidhu 2004; Tikly 2001). In the absence of an explicit and corrective internationalist agenda, popular nationalist backlash against this erosion of identity is perhaps unsurprising. Such an internationalist agenda would be based on the acceptance and celebration of differences in cultural identities and seek to improve intercultural understanding rather than cultural dominance and assimilation based on asymmetrical power relationships. The possibilities of such a process are part of the broad debate on issues of ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘global citizenship’, and it is not our intention to enter this debate here, if only for reasons of space (but see Turner 2002 and Gunesch 2004 for useful outlines of core concerns). Within the scope of this paper, our concern is with the initial inter-cultural engagement that is an essential precursor to any subsequent emergence of new cross-cultural relationships, whether cosmopolitan or hybrid in nature.

We propose, in light of the above analysis, that much – indeed most – of the contemporary ‘internationalisation’ of higher education is, as Knight suggests, a response to globalisation but that it is a largely unmediated, unreflective response that impoverishes the concept of internationalisation. It reflects a narrow, neo-liberal globalist (Naidoo 2003) rather than a broader internationalist agenda in higher education. The distinction that Yang (2002) makes between these two agendas in terms of their ‘economic’ and ‘human interest’ motivations, respectively, further illustrates our point. The growth of business-led managerialism, the use of ICT to expand e-learning into new markets, the commodification of knowledge to meet the demands of a ‘knowledge economy’ (Walker 2001; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; although see Brown and Hesketh 2004 for an interesting challenge to the significance of the knowledge economy) and the rhetoric of international advantage in terms of global rankings and positioning are further parts of this ‘globalist-internationalisation’ in higher education. We are concerned that even those forms of higher education internationalisation that appear to derive from an ‘academic’ rationale (Knight 2004) are increasingly ‘economic’ in their inspiration as the higher education sector is
subsumed into the global economy as ‘Higher Education Inc.’ (Haigh 2008; see also Jiang 2008).

In terms of our focus on the experiences of international students, we accept the proposal by Bolsmann and Miller (2008, 77) that their recruitment can be seen as engaging ‘with the processes of globalisation that are primarily economic and competitive but also as worthwhile and valuable in its own right’. Our concern is that the latter value is afforded inadequate strategic attention for it to be achieved in practice, with a common attitude seeming to be that the presence of sufficiently large numbers of international students on our campuses will by itself lead to its realisation. Instead, we would argue, there is a need for a clear conceptualisation of, and personal and institutional commitment to, a form of internationalisation that is not beholden to a particular contemporary view of globalisation. Teichler (2004) has called for internationalisation strategies that promote greater ‘global understanding’ and de Vita and Case (2003) for ‘culturally inclusive, fair and genuinely educational forms of multicultural higher education teaching and assessment’. Of great interest here is the distinction made by Turner and Robson (2008, 26ff. and drawing on Bartell 2003) between ‘symbolic’ and ‘transformative’ international orientations. The former (seen as one end of a spectrum) shows many of the characteristics that we have discussed above as the ‘globalist’ position, with its commitment to markets and an economic rationale. A symbolically international university may in fact enrol many overseas students but the institutional attitude to them is encapsulated by Luxon and Peelo (2009), in the UK context, as being that they come to the UK for a British education so the university has no need to change what it does. The alternative, as captured by the notion of transformative internationalisation, is that the ‘international richness’ these students represent does, and should, affect the nature of the educational experiences of all in the university. Turner and Robson (2008, 33) make the essential point that transformative internationalisation is personal rather than institutional and, as such, depends on the world-views and ideological commitments of academics rather than managerial strategies. Since our interest here is with the students’ experiences rather than the academics’ or managers’ intentions, we would extend the notion of this personal nature of transformative internationalisation to include the transformation of students’ world-views as a result of their university experience. Indeed, we would argue that ‘international’ is a label better used to describe those who emerge from such a transformative experience, whether they be ‘home’ or ‘overseas’ students, rather than as a description of the latter on arrival.

To provide philosophical and ideological underpinnings to this notion of personal transformative internationalisation we are particularly attracted to an article by Gavin Sanderson (2004). Sanderson begins by recognising the significance of the present era of globalisation and sees one of its most important challenges as how to deal with contact with the ‘Cultural Other’ that globalisation has made more likely, more immediate and more important to be dealt with. He identifies ‘fear of the unknown’ as being at the heart of our historical constructions of and reactions to the Cultural Other but maintains that this is an inadequate response in the contemporary world. Drawing on existential philosophers, he labels his ‘modest proposal’ for a way forward as ‘existential internationalism’: ‘It is to internationalise our personal selves in a bid to produce a very different relationship between internationalisation and globalisation than the biased, instrumental one offered by neo-liberal globalism’ (Sanderson 2004, 14). In amplifying the meaning of such an internationalisation, it is clear that Sanderson does not propose the suppression of the individual’s national
identity but argues instead that through gaining greater understanding of the Cultural Other one is better enabled to understand oneself, to deconstruct and reconstruct one’s understanding of national identity rather than retreating into a stereotyped, chauvinistic populist nationalism. It is interesting that although Sanderson begins by recognising Knight’s statement that the internationalisation of higher education is a response to globalisation he goes on to turn this relationship on its head. He draws on Appadurai’s (2001) distinction (although originally made in the context of academic research practice) between ‘weak’ internationalisation, which invites those from ‘outside’ to engage on the basis of the acceptance of the host’s knowledge and ethics, and ‘strong’ or ‘critical’ internationalisation in which communities are genuinely open to and willing to debate without prejudice the knowledge and ideas of all members. This, according to Appadurai, is a route to an alternative ‘globalisation from below’, or ‘grassroots globalisation’ that could, in Sanderson’s words, represent ‘an opportunity for humanistic advancement in the face of the domination of present neo-liberal, neo-conservative and implicit neo-colonial agendas influencing politics, economics and culture’ (2004, 16); and, we would add, ‘higher education’ too.

As explained at the beginning, our concern in this paper is with the concept of internationalisation of higher education as a conceptual context for the analysis of our data on the experiences of Chinese students. We do not attempt to examine whether their respective universities could be considered ‘transformatively’ or ‘existentially’ international, but are concerned instead with whether the initial conditions exist for such forms of internationalisation to develop. The growing recent concern for the more experiential aspects of internationalisation has been accompanied by a literature documenting the actual experiences of students studying outside their own country, largely focusing on their teaching and learning within the institution and with suggestions for how this might be made more genuinely intercultural, but also including studies of students’ lives off campus (e.g. Gill 2007; Gu and Schweisfurth 2006; Pritchard and Skinner 2002; Skyrme 2007; UNITE 2006; Yen and Stephens 2004). We wished to focus in our research on the total experience of these students in the UK, on and off campus, since we believed – and our data confirmed – that responses to experiences on campus and in the classroom can only be fully understood when placed in a wider context, both spatial and temporal, of the students’ lives.

Our research deals exclusively with Chinese students and, in focusing on depth and richness in our data, we have necessarily examined the experiences of only a small number among this, the largest national group of international students in the UK. We see our findings as indicative rather than definitive, even with respect to the Chinese student community, and make no attempt to generalise. At the same time, however, the similarities in some of the experiences reported to us from the diverse universities in our study do suggest some common, if not universal patterns. Our findings suggest that aspects of national identity, together with gender, level of study and time spent in the country, may be important influences on individuals’ constructions of and responses to their experiences, but that individual ‘character’ and personal histories may play at least as influential a role.

**Our research studies**

Our data come from two distinct research projects. One is a longitudinal study of the experiences of Master’s-level Chinese students at a single university. In this study, the researcher kept in close and frequent touch with 13 students from Mainland China
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throughout their one-year courses in the UK. A novel aspect of the research was the use of non-structured audio diaries as a key data collection method. More than 3000 diary entries were gathered to form a solid foundation for the in-depth understandings of the participants’ daily experiences in a way which was able to capture the immediacy of their responses to events that is difficult to achieve using other methods. Other data sources included a range of follow-up interviews, emails, on-line chatting, the participants’ on-line blogs, observation and conversations at social gatherings and chance encounters. It should be noted that the mixed research methods were not restricted by any pre-designed research plan, but developed during the process of data collection, with the existing methods being continuously edited and new ways of knowing being gradually incorporated. The rejection of rigid a priori methodological planning in favour of a more contingent approach that prioritised depth and richness of data collected was adopted as a strategy best able to capture the dynamics and complexity of individuals’ experiences.

Moreover, inspired by feminist methodological ideals, this research prioritised a non-hierarchical researcher–participant relationship. The gradually gained closeness between researcher and participants helped to produce the depth in the data that the study sought, which enabled the researcher to interpret and reinterpret the data obtained from earlier phases of data collection, and increased the ability to critically understand the participants and their inner worlds. Moreover, building a close rapport was considered to be crucial from ethical considerations. It handed power over to the participants, so that they could speak of their perceptions and present personal stories with an assurance that their voices would be met with respect, empathy and objectivity.

This first study focused on a very narrowly defined group of Chinese students: postgraduates at a single university who had no prior experience of living outside a Confucian heritage country. The second study is included here as a complement to the first, to broaden the nature of the sample, although the data from it cannot match the depth obtained in the first study. It is a study of Chinese undergraduate students at seven English universities and data were obtained by interviews alone, with a total of 14 students. Using the categorisation suggested by Bolsmann and Miller (2008) in their study of views on internationalisation held by university managers and other staff, the universities in this study can be described as one London University College, three Big Civic, two County and one ex-College of Advanced Technology. All of them had proportions of international students similar to or higher than the national average (HESA 2009), at least suggesting a commitment to internationalisation of the student body. Four were in locations with a significant level of ethnic diversity in the local population, while three were in more ethnically ‘white’ areas, although we actually found that the nature and location of the university made little difference to the general tenor of our subjects’ reports on their experiences.

The presentation of the data that follows is necessarily selective in terms of the aspects of the students’ lives with which it deals. We have identified certain aspects that reveal some of the common difficulties these students faced but also those that raise questions about the international or intercultural nature of their experiences in the UK. We have imposed two broad divisions on the presentation, ‘learning and teaching’ and ‘intercultural interaction’, but these are to some extent artificial since we find that student experiences and their impacts can only be understood if treated holistically, as interacting parts of the students lives as a whole. With just two exceptions, from the second study, all interviews were held in Chinese rather than English and quotations
in the flowing section are translated by one of the authors, except where indicated. To distinguish quotations from students in the two studies we use the labels ‘P’ and ‘U’ to refer to postgraduate (study 1) and undergraduate (study 2) students.

Research findings: learning and teaching

Language problems and experiences in classes

Experience of language-related difficulties are a major source of shock to the students. In both studies, all participants commented on their inadequate initial command of English and its influence on their academic learning. Some saw this as a personal limitation, a comment on their own inadequacy, which had a very early deflationary effect on the excitement with which they had initially engaged with their course: ‘I am sitting in a lecture of international business. Depressed. It seems I heard every word but in fact couldn’t grasp any information. What is wrong?’ (P12, audio diary, 18 October).

Whereas we had expected to find such difficulties among our postgraduate students, since none of them had previously been out of China and had no experience of listening or speaking to native English speakers, we were more surprised to hear similar comments from the undergraduates, most of whom had spent at least one year, often two and occasionally more, in the UK before coming to university. One undergraduate student claimed this to be a universal problem: ‘When we Chinese students interact [with other students], our biggest worry is language, is English … It limits your ability to communicate’ (U2, interview).

Reflecting on their language problems, some students deliberately engaged in strategies to improve their comprehension, such as trying to identify variously sized ‘chunks’ – words, phrases, whole sentences – in what was being said and building as much meaning as they could from these. This could eventually lead to the sort of breakthrough happily recorded by one postgraduate: ‘so excited today! Suddenly felt I could understand 95% of the lecture content. Hope I am really improved!’ (P8, audio diary, 25 November).

Negative experiences with comprehension can quickly lead to a sense of exclusion from the learning community that could, rather paradoxically, be even worse when tutors adopted what they felt was a more collaborative approach to learning and encouraged student contributions:

In lectures, British students always told some jokes that we couldn’t understand. At that time I felt as if I was watching TV. They were playing and I was watching. When they had discussions, they said your voice was low, or your English was not fluent. Sometime they smiled, which might have no negative implication. But I was so sensitive; I could sometimes feel very sad and cried for it. (U7, interview)

Of particular interest in the students’ reports and analyses of their language difficulties is their readiness to place the blame on themselves, either as individuals or collectively as ‘we Chinese students’. They are willingly complicit in the practice that Ninnes and Horstén (2005, 10, cited in Haigh 2008) describe as treating international students ‘as sites of English language deficiencies or “empty vessels” to be filled up with Euro-American knowledge’. An alternative analysis sees these experiences as sites of the manifestation of differential power, in which the Chinese students are placed in subordinate positions, justified by an appeal to stereotypes that they themselves are willing
to support. Rather than being ‘met half way’ by lecturers or fellow students, as a reaching out towards cross-cultural engagement, the Chinese students are left to find their way through their own efforts to as best an assimilated position as they can manage.

Although not articulating their analyses in such power terms, some students did, however, begin to feel that part of the blame lay with their tutors who appeared to be unaware of their difficulties – ‘he just enjoys himself, not caring whether we can hear or not’ (P4, audio diary) – and in many cases were guilty of poor teaching. Many mentioned their difficulties in understanding the lecturers’ accents and their use of arcane terminology without adequate explanation. Some commented on lecturers’ poor diction or their speaking in a low voice, which was particularly irritating when lectures were given in noisy settings, with a large audience, while others criticised high delivery speeds, a tendency to cram in too much information, disorganisation in presentation and a lack of interaction with the audience. This inadequate attention to lecturing methods added to the comprehension difficulties that the students had as non-native English users but would probably cause problems even for those for whom English was their first language. As P4, went on to comment in the same diary entry: ‘It seems we all dislike him … Is that what the masters’ course demands? We cannot choose the teacher, nor can we make the teacher change for us. We have to accept all ways of teaching’. Here at least there is an implicit recognition of inequalities of power, although it is seen in terms of the students as a whole, rather than international students’ positions in particular.

Such complaints challenge stereotypical portrayals of ‘the Chinese learner’, for example, their description as obedient students who cherish a hierarchical teacher–student relationship because they come from a ‘high power distance’ culture and have been taught to be tolerant to playing a submissive role (Hofstede 1980). However, close examination of class teaching contexts suggests that rarely would the participants endure ineffective teaching for a ‘culturally desired’ son–father type of relationship. Instead, a general feeling of being less able to communicate their dissatisfaction led to a shared feeling of being marginalised. In some cases, we notice that the perceived indifferent attitude of the lecturers resulted in strengthened stereotypes of ‘the British teacher’. The perceptions distanced some participants from British lecturers and discouraged them from trying to learn through the lectures. Students would either try to rely more on their own resources or on their Chinese colleagues, as a voluntary withdrawal from their recognised position of inequality and marginalisation.

This power–knowledge differentiation, interpreted as inadequacy on the part of the Chinese students, appears in relation to home students as well as teachers. Where more inclusive teaching approaches were adopted, students were given greater opportunity to raise questions or discuss with peer students, but being unable to understand their peers hindered their ability to participate. This inability to understand was not interpreted as a communication failure involving both sides but as a personal weakness.

I notice my weakness, i.e. I spoke too little. It was not because I didn’t want to make contribution; some times I didn’t know what they were talking about, failing to make reaction. Sometimes I was not sure whether my opinion had been mentioned by others, but I did not hear. (P5, interview)

Other similar comments in our data lead us largely to reject interpretations of Chinese students’ silence in class based on cultural pre-dispositions that suggest voluntary withdrawal from interaction (Wright and Lander 2003), and to emphasise
instead linguistic difficulties, combined with asymmetries of power arising from a lack of familiarity with the local academic cultural expectations that were taken to be an unassailable norm. Several students expressed their wish to contribute, to comment in class, but were too self-conscious of their weak spoken English skills to dare to do so. Lack of accommodation to these difficulties by staff and peer students explained the considerable distress and feelings of being excluded as observed among the participants.

In contrast, teachers who recognised language problems and adopted strategies that actively promoted contributions from all were found to play a key role in boosting confidence and help students engage and communicate as they actually wished to:

I always think it is good to speak out. But I just did not dare to speak. You were worried that your ideas were wrong or thought this would be something everyone else knew so it was not worth speaking it out. But tutors always said that you’d better tell others if you have some ideas. At the beginning, tutors called your name and asked you to give opinions. Later you actively spoke out your idea. This was really a good module. We complained a lot when we were [taking it] in the first year. But now we feel thankful for having the module. (U6, interview)

This student was highly motivated to speak and tutors were then able to play a scaffolding role, encouraging her to speak out and exchange her ideas with others. Our research commonly showed that our participants, though appearing initially silent due to their lack of linguistic confidence, were very open to new experiences and sought opportunities for self-improvement. Given adequate support and a readiness among the hosts to recognise that their contributions could be valuable, they would appreciate the strengths of the host academic culture and display willingness and ability to build their knowledge by communicating with others.

**Group work**

In both studies, most participants had experienced working in groups to discuss issues or solve simulated problems. Rather than promoting intercultural exchange and understanding, however, intercultural group-based learning activities could easily become a source of discomfort and anger for some students. As de Vita and Case (2003) point out, intercultural interaction does not simply develop naturally by putting students into multicultural groups (see also Li and Campbell 2008). Sources of discomfort included a sense of lacking appropriate background knowledge that would allow them to understand what was being discussed in the group and enable them to make a contribution. Combined with a lack of confidence to engage in discussions with native English speakers in the group, this and other factors often led to perceptions of differential power relationships and marginalisation within the group.

It is the third week of the semester. I always keep silent in group discussion. It’s because I still have no idea of what educational research is. Nor could I find the exact words I want to express. Every time was the same. How can I improve my English? (P13, audio diary)

A much more disturbing observation in our studies, however, was of acts of deliberate social exclusion by other members of the group. In one example, the East Asian (Chinese and Thai) group members felt they and their opinions were simply ignored by the UK members (and one other European member with fluent English):
They speak [in English] very fluently … Since she came, seldom did we three Asian people speak. They never stop talking, we three become the audience … from the meeting, we have to say, there is a clear distance between us and them, both in the way of thinking and in terms of language. I don’t know how we could communicate with each other afterwards. (P1, audio diary)

This respondent had come to think in terms of ‘them’ and ‘us’, a separation which she elsewhere indicates is made along racial and linguistic lines as a classic construction of the ‘Cultural Other’ that debars effective intercultural communication. In this particular case, the situation deteriorated further with the Asian students feeling they were deliberately excluded by the Europeans from group meetings about which they were not informed: ‘And in fact they have already finished the task. They talked a bit about what they had done … it doesn’t matter, anyway, it is always them who talk during group meeting; we three sit and listen’.

Others reported similar experiences of exclusion. Some persisted in trying to make the group activity ‘work’ but others reacted to perceived marginalisation by ‘giving up’ – deliberately withdrawing from active group participation and accepting their marginalised status, once again reluctantly complicit in the formation of their subordinated position. But amongst many in both of these camps a further reaction was to develop an enhanced sense of differentiation along ethnic or national lines that could contribute to reinforced national pride and identity as a means to rebuild self-esteem.

I must write the framework of the assignment tonight so that I can present it tomorrow in the group work … It is not required. But I should let them know we Chinese would like to contribute and be able to do so. (P6, audio diary).

Here P6 tried to regulate his own behaviour, by preparing for the task, to improve personal performance; doing extra work was expected to build a more capable image in the minds of other group members. Stressing his Chineseness, moreover, gave him something to draw on as it reduced the negative impacts of the perceived or real social exclusion. All these means helped the student re-establish his own sense of self-worth, but also served to challenge subjugation of the minority culture. Thus, participation in groups went beyond being a vehicle for information exchange, to being a social means of self-construction. This type of response, drawing on a sense of national identity and solidarity was further supported by experiences outside the university that are part of the focus of our next section.

Research findings: intercultural interaction

Intercultural learning concerns not only the acquisition of new knowledge at a higher cognitive level but the ‘authentic’ experiences of intercultural interaction (de Vita and Case 2003, 388). Absence of social- and emotional-connectiveness with the host people has been seen as one of the major obstacles to the goals of international education (Volet and Ang 1998). A close examination of the students’ experiences shows that despite their initial expectations of engaging in intercultural experiences, they appeared to be ‘sticking together’ with co-nationals (Robson and Turner 2007). In the following, we focus on some contexts for intercultural interaction on and off campus. The findings support the argument (de Vita and Case 2003) that intercultural interaction does not develop naturally in spite of the articulation of celebrating diversity in the pervasive rhetoric of higher education internationalisation.
Recreational contacts

Outside classes, most participants had only infrequent contacts with British or other international students. Such contacts were largely through ‘formal’ schemes and events organised by the university or local community with the explicit aim of promoting inter-cultural communication. Most of these events had limited success, however, and in some cases reinforced a sense of alienation and marginalisation. We explored experiences of a range of such activities but here we comment on just two that in broad terms are representative of the experiences reported by our respondents.

Parties

Most students spoke of parties that were organised by the university, departments or other groups as a means of encouraging cross-cultural interaction, particularly in the initial few weeks of the academic year. Although being initially highly motivated to take part, the participants were to different extents found to be reserved in such events. In one extreme case, a student reported her sense of horror on opening the door to one party, which she described as a ‘hell’ of noise, alcohol and embarrassing sexual behaviour; but more commonly these events are described as being awkward assemblies of national groups failing to have any meaningful contact with each other:

So in the end it was still Chinese students sitting together with other Chinese, or at least Asian students. I feel we have more common topics with other Asian students, perhaps because our background is a bit similar. It is different regarding European students, to whom we just asked several key questions and then we don’t know what to say. (P7, audio diary)

Sadly, stereotypes abound in some accounts and the following excerpt reveals Chinese students as passively waiting to be approached at a party rather than actively attempting to communicate:

I feel westerners like Canadian students have prejudices against the Chinese. The Palestinian students or our ‘black brothers’ are comparatively very friendly to us. ‘Black brothers’ are in particularly kind. In all, all Chinese students sit together, eating and chatting. Black brothers and Palestinian students would come and talk to you; but Canadian or Australian students seem to have no interest at all. Probably they feel they are too different from us. (P6, audio diary)

Host programme

Three of the postgraduate participants in our research had joined a programme that gave them the opportunity to spend part of their holiday time living with a British family. P7, for example, spent Easter weekend with an elderly couple. The programme provided a valuable opportunity for her to experience the life style of the host family. Living with hosts who had been complete strangers before meeting could, however, be a source of anxiety. All three participants reported that they were troubled by communication problems: P7 was worried about her English competency, while P13 kept being embarrassed because ‘in the middle of chatting, we suddenly did not know how to continue and fell into silence’ (P13, interview).

In some cases the reported communication problems were due to a lack of adequate ‘cultural’ knowledge. For example, P5 was shocked when the host couple were frank about their married life, but despite experiences not all being positive, this
cultural authenticity was what the students claimed they wanted to experience. They
could not have such ‘cultural knowledge’ in advance, but had to learn to master it.

Given the participants’ difficulties in communicating, the attitudes of the host
family became crucial to the outcome of the experience. When the host family
members were poor communicators, less tolerant or less willing to make a greater
contribution to boost communication, the attraction of the host programme could be
reduced. One such negative instance was the second host experience of P5, which
turned out to be unsatisfactory:

they did not provide us with enough food, or the time for us to have lunch. We got up in
the morning, having a small breakfast. They then drove us to a place and handed us over
to an information tour. Nothing interesting, just hungry … I heard before that some host
families join the programme just because they could get money from the organiser. I
suspect we encountered one of these families. You know we had to wait an hour for
dinner at the end of the day. And do you know what the dinner was? Just a supermarket
sold beef pie with mashed potatoes. (P5, interview).

Although P5 was astonished by his first talkative host couple, who ‘kept talking of
their married life for an hour’, he had been very excited by the friendship he enjoyed
at that time. In sharp contrast, the experience in the second host family left him little
memory of companionship or communication but the feeling of ‘being hungry’. On
the one hand, this experience of different eating habits may have been a ‘genuine’
cultural experience but, on the other hand, the perception of an uncaring attitude from
the hosts could not help the student acquire the new social skills he sought.

We must emphasise here that, as with all our data, it presents the perceptions of
experiences from one side only. We have no account of interactions from the side of
other students or, in this case, from the host families. We do not present these examples
as judgements on the hosts but as illustrations of the difficulties inherent in cross-
cultural communication. We have, for example, no idea as to whether the hosts felt
that the visitors’ behaviour was inappropriate: might they have been expected to offer
help with preparing food for example? In some cases, the participants may have
approached situations with their own pre-judgements, or interpreted certain behaviour
in their own cultural terms and imputed attitudes incorrectly. In these cases, it was the
perceived attitudes, such as unfriendliness, indifference and arrogance which inhibited
Chinese students from intercultural communication. It is of concern, moreover, that
such experiences may encourage the development of cultural stereotypes of ‘the
British’, and adversely impact on further attempts at intercultural communication.

**Negative experiences in day-to-day lives**

Students in both studies recounted experiences of meeting prejudice, discrimination
and hostility in their everyday lives. They commonly perceived themselves as being
positioned as outsiders and foreign ‘others’ in the host country, which led to feelings
of suffering, anger, pain and loss. Reports of verbal abuse and even violence were
sadly common. For example,

In my first year, I had an English course … The teaching finished at around seven. When
I went home, some children threw stones at me … One of my Chinese friends was hit by
an egg recently. One day a friend and I went to another student’s home for dinner. We
walked along the street at around 6 or 7 pm in the evening. A British kid threw something
Among the many who took on some form of part-time employment, the workplace was commonly reported as a scene where they encountered discrimination. They referred to their interaction with white British staff and expressed their awareness and resentment of unequal treatment. Several who worked in fast-food outlets commented that ‘always Chinese people were arranged to do dirty and exhausting jobs’ (U1, interview). Two mentioned their jobs in a supermarket where the rest breaks were arranged for ‘the white first, then Indian and black people. And we [Chinese] are always the last ones’ (U5, interview). Again, we recognise that we have only one-sided accounts of these events and are reporting the perceptions of the ‘injured’ party only; but in such cases we would argue that it is subjective perceptions that are important in the inhibition of cross-cultural engagement, rather than any ‘objective’ account.

Responses to prejudice and discrimination tend to have consequences for the reformation of identity (Parker 1995). In many cases, students’ failure to defend themselves against racial abuse threatened their sense of individual self-worth. Their sense of national identity, however, was often consolidated or enhanced:

Before I came to the UK, I didn’t realise I had such a strong love of my mother country. When you are far away from your country, you become patriotic. This is because we live here and sometimes we meet with some people who are not so kind. In such cases, you realise how much you love your country. (P3, audio diary)

An emphasis on being Chinese became a means to protect their source of pride and a source of personal power. By finding something to be proud of, they gained confidence and were better able to engage with difficulties throughout their time abroad, but this was at the expense of distinguishing and distancing themselves from the British, rather than promoting greater intercultural exchange or understanding.

‘Successful’ cross-cultural experiences

It is sadly true that the vast majority of our respondents failed to achieve much meaningful interaction with the English and what there was too often reinforced perceptions of the Cultural Other as strange or even hostile. Amongst our 27 subjects, just four reported significantly richer and more positive ‘contact’. Two of these were female students who had an English boyfriend and amongst these, one is of particular interest in that she could be portrayed as an example of at least partial ‘assimilation’. This undergraduate student was one of just two who asked to be interviewed in English, as otherwise, ‘If I speak Chinese I have to translate it from English to Chinese’ (U10, interview). She declared she was indifferent to where she lived and worked in the future, spent ‘70 per cent’ of her social time with English friends rather than Chinese and was critical of some of her Chinese colleagues because, ‘They think if people are not nice to them it’s because they’re Chinese. But I tend to think if people are not nice to you, there must be something you got wrong’. There was a price to pay for this engagement with the local and critical detachment from ‘being Chinese’: ‘probably because I prefer to speak English than Chinese, other Chinese people think I don’t wanna be with them. I’ve got probably one really good Chinese friend’.
These cases of more positive engagement are of considerable interest and deserve more attention than can be given here. It is important to mention them but they do represent a minority experience amongst our respondents. At least two of the cases suggest that nearly all of the ‘cultural accommodation’ came from one side only and ‘inclusion’ took the form of a considerable degree of assimilation to the host culture.

Discussion

Evident in most students’ accounts of their experiences is their distancing from the lives of their British hosts. For most participants, life in Britain became routine: commuting between classroom, library, accommodation and perhaps workplaces. They also went shopping, attended various parties and occasionally travelled around, but these activities did little to increase their communication with the British. After some initial efforts, most of them gradually withdrew to Chinese groups for socialisation, interaction and for mutual support in the face of perceived indifference or hostility from the host community.

Their universities made attempts to facilitate intercultural contacts and communication but, despite some initial excitement, few participants reported positive experiences of these. There are issues here of both organisation and communication by the various university bodies involved, suggesting that a more sensitive appreciation of the needs and difficulties of the international students should be sought. But we suggest that there is also a need to approach this general failure of intercultural communication from a different direction. Too often it seems that the presence of overseas students is seen as a ‘problem’ rather than a resource. The vast majority of the research in this field – and ours is no exception – approaches this situation from the perspectives of the overseas students, aiming to identify their difficulties and suggest ways in which they can be better assimilated into university life. But intercultural communication is a two-way process that demands movement from both sides and is of benefit to both sides, particularly if we adopt the view of internationalisation advocated earlier in this paper. It will rarely take place simply by putting people of different nationalities together and requires instead an active commitment and recognition of mutual benefits from all involved, together with a better understanding of how to organise activities, such as group working, so that they actively promote cross-cultural awareness and sharing (Volet and Ang 1998; Summers and Volet 2008).

Language difficulties were undoubtedly a significant barrier to the development of international contacts and understanding, especially with the host community. Again, however, it is too easy to think of this as a problem for the overseas students alone. Certainly their initial limited communicative competence in English presents difficulties, but the solution demands understanding, sensitivity and effort on the host community’s side and not just enhanced ‘language support’ for the incomers. This applies to all members of the university community, staff and students alike, and will be achieved only through the recognition that the effort is worthwhile, bringing significant benefits to all. Communication is a basic skill for the development of cross-cultural understanding and it is unhelpful to turn a communications ‘issue’ into a ‘problem’ for just one of the parties involved.

Universities must also recognise, however, that the isolation that our participants experienced on campus was mirrored in wider society and that these two aspects tended to reinforce each other in their impact on students’ perceptions and daily lives. A sense of social exclusion and discrimination in both arenas provoked an enhanced
sense of national identity and pride as a personal resource to counter their unequal position in power networks. Cross-cultural understanding and awareness commonly became displaced by stereotyping by the Chinese students, not just of the hosts but auto-stereotyping of themselves too, as a means of providing a defensive self-identity. We accept that universities will feel much less capable of addressing these off-campus issues and may simply declare them to be beyond their influence or remit. Universities must also be aware, however, that attempts to develop their own ‘international community’ will be hampered by negative experiences outside and could commit themselves to adopting more of a public education role within their local communities than many do at present, perhaps by working jointly with community and local government bodies.

Conclusion
In this article we have presented and discussed the experiences of a small number of undergraduate and postgraduate Chinese students during their living, studying and working in the UK. These experiences suggest that, rather than the increase of international students on British campuses enhancing cultural awareness and offering opportunities for intercultural communication, it too easily leads to withdrawal into national enclaves with reinforced notions of cultural separation. Our data show Chinese respondents were in fact homogenised, ‘foreignised’ and ‘otherised’ in the ‘internationalising’ communities both in and off campus (Perrin 2006; Devos 2003). Other research has suggested that the internationalising efforts of British universities may be promoting contacts, communication and friendships among international students from different countries, but are much less successful in relation to contacts between these students and home students (UNITE 2006). We would argue that in the contemporary and future world of global exchange and interdependence this situation places the home students at a great disadvantage.

There is a need for greater clarity in the internationalising agenda of British universities and for better understanding of its implications amongst many of those working there. In particular, a distinction must be made between the economic rationales for recruiting large numbers of overseas students and the cultural rationale that aims to develop intercultural understanding and ‘international mindedness’. A genuine commitment to the latter rationale is as much an imperative as the former but its implications must be thought through and put into practice (see Habu 2000; de Vita and Case 2003). These implications cover not only the social sphere but the academic too, and in this regard may demand changes in the teaching practices of academic staff that recognise both the difficulties that many overseas students face but also the positive contributions that they can make to a genuinely international learning environment.

When commenting on the inclusiveness of higher education, Robson and Turner argue that internationalisation must be conceptualised as ‘a process for continuous improvement’ rather than a state (2007, 51), a position similarly reflected in Knight’s process-oriented model (2004, 11). Embracing these arguments, this study demonstrates that such a process should place much greater emphasis than at present on the attitudes of academic staff, home students and the host people as a whole. To switch Chinese (and other nationalities) students’ status from being outsiders to insiders (Perrin 2006), teachers need to be sensitive to students’ needs and difficulties, particularly those relating to language, and to be ready to act more like a friend.
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or a mentor; academic and supportive staff should critically reflect on pedagogy and practices based on students’ surveys and action research; host students should be encouraged to challenge ethnocentric views and to be informed of reciprocal benefits from communicating with international learners. The development of an ‘inclusive’ internationalised campus, where ethnically diverse student groups are bonded, the sense of belonging among overseas students is boosted and diversity is respected, requires a shared responsibility of all people involved (cf. Volet and Tan-Quigley 1999).

References


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