Empirical Article

Chinese Students' Transcultural Strategies: Intentions to Navigate Identity Conflicts and Expand Their Identities Through Hong Kong Study Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Chinese international students' acculturation strategies and pragmatic intentions to address identity conflicts in Hong Kong study experiences through a developmental lens. We treat conflicts and stressors as indicators of active commitments and the process of engagement as strategic, goal-oriented, intentional investments to become better selves. Undergraduates ($N = 95$) enrolled in a Hong Kong university participated: 85 completed a Cultural Practices Questionnaire about daily activities; 10 completed semi-

structured interviews on their acculturation strategies, identity conflicts, and justifications. Mixed method data analysis highlighted strategies rooted in goals, choices, consistency, and commitment. Several pragmatic intentions were also identified. Participants considered academic study, language learning, club activities, communicating with friends, volunteering, and interacting with diverse people as fundamental active commitments. An alternative definition of "integration strategy" is proposed to better capture students' transcultural choices and decolonize the view that students are expected to conform to the host culture.

Keywords: acculturation strategy, Chinese international students, identity conflict, identity expansion, integration, intention

Introduction

"*I come to experience, not to integrate!*" One Chinese international student expressed this intention when being interviewed about acculturation strategies chosen during his Hong Kong (HK) study experience. The current generation of Chinese students constituted one of the largest international student groups on Western campuses, including in HK (He & Hutson, 2018; Leong, 2015). Textor (Nov, 2021) reported about 703,500 Chinese students studied overseas in 2019; China was the largest country of origin for international students in the world. During 2020/21 academic year, "China is still the leading source of international students in the U.S. education market with over 317,000 [taking] courses." The majority of these students aim to achieve educational goals through international higher education rather than to immigrate to the host country. To realize their objectives, they apply "acculturation strategies" to intentionally and strategically choose daily "contact and participation" (Berry, 1997, p. 5; 2015, p. 349)—namely "cultural practices" (Kim, 2008, p. 363)—in the host culture.

Many researchers (Jackson, 2011, 2013; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Leong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wei et al., 2007, 2012) have studied Chinese students' acculturation practices (e.g., efforts, coping strategies & participation) from cultural, psychological, and linguistic perspectives. Scholars generally agree Chinese students' coping strategies are ineffective, even labeling them "disengaging," "avoiding," or "self-segregating." They attributed these

deficiencies to students' linguistic limitation, home-culture negative impact, or mental stress. They interpreted students' imperfect adaptation according to research focusing on "dominant-group" (Berry, 2015, p. 349) colonization, wherein students are expected to "assimilate" or "integrate" (Berry, 2015) into the host culture. In this case, the host culture is the norm against which students' contact and participation (e.g., priorities for cross-cultural practices) are evaluated. By contrast, we assume a decolonized student perspective in this study, which respects students' choices of transcultural adaptations and their own navigation to identity expansion rather than impose host-culture-norm expectations upon them. This perspective is clearly exemplified in the current decolonizing education-abroad view (Woolf, 2021) that recognizes history and emphasizes process, situational learning, multidimension of the colonized society such as Hong Kong, a colony of the British Empire for over 155 years and it lies at the crossroads of the east and the west in terms of cultures, values, systems, and languages. The perspective also invites alternative voices and perspectives by applying colonization as means of understanding power imbalance and discriminating attitudes and behaviors (p. 197). Therefore, we specifically adopt a developmental lens in treating students' challenging adaptations as indicators of intentional and active commitments to navigating identity conflicts, meaning overcoming linguistic and cultural challenges while expanding selves to become better selves. We argue students' strategies should no longer be deemed "acculturation strategies" in relation to host-culture expectations; rather, be considered "transcultural strategies," optimizing choices in practices that blend multiple cultures and facilitate personal goals and better selves.

Allowing students to make sense of their own practices can also expand understanding of "hidden agenda" (Dai & Garcia, 2019) -- pragmatic intentions and identity conflicts. This perspective enables a developmental investigation of sources of stress and disengagement identified in prior literature. This study frames the process of Chinese international students' host-culture engagement as strategic, goal-oriented, and intentional investment (Norton, 1995, 2000; Norton & McKinney, 2010) in extending the self and surmounting obstacles to construct a "transcultural identity" (Rogers, 2006; Vauclair et al., 2014, p. 12) rather than as a passive, stressful, host-culture alignment journey. Students exercise *agency* (van Compernolle & Williams, 2012) through *intention* (Bach, 1987; Clark,

2003; Kecskés & Mey, 2008; Korta & Perry, 2020), *control* (Kim, 2008), and *investment* (Norton, 1995) in transcultural practices. They deliberately choose strategies and commitments to fight through "identity conflicts" (Bodycott, 2015, p. 246), including "intragroup conflicts" (Bodycott, 2015, p. 252), in the host society to expand their identities and become better selves.

Literature Review

Acculturation Strategies

To achieve educational goals, *international students including Chinese students in the present study*, defined as students who pursue education degrees or participate in degree related exchange programs rather than short-term study-abroad programs on a Western campus, e.g., an American campus and those in the other developing countries across the globe or campuses influenced by western values, languages and systems—including in HK (Yu et al., 2019), a colonized society—must interact in this setting via contact, participation, and acculturation strategies. Berry's model (1997, 2015) for investigating acculturation emphasized attitude (i.e., acculturation preferences) and behavior (i.e*.,* actual activities). The value of maintaining a relationship with students' cultural identity and the degree of involvement in the host culture affects their choices of four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Assimilation means interacting solely with the host culture without maintaining their cultural identity. Maintaining original culture and avoiding interacting with others is separation. Integration means maintaining original culture and engaging in daily interactions with other groups. Finally, if students show little interest in cultural maintenance and relations with others, they become marginalized. Assimilation and integration are recommended for managing acculturation stress.

Berry's model (1997, 2015) underpins our study given the power of relationships among attitudes, behavior, and strategies in international education experiences. However, this model does not address the developmental power of identity conflicts which can directionally drive these relationships. The four strategies take host-culture expectations (Swarts et al., 2021, p. 190) as a key norm with little regard for students' actual intentions, goals, and strategies in choosing what and how to learn though Berry was aware of the "dominant group

influence" in the mutual acculturation process (2015, p. 350). We therefore assume a student perspective in applying Berry's acculturation framework. In particular, we investigate students' attitudes by examining their intentions, goals, and choices to reveal the developmental driving power of identity conflicts. We further explore students' behavior by examining cultural practices—daily activities within and outside classes—to overcome identity conflicts and grow. However, we relabel *acculturation strategies* (Berry, 1997, 2015; He & Hutson, 2018; Kim, 2008) as *transcultural strategies.* Doing so emphasizes students' intentional choices, which is absent from the current framework, along with students' participation and contact during multicultural practices to realize their goals in international education. This framing contrasts the typical treatment of students' journeys as a default alignment with the host-culture expectations.

Transcultural Identity Conflict and Development

International students must treat identity conflicts strategically to promote "identity expansion" (Byram, 2008; Jackson, 2011). They must also selectively engage in contact and participation in the host culture, which entails an intentional, self-extending, and strategic process that further reflects the "fluidity, diversity and hybridity" characteristics of post-millennial transcultural learners (Schmitt & Rogers, 2020, p. 177). Kim's (2008) study of acculturation and identity supports this proposition, describing "acculturation [as] a process over which each individual has a degree of freedom or control, based on his or her predispositions, pre-existing needs and interests" (p. 363). Students' identity expansion emerges from interactions among goal-oriented practices, battles over conflicts, strategic investments, and intentional choices based on their "degree of cultural integration" and "degree of freedom or control" (Kim, 2008, p. 363) in the process. Regarding learning gained through this process, Kim argued that "as new learning occurs, *deculturation or unlearning* of at least some of the old cultural elements has to occur"; indeed, "no construction [can happen] without destruction" (p. 363). These assertions reflect the struggles of transcultural learning but overlook the value of maintaining one's original identity and choosing strategies to select host-culture integration. New learning is thus treated as a deculturation or "unlearning" process rather than an evolving journey—yet learning must come from somewhere.

Wei et al. (2012) analyzed survey responses from 188 Chinese international students to assess their avoidance coping strategy as well as identification with heritage culture, acculturative stress, and psychological distress. The researchers found when students feel strongly about their original culture, they cannot use avoidance to alleviate any level of stress. Students' integration into the host culture thus becomes unpredictable. Accordingly, the expectation of the alignment "integration" (Berry, 1997, 2015) is called into question: few students will not identify strongly with their original culture. In 2014, Pan and Wong conducted a comparative study by applying Berry's acculturation strategies' model and investigating acculturation stressors experienced by 606 Chinese international graduate students studying in Hong Kong and Australia. They found that academic work and marginalization are the two significant stressors for both groups. Comparatively, cultural difference is a bigger stressor for the participants in Hong Kong and assimilation is a bigger stressor for participants in Australia. These findings continue to emphasize acculturation stress but ignore the value of investigating intentions behind chosen strategies to reveal sources of stress and avoidance, including "self-segregating" (Leong, 2015, p. 468) and "strengths for success" (He & Hutson, 2018, p. 87) in particular.

Bodycott (2015) examined intragroup conflict among three HK-born Chinese students during a 14-week study abroad in Canada and pinpointed several types of identity conflict (e.g., task conflict). This small sample enabled exploration of deep internal conflicts each student experienced in their program. Although we agree with the supposition that "identity conflict in study abroad occurs when new experiences oppose or cannot be integrated into the student's existing way of thinking" (p. 246), we question the suggestion that "to deal with conflicts, students often turn to co-national groups or others in their host culture for support" (p. 246). Students may turn to their cultural group, but it is not a default avoidance strategy as "often" implies. Instead, it could be an intentional choice, such that students either adapt or reject new experiences based on intentions underlying specific activities; not all conflicts are resolved through cultural avoidance without intention.

To investigate Chinese students studying in Hong Kong universities, Yu et al. (2019) surveyed psychological and academic adaptations based on a sample

of 2,201 while Vyas and Yu (2018), applying surveys and interviews, examined 202 Chinese graduates' acculturation experiences. Both studies reviewed the historic aspects of cultural and political connections and tensions between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Hong Kong was a British colony for over 155 years and it was returned to China in 1997. Currently, Hong Kong is under the governance of the "one country, two systems" framework. Both Hong and China share a Confucian heritage, but values, languages, and systems used in Hong Kong universities mix Chinese and more Westernized influences. Since 1997, Hong Kong has been experiencing ongoing decolonization (i.e., leaving British colony's influences and gaining independence) and her reunification with China is characterized by the accommodation of differences rather than a whole-hearted embrace (Yu et al., p. 2). Both studies found perceived discrimination experienced by Chinese students in Hong Kong; for example, English and Cantonese proficiency positively supported academic and acculturation adaptations in Hong Kong. The former study recognized the methodological limitation of survey reports and invited mixed method including interview studies to understand the causal path to positive psychological and academic experiences while the latter focused on graduates other than undergraduates from a stressful experience perspective. Both studies' review of the backgrounds justifies the context of the present study and their findings highlight the value of the present mixed method study of transcultural strategies and identity conflicts on undergraduate Chinese students in Hong Kong from a decolonization perspective that treats Chinese students' transcultural experiences active, constructive, positive rather than purely adaptive and conforming to the norms during this decolonization period of Hong Kong.

We define *transcultural identity* as students' "dynamic and fluid" (Vauclair et al., 2014, p. 12; Wei, 2011) process of constantly reidentifying who they are and who they want to be by relating to the self, others, and contexts. Better selves emerge from intentionally chosen multicultural practices and commitments expressed in daily activities.

Intention and International Education

Research on college students' international education participation has examined multiple factors affecting intention (Bandyopadhyay &

Bandyopadhyay, 2015) and the development of intention through sociolinguistic abilities to perceive others' intentions in social settings (Lasan & Rehner, 2018). All aspects that Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2015) proposed as influencing students' participation in study abroad point to one key indicator: intention to participate. Meaningful variables (e.g., personal growth) were investigated; however, the notions of identity and conflict—as major predictors that can shape students' intention to participate—were not addressed. One's intention to participate is not a dependent variable as their study indicated but an independent variable that can predict students' attitudes and behavior. Lasan and Rehner (2018) studied the effect of (extra)curricular contact on 38 French second-language learners' abilities to perceive and express identity and intentions in French. Questionnaires and interviews were used. Extracurricular contact was operationalized as eight factors (e.g., year of study). Findings suggested the longer students studied in the target-language context, the greater their abilities to perceive and express identity and intentions. Students' number of "active commitments" (e.g., self-imposed risk taking engagements to promote target-language exposure and use) was a key indicator of intercultural competence. These results help explain sociolinguistic competence development in context. However, we argue learners' attitude toward the target language that was not operationalized could also be a critical factor affecting the number of active commitments.

To uncover Chinese students' "hidden agenda"—a type of intention related to complexity of adaptation and intercultural learning—Dai and Garcia (2019) examined seven Chinese college students' adjustment and intercultural learning in the Chinese and Australian contexts through interviews. They found students experienced a U-shaped learning curve with a stressful beginning, ongoing negotiation, a sense of disempowerment when adjusting in the new system, and finally a complex sense of belonging through adjusted attitudes and multiple strategies. Several students reconstructed their identities throughout this U-shaped journey. Yet the authors missed the "hidden agenda" concept at length. Additionally, although identity conflict could have made students feel "disempowered" (Dai & Garcia, 2019, p. 378) without continuity in the new system, neither was explicitly addressed.

Intention reflects desires driving one's thoughts and behavior. Korta and Perry (2020) defined intention as "a kind of mental state, like belief and desire … From the point of view of the mental cause theory of action, intentions cause actions" (Spring 2020 Edition). Kesckés (2014) described the "dialectical relationship between a *priori* intention (based on individual prior experience) and *emergent* intention (based on actual social situational context)" (p. 7). Accordingly, we define intention as a state of mind that causes actions and disactivates actions driven by contextual factors: identity conflicts or specific goals. Actions manifest as "cultural practices" (Kim, 2008) and "active commitments" (Mougeon & Rehner, 2015, p. 433) reflecting one's purposes, beliefs, attitudes, and desires. Such drives are rooted in the internal system of their brain to optimize trade-offs between "stability" (no change) and "flexibility" (change) according to Badre's neuroscience scholarship "On task: How our brain gets things done" (2020, p. 66), which informs students' degree of commitment and chosen practices to surmount challenges, through which they grow into better selves.

Overall, scarce research has investigated active transcultural strategies the new generation of Chinese students apply in daily cultural practices during study-abroad programs. Similarly, few studies have examined their positive pragmatic intentions to navigate identity conflicts including a decolonized developmental understanding of Berry's "integration strategy" (1997, 2005). Therefore, three research questions (RQs) are proposed:

1. What transcultural strategies do Chinese students choose to develop transcultural identities during HK study experiences?

2. How do Chinese students' strategies express pragmatic intentions to navigate identity conflicts and grow during HK study experiences?

3. How do Chinese students' strategies redefine the recommended "integration strategy" to grow during HK study experiences from a decolonized student perspective?

Research Method

To investigate answers to the research questions, this study has adopted a mixed research methodology that collected data from participants by utilizing a 23-item Cultural Practices Questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The analysis of

the collected data has triangulated the reporting features of quantitative as well as qualitative research techniques with the support of a corpus linguistic analysis tool.

Participants

Mainland Chinese (MLC) undergraduates ($N = 95$) enrolled in a comprehensive HK university participated in this study. Slightly less than half (48%) were from northern China, while 52% were from the southern part of China. Students were recruited via email lists provided by campus offices and through participants' recommendations (i.e., snowball sampling-- applied for recruiting interview participants only, Perry, 2017). Of the 95 respondents who completed the Cultural Practices Questionnaire, 85 (47 Males, 38 Females) were included in this analysis. Participants studied in HK for 7.53 months on average and they were between the ages of 19 to 25. They were studying in various programs such as engineering, computer science, construction and environment, business, health, or humanities. Roughly half (51%) established study goals before departing to HK; the others did not. Another 10 undergraduates (4 Males, 6 Females) completed semi-structured interviews with the first author. Among them, six studied engineering; three majored in English; and one studied optometry; they studied in HK for 31.5 months on average.

Data Collection

The first instrument was a 23-item Cultural Practices Questionnaire (see Appendix A). Participants reported frequency of activities in which they participated within and outside classes, including length of participation, demographics, and social media use. Questions (Qs) 1–6 concerned participants' demographics (e.g., study goals); Qs 7–12 elicited daily activities and length of participation based on reference days (e.g., "yesterday," "last Saturday") to ensure the accuracy of reporting. The extent and consistency of participation was identified by frequency (e.g., daily or weekly). Qs 13–15 referred to investment in communicating with people from other cultures. Q 23 asked commitment to learning Cantonese, a local language in HK. Qs 16–22 regarded social media use; responses to these items, along with three staff interviews conducted as part of a larger study, will be reported in another article. This part of the project was self-

sponsored. The second part, which collected staff data on students' reported strategies, was sponsored by Murray State University CISR Grant, Grant ID: CISR14-15. The entire project was approved by MSU IRB.

     A Google Forms link to the questionnaire was distributed to 1100 MLC undergraduates via a university office. Students were given two weeks to complete it; engaging participants soon after receiving the questionnaire was intended to increase participation and avoid conflict with upcoming events scheduled by the office. Ninety-five students responded (i.e., 8.64% response rate). Approximately 95% of the responses were written in English; about 5% were in Chinese.

     Semi-structured interviews were then conducted (see Appendix B). Themes identified from questionnaire responses guided this interview design. All interviewees spoke in Chinese. Interviews ranged between 75 and 95 minutes and were recorded with consent and transcribed by a bilingual research assistant. The interview protocol contained 10 semi-structured questions eliciting interviewees' demographics, activities, socialized cultural groups, perceptions of MLC students' reluctant participation in cultural practices, and strategies based on Berry's four categories (2005). Participants were also asked to justify their answers.

     Overall, we have chosen a mixed methodology to conduct this study first due to the nature of this study on participants' transcultural strategies defined by participation commitment, frequency and consistency, and also because triangulation of data sources is repeatedly recommended by research methodology literature. The 10 interviewees were not from the 85 participants in the questionnaire based on the rationale that an independent sample, meaning an alternative form of reliability (Perry, 2017, p. 144) can help validate the correlation or convergence of interpretations between the investigated focuses collected from both sources: the questionnaire and the interviews.

Data Analysis

     Questionnaire responses were initially analyzed using the report feature in Google Forms. Data were exported into Excel for cleaning, and missing responses were carefully considered. Regarding imputation methods, Jans et al. (2008) suggested addressing missing questionnaire values/responses by applying

either mean, subclass mean, or observed values for "donor" individuals (p. 2). We analyzed missing responses for Qs 9–10 and Qs 13–15, eliciting activities by frequency. Some participants may have responded previously and had nothing new to add; others may have had no reportable activities or simply did not want to answer. However, given that we elicited verbal responses and had a reasonable volunteer sample (Perry, 2017), we reported results based on the actual number of responses to questions eliciting examples and confirmation of activities reported in Qs 7–8. The base response number for Qs 9–10 and Qs 13–15 thus varied. We suggest readers consider response trends in these latter questions rather than focusing on variation in the number of responses.

Chinese-language answers were translated into English. Responses were first holistically examined using Google Reports before being manually sorted and color-coded in Excel to highlight "recurring themes" (McKey, 2010, p. 45) reflecting constructs in RQs 1 and 2. Constructs included "active commitments" (i.e., self-initiated activities participants completed with intention, consistency, and frequency; adapted from Mougeon & Rehner, 2015, p. 433) and strategies. A corpus linguistics tool (AntConc 3.5.8, 2019) was applied to facilitate identifying themes, patterns, and activity types based on frequency. The tool generated *Word List* of reported activities for each question. For Qs 7–12, high-frequency verbs and nouns were identified through the *Word List* analysis and low-frequency verbs and nouns were manually examined to discern word-type tokens. Identified nouns and verbs were associated with emerging types of activities and commitments for each question. Finally, the 10 interviews were coded using the grounded theory approach to identify cross-case patterns and "critical incidents" (Perry, 2017, p. 59). Trends in strategies and activities observed from the questionnaire were also considered during coding. The results are summarized below by question, answering RQ1 in full and RQ2 in part. Interview findings revealed participants' contextual struggles, choices, and definitions of "integration" in navigating conflicts and expressing intentions, thus answering RQs 2 and 3.

Results

RQ1: What transcultural strategies do Chinese students choose to develop transcultural identities during HK study experiences?

Strategy 1: Establish Academic Goals and Transcultural Expectations

Roughly half (51%) of participants established goals before departing for HK. Seven goal types were coded, with an ultimate goal being coded if participants mentioned two or more goals in one response: 16.28% wanted a higher GPA and 30.02% planned for advanced studies. Overall, 46.30% of participants cited academic goals (e.g., GPA and advanced studies) as their primary objective. Additionally, 11.63% respectively mentioned fitting in in HK, gaining practical skills, or further study-abroad. Fewer participants (4.65%) wanted to improve English skills, whereas 13.95% sought personal growth. Except participants (46.30%) who held academic goals as their major aim, 53.70% wished to realize identity expansion and personal growth. The rest 49% who did not establish goals may have had no agenda or may have been more adaptable to new experiences, especially as these students develop.

Strategy 2: Commit to Self-Selected Academic and Transcultural Practices

Table 1 lists the types and duration of participants' active commitments during weekdays (Q7) and weekends (Q8). Following McKey (2010) that open-ended survey results can be reported in a summative manner reflecting typical participant responses, we first coded responses by activity types (Column #3; examples in parentheses) and then by themes comprising relevant types (Column #2).

Table 1

Weekday & Weekend Activity Commitments: Themes, Types, & Length (N = 85)

Reference Day	Commitment Themes	Activity Types	%	Total Hours	Mean Hours	Total Mean Hours Per Theme
Weekday	*Academic*	Academic study	94.12	360	4.24	4.24
	Transcultural	Studying language (Cantonese)	7.06	9.50	0.11	0.41
		Volunteering	5.89	8.5	0.10	
		Club activities (dance)	7.06	17	0.20	
	Personal	Exercising	7.06	5.5	0.06	0.06
Weekend	*Academic*	Academic study	74.11	134	1.58	1.58
	Transcultural	Volunteering	9.4	17	0.20	0.83
		Club activities (dance)	7.1	25.5	0.30	
		Studying language (Cantonese)	3.5	5.5	0.07	
		Field trip (Ocean Park)	5.9	22	0.26	
	Personal	Reading (novels)	7.1	14	0.16	0.48
		Watching (movies)	8.2	17	0.20	
		Exercising	8.2	10.8	0.12	
	Virtual	Interacting (social media)	12.9	30.5	0.36	0.36

Most (94.12%) weekday activities were academic with participants devoting 4.24 hours on average to such practices. Learning Cantonese, club activities, and volunteering were coded as "transcultural commitment" because all involved interaction with people and other cultures. Participants spent 0.41 hours in a typical 8- to 10-hour study day on transcultural activities, which is not negligible.

About three-quarters (74.11%) of weekend activities were academic, totaling 1.58 hours per participant; students studied 2.66 fewer hours on average compared with weekdays. Meanwhile, the total mean number of hours invested in transcultural activities more than doubled from 0.41 to 0.83 and exceeded the average amount devoted to personal commitments (0.48 hours) and virtual commitments (0.36 hours). Participants learned Cantonese, did club activities, and volunteered or took field trips on weekends, representing forms of interaction featuring contextually relevant "intention" and "action" (Bach, 1987; Kecskés, 2014; Korta & Perry, 2020). Participants similarly prioritized academic activities,

transcultural activities, and investing in personal growth when comparing the total mean hours per theme devoted to weekday and weekend activities. Self-selected academic and transcultural activities thus demonstrated consistency and "agency."

Strategy 3: Co-Develop Transcultural Identity with Friends

Word List analysis of the weekday activities (Q7) (373 word types, 1428 word tokens) identified: #1 content verb consisted of tokens of *studied* (frequency: 36; rank: 22); #1 content noun was *class(es)* (frequency: 41; rank: 8); *friend(s)* had a frequency of 8 (rank: 119–120). Analysis of weekend activities (Q8) revealed 283 word types and 959 word tokens. The #1 content noun was *friend(s)* (frequency: 18; rank: 12) except for the token *friend* (frequency: 3).

Combined results of Qs 7–8 highlighted *friend(s)* as the #2 content noun (frequency: 25; rank: 18; *friend* – frequency: 4; rank: 149) among the 504 word types and 2387 word tokens. *Friend(s)* was beside *class(es)* (*class* frequency: 35; rank: 13; *classes* frequency: 11; rank: 28). Participants seemed valuing the meaningfulness of *friends* nearly equally to academic activities. They also appeared co-developing transcultural identities through daily interaction and negotiation with friends.

Strategy 4: Treat Identity Maintenance and Expansion as Fundamental Commitments

We identified daily activity types (Q9) by analyzing top-frequency verbs and nouns generated via *Word List* (162 word types, 493 word tokens) analysis.

Table 2

Daily Activities (Q9, N = 65)

Commitment Themes	Activity Types	FRQ	%
Academic	Academic study	45	69.23
Identity Maintaining & Expanding	Communicating with friends/family (WeChat)	19	29.23
Transcultural	Learning language (Cantonese)	3	4.62
	Club activities (dance)	5	7.69
Personal	Reading (novels)	3	4.62
	Exercising (gym)	2	3.08
	Playing instruments (Xiao)	2	3.08
Virtual	Gaming/Browsing	4	6.15
	Watching (YouTube)	2	3.08

Academic study was most common, reinforcing the findings in Q7 on weekday commitments. Of daily activities, 69.23% were academic, which is unsurprising because participants primarily came to HK for education. The second most common commitment was communicating with friends and family. Participants considered interacting with loved ones as fundamental to maintaining and extending "who they are." This type of daily practices, however, does not suggest participants "unlearn" or "destruct" old cultural elements (Kim, 2008), rather, they revise the old by adding new elements to become better selves through the commitment.

Strategy 5: Invest Regularly and Deeply In Self-Selected Cultural Activities

Fifty-three students responded to Q15 about daily out-of-class activities. When considering one major activity per student, 21.18% participated in other culture–related activities (e.g., Arabic culture workshops). About one-quarter (24.7%) attended club activities (e.g., choir), interacted with diverse people, and volunteered. Collectively, 45.89% participated in daily activities outside classes, strove to communicate with diverse people, and gained new learning for self-development. Although this percentage is imperfect (i.e., the remaining 55.11% did not report relevant activities), it suggests regularity and opposes the "disengagement" reported in other literature on Chinese students.

Table 3 indicates participants shared more weekly commitments versus activities completed daily or on weekdays.

Table 3

Weekly Activities (Q10, N = 55)

Verbs (Actions)	FRQ	Nouns (Focuses)	FRQ
Attend	36	Classes/class/school	37
Go	11	Cantonese/French/English	19
Do	9	Badminton/soccer/basketball	8
Play	8	Friend(s)	8
Read	4	Exercises/fitness/walk/gym	5
Study	4	Club/dance/picture/books/cooking	5
Watch	4	Library	4
Dance/draw/paint	3	Games	4
Write	2	Bible study/missionary/Christianity	4
		Movie(s)	4
		Internet/online	4
		Diary/homework	4
		Shopping	3
		Drums/piano/ukulele	3
		Choir	3
		Volunteer	2

Note. Word List revealed 160 word types; 450 word tokens.

Participants' top two weekly commitments were academic activities and language learning, confirming the results of Q7 on weekday commitments. Meeting friends and exercising were the next two most common activities. This order of commitments reflects the goal-oriented intentions underlying participants' transcultural journeys: *achieving academic goals*, *learning language*, *meeting friends*, and *staying fit*. These commitments also convey students' fundamental needs in international education. The variety of activities in the noun list varied in 16 categories. We observed fewer verbs than nouns, which is unsurprising given that categories were labeled by nouns.

Strategy 6: Maintain Frequent Contact with People from Other Cultures

Qs 13–14 elicited information about the cultural backgrounds of people involved in participants' daily and weekly communication. Fifty-six participants responded. Slightly less than three-quarters (71.4%) interacted with people from multiple countries/areas (i.e., Mainland China & HK/Taiwan: 51.8%; HK & others excluding Mainland China: 8.9%; HK, Mainland China, & others -- Thailand/Korea: 10.7%). The other 28.6% reported interacting with MLC people only, countering the perception that most Chinese students only interact daily with their own group in host cultures. Regarding weekly frequency (Q14), 8.9% of participants interacted solely with MLC people. The majority (91%) engaged

with people from a mixture of cultures (i.e., HK only: 23.1%; Mainland China & HK/Taiwan: 23.2%; HK & others excluding Mainland China: 19.6%; HK, Mainland China, & others -- Italy/United States: 25%). The 23.1% of participants who communicated only with people from HK implies immersion in the host culture with weekly investment.

RQ2: How do Chinese students' strategies express pragmatic intentions to navigate identity conflicts and grow during HK study experiences?
Study in a Conflicting Context Yet Invest in Learning the Local Language

Q23 reflected participants' efforts to learn Cantonese. When participants could use Chinese and English in HK with few academic or communication barriers, 74% invested in learning Cantonese. This proportion suggests a purposeful intention to surmount specific identity conflicts (i.e., struggles between Mandarin vs. Cantonese or Mainland Chinese vs. HK people due to historical, cultural, and political tensions since HK became part of China in 1997) and expand the self. The finding fully accords with interview data on the same question: all interviewees reported devoting extensive time and effort to learning Cantonese. Learning the local language is not a rejection of HK culture but an active expansion of "limited common ground" (Kecskés, 2014) in the conflicting context. Participants' investments represented "active commitment" (Mougeon & Rehner, 2015) to better navigating language conflicts between Mandarin and Cantonese.

Interact with Diverse People; Prepare to Be Better Selves

Qs 13–14 focused on routine interaction (daily or weekly) with diverse people. Most (71.4%) participants deliberately interacted with people from two or more cultures daily. On a weekly basis, 23.1% were immersed in HK culture and 67.8% communicated with people from multiple cultures. Multicultural interaction composed a substantial proportion of participants' regular interaction, suggesting intentional preparation to become better selves by activating the "preparatory principle" (Clark, 2003, p. 260) (i.e., turning intention into action) through keeping diverse people in their social circles.

Redefine "Who I am" in Relation to "We VS. They"

Interviewee #1 (S1; male, studied transportation engineering for 36 months) is a critical case (Perry, 2017) of activating intention through redefining

"who I am" in relation to "we vs. they" as indicated by his strategies, choices, and commitments.

Regarding Cantonese learning, he stated, "I learned Cantonese in four classes. But students from Beijing generally held an attitude: I'm from Beijing; There is no value for me to learn Cantonese."

On negative perceptions of MLC students' transcultural participation, he remarked "I'm not participating in what *they* think are active activities" and justified:

I stay with MLC students to keep my identity. I hang out mainly with MLC students because we live in the same dorm. We share new sets of vocabulary, making it easy for us to communicate with taboo words [e.g., shen jin bing, meaning "insane"]. Locals do not live on campus, which limits our interaction. MLC students have greater academic abilities than local students. Our motivation is different from theirs. We intend to do advanced studies.

S1 used "we" and "our" (vs. "they" and "theirs") and "MLC students" (vs. "locals") to redefine "who I am" in relation to "we" and "they." His chosen pronouns and nouns appeared to be intentional "lexical choices in production" (Kecskés & Mey, 2008, p. 4) in which he indicated "intergroup and intragroup conflicts" (Bodycott, 2015, p. 252). The theme of negotiating "we vs. they" repeatedly emerged in the interview data, illustrating participants' "intentions and goals as pre-existing psychological entities that are later somehow formulated in their language" (Kecskés & Mey, 2008, p. 2) of identifying who they are in the stated relations. Furthermore, this negotiation may reflect that the student was intentionally "self-segregating" (Leong, 2015, p. 468) from non-MLC students but his justification in the quote can partially justify the source that differences in residence and academic goals may have contributed to the segregation.

RQ3: How do Chinese students' strategies redefine the recommended "integration strategy" to grow during HK study experiences from a decolonized student perspective?

Eight of the 10 interviewees responded adopting an "integration or assimilation" strategy after being presented with Berry's (2005) four strategies. The other two (S1, S6) discussed a component of integration but distinguished their strategies analytically. This finding looks contradicting to but actually

advances the result identified by Swarts et al. (2021, p. 196) that " the integration strategy was the least accessible strategy due to perceived social barriers constructed by the Belgians" after investigating six South African postgraduates' acculturation strategies in Belgium, because each interviewee articulated various conflicts, analytical practices, and justifications to redefine the strategy when asked for elaboration as shown below.

Table 4

Cross-Case Analysis of Interviews

Inter-viewee	Identity Conflicts	Integration Redefined	Transcultural Growth
S1	See Above	See Above	HK's Western culture/education component benefited me more than expected, with almost 100% satisfaction.
S2	I talk to HK people regularly but no in-depth discussions are involved. I don't like teachers comparing MLC and HK in classes.	I've been here for 5 years. The society is so diverse. I don't have to integrate. I can't have a deep discussion, not because of language.	I learned Cantonese and English. I became more mature. I developed [critical] thinking.
S3	I like the cultural shock and diversity. I was lost when the political conflicts happened in the first 2 months.	Language barrier is a direct reason, but not the fundamental reason that affects HK peers' and MLC students' integration.	I become more independent. I experienced diversity. I gained adaptability, collaborative skills.
S4	I'm clearly aware of the hostile emotions towards MLC students from HK and Taiwan peers.	I want to integrate into the culture though I'm from Beijing. Local students don't live with us. It's easier for us to stay with my group.	I become more independent. I noticed HK and Taiwan's hostility against Mainland China. I understand when I think from their perspective.
S5	I strongly feel the difference when completing class activities with HK peers. That kind of difference doesn't come from language. I won't participate in activities like memorializing June 4, 1989 Incident.	There is the line I cannot cross no matter how long I stay here. I don't have the intention to integrate. I just come to experience.	I became more confident and open. I learned how to collaborate. I really like being a volunteer, staying with elderly people/kids.
S6	When teachers can't make themselves understood, they deliberately use Cantonese to elaborate. Why not use Mandarin to elaborate as half of the students speak Mandarin in class? I don't feel comfortable when teachers compare China and HK.	I come here to experience, not to integrate. In classes we are well integrated, but in the dorm, it's hard to integrate.	I developed social competence, improved English. I understand HK people have their own views about HK and Mainland China.
S7	I'm still different from the locals. I won't give up some values from Mainland China that I really like.	I like the kind of in-betweenness. I have not tried to change but I did try to improve.	I'm willing to know different views. I became more independent. I began knowing who I am.
S8	It's hard to share deep emotions. I can't joke with them. Language is different but not a barrier.	It doesn't mean MLC students are not able to integrate, but I don't want to. We all live in the residence hall and have more contact. I don't reject	I became more open-minded. I constantly made new friends. I really like HK.

		doing academic work with HK peers.	
S9	Our personality is more reserved comparing to Western and HK peers—plus the language barrier in a new environment.	I don't intend to not integrate into the local culture. Cultural and personal upbringings limit our choice of activities.	I became more accepting of different views; more expressive. I developed time management skills.
S10	We have different popular vocabulary. Some HK people are very judgmental and think we are rednecks. I think the fight between HK people and MLC is like the fight between Whites and Blacks in America.	I learn HK culture, but I don't fully integrate in the culture. I want to be myself and accept all cultural differences.	My personality became more agreeable. I'm more mature. I care more about people around me.

Table 4 lists interviewees' identity conflicts including language conflicts. Interviewees questioned attitudes towards learning Cantonese (S1) and teachers' use of Cantonese to illustrate difficult problems (S6) such as "Why not use Mandarin to elaborate, as half of the students speak Mandarin in class?" Others lamented they could not joke with peers or have deep conversations. However, participants did not treat these challenges as language barriers; several contended the differences did not arise from language (S8, S3). S10 compared conflicts between HK people and MLC to those between Whites and Blacks in the United States when expressing uncomfortable emotions. Multiple interviewees shared similar discomfort (S2–S6, S8).

Column #3 illustrates how interviewees redefined "integration." It was defined by learning-oriented intentions and actions such as "I come to experience, not to integrate"; "I did not try to change, but I did try to improve"; "I don't have to integrate" or "I don't want to integrate." Academically, interviewees explained "we are well integrated", but in the dorm, their integration was limited by the residence difference between them. Differences in time management, cultural personalities, popular vocabulary use, and the areas from which students hailed in Mainland China further influenced their extent of integration. The last column in the Table describes interviewees' transcultural growth. During their average 31.5-month journey in HK, interviewees struggled and felt stressed. However, they did not surrender to conflicts but thrived as they grew: they came to acknowledge diverse views; empathized with others; and

became more collaborative, mature, open, and competent linguistically, culturally and developmentally.

Discussion

Following the theoretical framework, acculturation strategies and transcultural identity and the mixed methodology adopted, we verified our results' accuracy by asking participants to recall activities in which they had participated yesterday and the prior Saturday (Table 1). Top activities identified (e.g., academic study, studying language & club activities) were consistent with students' top daily and weekly activities (e.g., attending classes, learning Cantonese & club activities; Tables 2 & 3). Interacting with friends and family notably contributed to participants' daily activities. However, we observed a discrepancy between students' prioritizing volunteering between reference days (Table 1) and weekly activities: it was ranked third on weekdays and second on weekends yet ranked low among 16 weekly activities (Table 3). Volunteering may therefore represent event-based activities rather than weekly or daily activities.

The intention hidden behind most (74%) participants' consistent commitment to learning Cantonese suggests non-rejection of HK culture and dedication to developing the linguistic competence necessary for richer transcultural experiences. The identified regular and fundamental transcultural commitments (i.e., learning Cantonese, doing club activities, meeting diverse people, and event-based volunteering) contradict earlier negative evaluations (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007, 2008; Leong, 2015; Wei et al., 2007, 2012) of students' transcultural behavior, overemphasizing stress, passivity, and disengagement while neglecting their active commitments and selective integration. Popular daily strategies of *conducting academic study, learning local languages, making friends, communicating with diverse people, and volunteering* seem paramount to a productive transcultural learning experience.

Another interesting finding is that participants co-developed identities with friends. Friends (i.e., friendship, Leong, 2015; Swarts et al, 2021) reflected a sustainable commitment alongside academic study and learning Cantonese—participants' top three weekly commitments. Friends can foster open-mindedness and appreciation of cross-cultural communication (Williams & Johnson, 2011).

We presume participants' daily interactions with friends aided them in co-fighting stressors and co-developing identities, including linguistic competence. Meaningfulness of friends in international education programs appears much deeper than in other contexts. Making friends is difficult (Leong, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Swarts et al., 2021), so stakeholders should consider designing curricula to facilitate friendship (e.g., creating extended field trips for diverse students).

The cross-case analysis reinforces the position of "I come to experience, not to integrate" as a decolonized alternative definition of the recommended "integration strategy" (Berry, 1997, 2005), emphasizing experiential and selective integration. Interviewees suggested their experiential journeys were not intended to change their identity but to maintain and enhance their sense of self. Participants who studied in HK for 5 years shared this practice, echoing prior literature (Lasan & Rehner, 2018). This finding substantiates the notion of "identity expansion" (Byram, 2008; Jackson, 2011, 2018) but counters the assumption that students "unlearn" (Kim, 2008) what they already know.

Interviews suggested participants took a "we vs. they" approach to negotiate who they were, the groups to which they belonged, and the conflicts they confronted. Participants considered "we" to maintain their original cultural selves and sense of belonging but pondered "they" to identify differences and growth opportunities. This perspective suggests an intentional process that fuels transformation rather than impedes growth. Participants' illustrative transformation (see Table 4) indicates they became more competent, open-minded, confident, collaborative, and independent. These changes imply self-development, identity expansion and execution of intentions via the identified strategies. Our findings extend the acculturation outcomes of psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Swarts et al., 2021) by showing that transcultural identity expansion is developed via intentions, self-selected strategies, constant relational negotiations, and identification of "we vs. they."

The findings identified from the cross-case analysis further reflect the historic and political tensions, struggles and conflicts experienced by Chinese students when exploring their transcultural identities in Hong Kong that is governed by a "one country, two systems" ideological framework. The recent

challenge to the framework in the media due to the differences in defining the independence of Hong Kong has made the tension between the two systems become more complicated. Such tensions participants experienced and the education including the patriotic education they received in Mainland China may partially justify the avoidance strategy the participants adopted when they faced conflicting political issues (e.g., memorizing June 4 incident) in order to transform and grow. Meanwhile, although participants have confirmed their cultural and academic growth and transformation via Hong Kong study experiences, yet their community encounters and justifications seem clearly exemplify a conflicting experience of a welcoming as well as discriminating journey, which justifies one major source of the "sense of discrimination" identified in earlier research (Yu et al., 2021; Vyas & Yu, 2018) and further highlights the decolonizing and mutual adaptation tension between the two groups of people.

  Finally, the findings and discussions just presented in relation to the research questions are hoped to have reassured that the focus of this study is on MLC international students who have studied in Hong Kong in undergraduate degree programs, their transcultural strategies that are defined by actual commitments, intentions, consistencies, and participated activities; and their selective integration strategy that recognizes individual choices, commitments, and intentions from a decolonization perspective. It emphasizes their positive strengths and active investments to succeed, to grow, to fight through conflicts, and to become better selves through their extended Hong- Kong study experience. Numerical presentation of the students' self-reported commitments, participated activities, and frequencies in the transcultural experience with best minimal interpretations seems to be more objective in demonstrating their consistent strengths, investments, and choices to offer educational implications for this group of students, comparing to the potential interpretations suggested in the manuscript reviewing process from political perspectives. Therefore, the current paper has not focused on the latter but observed the objectivity of a mixed method research to reveal the strategies, intentions, and choices identified with the best minimal interpretations.

Limitation and Future Direction

The first limitation of this study is the variation in the baseline number of responses to several questions (i.e., due to non-responses) and the survey sample size is small. Also, survey reports are subjective. Additionally, the identity conflicts participants experienced can be explored more such as the political education participants have received in Mainland China. Other recent theoretical frameworks can also be applied to investigate the same problem. Finally, our research setting represents another constraint; future work could examine MLC students in other destinations (e.g., the United States), to determine whether their strategies, intentions, and identity conflicts are similar. Such research could further uncover how context affects students' chosen transcultural strategies.

Conclusion

Our study advances the research on acculturation in the field of comparative and international higher education (Bano & Xia, 2019; Bodycott, 2015; Leong, 2015; Swarts et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2019) through a mixed methodology supported by corpus linguistic analysis that is rarely applied in this field. It offers empirical evidence on Chinese students' quality of transcultural strategies and commitments defined by frequency, consistency and justification to become better selves. It further offers empirical implications to better assist Chinese students by respecting their goal-oriented investments, intentions, and strategies chosen to expand identity even in conflicting social cultural contexts like Hong Kong. The study adds a decolonized view that the host culture expectation is not the default norm to evaluate international students' transcultural behaviors and that it would be better recognize international students' transcultural choices, commitments, and especially individualized degrees of integration based on their own international education goals.

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APPENDIX A: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Qs1-6 about demographics: gender, program of study, length of stay in HK, goal of studying, where they are from in China etc.

7. Can you write down all the activities you participated in yesterday from morning (8 am) until the end of the day (12 midnight) by indicating the name of the activity and the length of the activity?

8.Can you write down all the activities you participated in last Saturday from morning (8 am) until the end of the day (12 midnight) by indicating the type of activity and the length of each activity? e.g. I talked to 2 Hong Kong friends for 20 minutes.

9. Please write down all the activities you have participated in every day since
     September. e.g., I attend classes every day

10. Please write down all the activities you have participated in every week since
     September. e.g., I attend Cantonese classes every week.

11. Please write down all the activities you have participated in twice a week since
     September. e.g., I go to the gym twice a week.

12. Please write down all the activities you have participated in three times a week since
     September. e.g., I go to my study group three times a week.

13. For people you talk to daily in Hong Kong, what areas or countries are they from?
     e.g., Area: Hong Kong, Taiwan; Country: Japan, Korea

14. For people you talk to weekly in Hong Kong, what areas or countries are they from?
     e.g., Area: Hong Kong, Taiwan; Country: Japan, Korea

15. For the daily outside-class activities you participated in, which ones involve people
     from other cultures (e.g., Hong Kong culture or any of the western/other Asian
     cultures)?

Qs 16-22 about social media use and that is not the focus of this study, so questions not
    attached.

23. Have you made efforts to study Cantonese since your study at this university?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographics: major, length of study

What class activities do you choose to participate? Why?

Which of the following do you usually choose to be your group members in class
activities? Why? How about after-class activities? Why?

    a)   MLC peers
    b)   HK peers
    c)   Peers from cultures other than (a) and (b)
    d)   HK and MLC students
    e)   All
    f)   I don't care

What after-class activities do you attend regularly? Why?

What weekend activities do you really enjoy? Why?

What activities do you really not like to attend? Why?

Have you scheduled time to learn Cantonese? Why?

How do you see yourself fitting into HK culture so far? Which of the following describes
you? Why?

(a) Fully involved in HK culture
(b) Have become part of the culture and also differentiated myself from the culture
(c) Differentiate myself without participation
(d) Don't care at all about HK culture

MLC students are observed to be not as active as other students on campus. What do you think?

How have you changed since you came to HK?

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