

Intercultural Learning in Transnational Articulation Programs: The Hidden Agenda of Chinese Students' Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Many Chinese universities engage in transnational higher education by establishing articulation programs with international partners. Although research has broadly investigated transnational higher education topics, few studies have explored Chinese students' intercultural learning and adjustment experiences in these programs. This qualitative study explored seven Chinese students' experiences in two China-Australia articulation programs to add insights to this under-researched topic. The findings indicated that research participants' intercultural learning experiences were far more complex than the theoretical model of "stress-adaptation-development." The students' agency, identity, and belonging underwent dynamic changes due to academic inconsistencies and differences, including the use of technology, assessment, and teaching strategies. This study suggests that it is important for educators to consider educational differences in designing and implementing transnational articulation programs.

Keywords: articulation program, Chinese student, intercultural adjustment, learning experience, transnational higher education

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to illustrate and examine Chinese students' learning experiences in China-Australia articulation programs and their intercultural adjustments to the Australian educational context. The articulation program is a particular type of transnational higher education (TNHE) in the Chinese education system (Huang, 2008). Many types of articulation programs (e.g., 2+2, 3+1, or 1+1) are developed depending on the agreement of Chinese and international partner universities. In the 2+2 mode, for example, students usually study in China for 2 years and then move to a foreign university to complete the rest of the 2-year undergraduate study. Such a setting allows students to experience both Chinese and foreign education in one program (Dai, Lingard, & Reyes, 2018).

Many scholars have broadly discussed the history, development, and potential directions of TNHE in China (e.g., Huang, 2008; Yang, 2008; Mok & Ong, 2014). Meanwhile, several researchers (e.g., Gu, 2016; Guo & Guo, 2017; Heng, 2016, 2017) have systematically investigated Chinese students' intercultural learning and adjustment issues in other sociocultural and educational contexts, such as in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Furthermore, some theoretical tools have been proposed to conceptualize the process of Chinese students' intercultural adjustment, for example, transformative learning framework (Gill, 2007). However, such experiences in transnational articulation programs are still under-researched. Thus, to add insights into this topic, we conducted a qualitative study to explore how Chinese students experienced intercultural learning and adjustment in such particular educational setting.

In this paper, we start with a literature review to explore TNHE in the Chinese context and examine existing studies about Chinese students' intercultural learning and adjustment. Then, the research method and findings are presented, followed by a discussion of key findings and implications. We conclude by discussing the limitations of the study and providing suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transnational Higher Education in China

As a response to the growing trends of globalization and internationalization in higher education, many Chinese universities have

actively engaged in establishing TNHE through the development of articulation programs with international partners (Huang, 2008). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) concisely defined TNHE as “all types of higher education study where the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based” (as cited in Mok & Han, 2016, p. 20). Existing research has widely investigated the development, implementation, and effectiveness of these programs in the Chinese context (e.g., Fang, Clarke, & Wei, 2016; Hou, Montgomery, & McDowell, 2014; Mok & Ong, 2014; Yang, 2008).

Notably, the quality of articulation programs amid the background of globalization and internationalization has become one of major issues in the development of TNHE (Hu & Willis, 2017; van der Wende, 2003). Many studies have discussed quality issues within the Chinese context using macro perspectives. For instance, according to Hou et al. (2014), the Chinese government has asked institutions to operate transnational articulation programs without charging unreasonable fees to avoid the development of an entrepreneurial approach. Furthermore, some researchers (e.g., Mok & Han, 2016; Xu & Kan, 2013) have suggested that it is necessary for the Chinese Ministry of Education to establish a quality assurance mechanism to control the general development of TNHE and to monitor the quality of articulation education. Although various studies have discussed the topics related to the quality of TNHE from a macro level, it is still important to consider and explore issues from a micro perspective—for example, students’ learning experiences within such transnational educational schemes (Wang, 2016).

However, it is still difficult to measure and examine the quality of this educational alternative due to its sophisticated setting in a cross-system context because different countries, universities, and students may face different situations in running and experiencing this type of cooperative education (Knight, 2007). Although various factors (e.g., teaching approaches, curriculum, and individual ability) may influence the quality of education in these programs, many researchers (e.g., Mok & Ong, 2014; Qin & Te, 2016) have suggested that it is significant to explore students’ learning experiences in these educational settings because students could play key roles in reflecting, examining, and further developing the quality of education. As Wang (2016) suggested, it may be necessary to explore whether students could gain learning experiences with academic consistency from home to host universities (in articulation programs). This is because cross-system differences could influence their adjustment to the new educational context and even the quality of learning in this particular educational setting.

Chinese Students' Intercultural Learning and Adjustment

Exploring Chinese students' intercultural learning and adjustment experiences in a new context is not new, but it still has various research gaps. Many researchers (e.g., Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Li, Wang, Liu, Xu, & Cui, 2018; Mesidor & Sly, 2016) have illustrated the adjustment issues that Chinese and other international students may face in Western educational contexts, which may include language issues and unfamiliarity with new teaching strategies and academic rules. Considering the differences in teaching and learning between China and Western countries, many existing studies have summarized several features. For instance, by comparing Chinese and UK educational practices, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) found that learning in the Chinese context is usually based on the use of textbooks, teachers' instructions, repetition, and memorization; students are usually listeners who are used to relying on lecturers or other people. In contrast, the learning process in the UK context is based on individuals' independent learning where lecturers and students have more communication and interactions. Similarly, Chan (1999) also pinpointed that Chinese education seems to emphasize the authority and role of lecturers in the classroom, where teachers should control both teaching and learning. In doing so, many Chinese students prefer to receive and listen to information rather than put their ideas forward. These studies offered a general comparison between Chinese and Western teaching and learning features. However, it is important to make sense of different situations based on different ever-changing perspectives because "there is a rich and complex tapestry of variations arising from cultural distinctions, individual variations, and background circumstances" (Kember, 2016, p. 185). Thus, it is essential for researchers and educators to examine these differences critically.

Notably, the processes of intercultural learning and adjustment have been theoretically summarized by several researchers. For instance, influenced by Kim's (1988) stress-adaptation-growth model, Gill (2007) proposed a tentative theoretical framework to conceptualize the process of intercultural learning and the adjustment of Chinese students who were studying in the United Kingdom. Specifically, the framework suggests that Chinese students usually experience three stages in their educational transition: (a) a stressful start; (b) adaptation to the new context; and (c) achieving individual development. This process is dynamic and cyclic, which means that students may continuously experience several rounds of adjustment to, and then possibly achieve active growth in, their intercultural learning and adjustment

processes. This framework further suggests that students could finally achieve positive development with progressive attitudes.

To theorize these changes, Gill (2007) argued that intercultural adjustment is parallel to intercultural learning. Students' experiences are based on individual changes and perspective transformation. They can make sense of their own vibrant and cyclical trajectory of adjustment to the new context, which has significant influence on shaping changes among the students. As Gill (2007) claimed, students' interactions with the new context and their reflections potentially create an intercultural space for them to accommodate different cultural, social, and educational factors dynamically. Although this framework concisely theorized the trajectory of Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the UK context, it may need to be examined by exploring such experiences from other students in different educational contexts: for example, the transnational articulation program.

In a study similar to Gill's (2007) research, Gu et al. (2010) found that many Chinese students usually experienced initial shocks when settling in the United Kingdom. These students adjust themselves to the new context by using multiple strategies, which include constant negotiations with the new setting, which results in the students achieving positive changes and favorable academic outcomes. Thus, the researchers argued, many students show changes in "identity, agency, and resilience" (Gu et al., 2010, p. 13). More recently, by examining many Chinese students' intercultural learning in Germany, Zhu (2016) suggested that many of them feel stressed when they study and live in their new environment. Students go through an ongoing and dynamic adjustment process that leads them to approach the cultural and educational differences they face successfully. By investigating the academic adjustment issues of several East Asian students, for example, the Chinese cohort in the United States, Li et al. (2018) also found that although many students from East Asian countries usually faced cross-system barriers in life and study, they were able to adjust to the U.S. context by using various strategies to finally gain positive development as intercultural learners. According to these research studies, many Chinese students experienced a complicated process of intercultural adjustment and learning, which generally resulted in positive outcomes.

Although many studies have analyzed Chinese students' intercultural learning and adjustment issues, there is still limited existing research that has critically investigated the situation in transnational articulation program (Qin & Te, 2016). These existing research studies have provided supporting evidence for this study that was conducted to explore Chinese students' trajectories of intercultural learning and adjustment in the setting of

articulation program that is different from the traditional educational pathway. In doing so, based on the review of the key literature, the research questions that guided this study are as follows: (a) how do Chinese students experience intercultural learning and adjustment in China-Australia articulation programs? (b) What individual changes do Chinese students undergo in their articulated learning processes?

RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative case study was used to investigate Chinese students' intercultural learning and adjustment experiences in their transnational articulation programs. A qualitative case study is an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or a social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Such a research approach helps researchers to explore "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). According to the aims of this study, Chinese students in transnational articulation programs can provide answers to the proposed research problem. To select potential participants, we adopted the purposive sampling approach.

This approach allows us to recruit participants "based on a specific purpose rather than randomly" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 713). As mentioned above, this study aims to explore Chinese students' learning journeys in transnational articulation programs. Thus, the purposive samples are students who were studying in such particular programs. Adopting this approach, we recruited seven undergraduate students in two China-Australia 2+2 programs. They had completed their Chinese learning and were in Australia when they voluntarily participated in this study. The reason why we decided to recruit Australia-based students with multiple learning backgrounds was that they had already experienced Chinese and Australian educational settings and were also in different stages of learning. This enhanced the variety of collected data and provided vivid stories as well as a more thorough understanding of the situation. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The participant's demographic information is listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Research Participants' Demographic Information

Students	Gender	Years of study in Australia	Field of major
Yuan	Female	1	Business-related
Jing	Female	1	Design-related
Wen	Female	1	Design-related
Min	Male	2	Business-related
Xiao	Female	2	Design-related
Hao	Male	2	Business-related
Qing	Male	2	Design-related

Individual interviews were used to collect data. As Seidman (2006, p. 6) emphasized, interviews are used to understand “the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.” Interviewing individuals allows researchers to “follow up on unexpected results, or to validate other methods, or to go deeper into the motivation of respondents and their reason for responding as they do” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 351). Therefore, it could provide “insightful analysis and produce defensible findings” for researchers (Mears, 2012, p. 171). The ethical clearance application was approved by the author’s university. All interviews were conducted in Chinese; using the participants’ first language allowed them to present their experiences without communication barriers. The interviews were conducted from April to June 2017 at an Australian university. Each interview took 1 to 1.5 hours, and they were recorded. In each interview, the first author asked open-ended questions (e.g., “Could you talk about your learning journey in your program?”) to motivate the interviewees to share their experiences flexibly. Then the first author translated the interviews from Chinese to English. The second author checked the English translation in consultation with the first author. After transcribing and translating the interviews, we adopted the member checking approach to verify the accuracy of the data.

Both deductive and inductive approaches were used to analyze interview data. Depending on the research aims and questions, researchers had the option of analyzing data by adopting either inductive (“bottom-up”) methods without analytical structures or deductive approaches (“top-down”) adhering to and using theoretical frameworks (Cohen et al., 2007); these can be used together with qualitative data analysis to explore the potential findings from different perspectives (Reichertz, 2007).

In our analysis, first, we adopted Gill's (2007) transformative learning framework to deductively analyze the participants' adjustment processes when moving from China to Australia. This analysis examined whether the framework (stress-adaptation-development) could conceptualize the under-researched trajectories of Chinese students' intercultural adjustments in transnational articulation programs. Second, we conducted an inductive analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (become familiar with the data, create initial codes, search potential themes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce results) to explore the changes that the participants experienced in their cross-system transition. Finally, the students' learning experiences were presented in the form of narratives that could provide rich data to illustrate the participants' stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

FINDINGS

According to the deductive analysis, we found that many participants (i.e., Hao, Jing, Min, and Wen) experienced the theoretical trajectory of stress-adaptation-development in their cross-system learning and adjustment. However, some students (i.e., Qing, Xiao, and Yuan) felt that adjusting to the new learning system was challenging. Based on the inductive analysis, we found that identity, agency, and belonging were key themes that demonstrated the students' dynamic and complex individual changes as transnational learners adjusting to cross-system differences. The following sections illustrate the key findings of students' intercultural learning and adjustment to their articulation programs.

Commencing Learning with Stress

After completing their first 2 years of study in China, many students moved to Australia. Initially, they began their learning and adjustment process with feelings of stress and uncertainty. Although they had been given pre-departure training (e.g., language), some of them reflected uncertainty and stressful feelings toward the Australian educational context. For instance, Wen, a student with a design major, said this:

Although my Chinese university arranged International English Language Testing System (IELTS) courses for transnational program students to help us learn English, I still felt that English was one of the significant barriers in my studies after starting my learning in Australia. —Wen

Min, who studied business, had generally positive views toward his Australian learning experiences:

When I came to Australia, I felt it was so difficult for me to follow the lecturers' teaching because of language and my previous knowledge of the subject. It was apparent that a non-native English speaker needed to learn English. I needed to spend more time and attention on reflecting on what the lecturers taught. So, my primary goal was to pass all of the courses that I had selected in my first semester. —Min

As Wen and Min's experiences indicated, language barriers and unfamiliarity with the new teaching and learning modes seemed to influence participants' learning activities in the initial stage. Moreover, this issue may also indicate that the pre-departure language training in some articulation programs was not supportive enough for students' learning in the new context. Similarly, Hao shared his experiences of his initial stress and how he approached dealing with learning issues:

At the beginning of my first semester, I did not know what a tutorial was and also did not know how to learn in this new context. I did not preview the course content, and then I did not understand the taught content. In the second week, I felt I was behind the normal process and missed some essential content. In this way, I needed to spend more time reviewing the first-week content after my slow adaptation. Based on this experience, I changed my learning methods. Now I usually preview the course content first and then review it after class, which helps me to catch up with the teaching process. —Hao

This extract suggests that Hao was able to develop further understanding of the educational differences between his home and host context by using a comparative view. To fit into the new context, he actively made changes to his learning strategies. These experiences indicate that many Chinese students start learning in the new context with stress as a cultural stranger.

After studying and living in the new environment for some time, many students develop intercultural competencies to adjust themselves to the new system (Gill, 2007). According to the selected participants' extracts, it is apparent that many students faced various barriers in their initial learning stages in Australia but were able to find approaches to deal with their

problems to adjust to the new context. The students shared their stories about their adjustment issues.

Continually Negotiating with the New System

When facing cross-system differences in learning, the participants developed different senses of agency and identity.

Dealing Positively with Cross-System Academic Differences

Many students felt empowered to adjust to the new context with progressive attitudes compared to their Chinese experiences. For instance, compared to the “dependent” and “demotivated” experiences in China, some of them identified that they became “independent” and “motivated” learners in the Australian context. Evidence can be found in Wen’s interview:

The most negative aspect was high dependency. In the initial stage, I remembered that I felt challenged to adapt to this learning context. I always wanted to ask my instructors to help me do something. This way of thinking could be a problem, but I have solved this problem. When I started my learning at an Australian university, I felt the instructors did not teach detailed knowledge in the classroom, and a few topics were introduced. However, there were many gaps between the taught content and assessments. To fill the gaps, I needed to be a self-regulated and motivated learner who can make use of other methods to overcome these shortcomings. Internet-based technology became much more useful to me at Australian universities. —Wen

Similarly, other students (i.e., Hao, Jing, and Min) also indicated that they became independent and active. For instance, Jing said this:

I thought I became more active when I studied at an Australian university because this environment and study style required me to rely on myself rather than instructors or other materials, for example, textbooks. The instructors encouraged students to be creative and critical in learning rather than only mechanically remembering what we were taught in class. Thus, I needed to make use of Internet-based tools to develop my learning approaches and abilities to achieve my goals and academic requirements. —Jing

These extracts indicate that many students continuously changed their learning approaches from the Chinese to the Australian context. In the process of negotiation with the different teaching and learning settings, these students were also able to reconstruct their identities as intercultural learners. According to the above excerpts, it is evident that these students did not only become “another” person compared with their previous experiences (Gu, 2009), but they were also able to realize the importance of dynamically changing their roles to the new circumstances rather than passively waiting for changes (Marginson, 2014).

Disempowered by Studying in the New System

Some students (i.e., Qing, Xiao, and Yuan) felt disempowered in the process of intercultural learning and adjustment. For instance, Qing, who had passive and negative attitudes toward intercultural learning and adjustment, argued that the Chinese learning stage was not helpful when adjusting to the Australian context.

For learning, I did not think the Chinese experience had many positive influences on my Australian study because they were two very different contexts. I needed to restart my life and adapt to the new environment. —Qing

Moreover, Yuan’s experiences indicated that she seemed to be a highly dependent learner who was struggling with the new academic mode in Australia.

I still prefer to study in the traditional Chinese teaching mode. I wish lecturers would write down the essential content on the blackboard and provide us with a detailed explanation, especially with math and statistics. Many Australian lecturers did not write the essential content on the blackboard during class. They usually read from PowerPoint slides and explained them orally without any writing. I found it very confusing to understand the taught content. —Yuan

When discussing why they felt disempowered, the students shared various experiences. For instance, Xiao seemed to be used to the didactical learning mode that he had experienced in the Chinese context. She argued that she was a traditional learner who was not used to highly Internet-based exploratory teaching and learning modes.

I preferred to study in a non-Internet context. In this context, lecturers will provide the students with more details. We do not need to explore the knowledge by ourselves. For students, this approach will save time and energy. —Xiao

To adjust to the new context, Xiao said, “I force myself to study here, but it was very different studying without enough support from my instructors and other peers.” Additionally, Qing mentioned that the learning content taught in China was not very useful for his learning in Australia. Here, Qing is describing an academic inconsistency between China and Australia:

Most of the content taught in my Chinese university was utterly useless, especially the discipline courses. What I had previously learned was entirely different from what I had to learn in Australia. The learning content at Chinese universities is too disordered to focus on one major. The content included design, film, theory, and other different courses, which were not matched with the Australian university. When I came to the Australian university, I realized what I had learned in China was not relevant to my Australian courses. In Australia, I started to learn web design, 3D, and animation. I did not have any knowledge or experience with these before coming to Australia. —Qing

Xiao expressed similar views:

For example, many Australian lecturers taught us basic content, but then they examined us with harder knowledge, which made it necessary for me to learn extra content by myself after class.... In this case, I liked to study in the Chinese way, where the lecturers taught the students everything and gave us many practice tests. I thought the Australian context was too flexible to learn in depth. When I had a lot of time, I did not know what I needed to learn in Australia. —Xiao

As Xiao’s extract indicates, she seems to have mixed thoughts about the Chinese and Australian teaching approaches. She had strong preferences for the Chinese mode, but she studied in the Australian mode with a sense of confusion and nonadaptation. According to these examples, it is apparent that the students indicated multiple and sophisticated senses of agency and identity in their cross-system transition.

Reshaping Complex Senses of Belonging

In this study, students reflected various preferences and different senses of belonging in their intercultural learning processes. The exploration of the students' sense of belonging could further refine Gill's (2007) transformative learning framework, which did not fully highlight this specific aspect.

Enjoying Intercultural Learning and Adjustment

Many students were satisfied and enjoyed the intercultural learning process, especially at the Australian stage. Their positive experiences indicated their changes in the sense of belonging, as transnational articulation program students who preferred and adjusted to the Australian learning context. For instance, Wen mentioned this:

Compared to my original expectations before coming to Australia, I thought my learning experience was much higher than what I thought before. I think I have adapted to the Australian context. I was delighted with my transnational learning. If I could rank my learning satisfaction from 1 to 10, I would mark it as 9. —Wen

Wen's comments indicate her successful adaptation to the Australian context and satisfaction with her intercultural learning experiences. Similarly, Min also shared his views on intercultural learning and adjustment.

I am satisfied with my program. In the beginning, I had some negative feelings and did not want to stay in Australia. After staying here for a long time, I felt I could adapt to the new environment no matter the study or life. Importantly, Internet-based technology helped me to solve many learning problems and to reform my learning approaches. It also helped me to connect with China. I could contact my friends and family members quickly, which reduced my homesick. —Min

Notably, as Min indicated, Internet-based tools played a significant role in his intercultural learning and adjustment, especially in (re)shaping his sense of belonging. However, some students shared different stories.

Returning Home after Completing Learning in Australia

Some students (i.e., Qing and Yuan) believed that they did not belong in the Australian learning context. Notably, they all mentioned that they wanted to go home after completing their studies. These experiences suggest a sense of isolation in the new environment. For example, Yuan said this:

The major issue was adaptation to Australian life and learning context. After studying here for a long time, I still felt that I preferred the Chinese context. In Australia, I did not have many friends and no family members. I wanted to live in a metropolis and to stay with my friends and family. So I did not want to apply for the Australian permanent residency, and I hope I can graduate successfully. Now I am planning to prepare to find a job in China after this semester. —Yuan

Not only was it a challenge for Yuan to adapt to the Australian teaching and learning mode, but also she did not have support from her family and friends, and these feelings of isolation upset her. Her experiences indicated a strong sense of homesickness, which indicated that she faced academic issues and psychological barriers in her transition process. Compared with Yuan's experiences, Qing shared an example to illustrate his sense of isolation in learning:

One impressive thing for me was writing an assignment at the language school. When I was learning English, I needed to submit a portfolio, which included various written pieces. Before doing this assignment, I asked a stupid question to the lecturer: "Do I need to write this by hand or type it on the computer?" The lecturer appeared to be very surprised. I thought she was thinking "Why would you ask such a question?" I explained to her that some of my Chinese instructors wanted to avoid plagiarism and did not let us write assignments using a computer. However, the lecturer told me that they had stopped writing assignments by hand quite a long time ago. This made me feel that I was out-of-date and did not belong to the Australian Internet-based learning mode. —Qing

This example indicated that Qing was shocked by the Internet-based learning environment when he studied in a language school, which made him feel that he was a stranger in this learning context. Although he tried to make

some changes to adapt to the Australian mode, he still felt that his learning was problematic.

I preferred to study in China. In China, I did not have language and cultural barriers. As I said, if I study in China, I can adapt in a short time because there are no cultural and language issues. Furthermore, Australian universities have too many assignments and exams compared to my Chinese university, which made me feel so stressed. When I cannot communicate with other people effectively, I believe that study becomes much more challenging. —Qing

Qing's comments demonstrate that he faced various issues in both study and life during his intercultural learning process. However, as he mentioned, "When I faced these situations, I felt morose, but I must suffer through this process to achieve my learning goals." According to his interviews, it was evident that he did not have a keen sense of belonging through intercultural learning as a Chinese student in Australia. Additionally, these students believed that they belonged to their homeland no matter how long they stayed in the new context. The difficult diasporic experiences made them have a strong sense of belonging to their homeland rather than the host context.

DISCUSSION

The learning trajectories of the students illustrated a sophisticated picture of intercultural adjustment in this special educational model. In answer to the first research question (*How do Chinese students experience intercultural learning and adjustment in China-Australia articulation programs?*), we suggest that research participants experienced their articulation programs with complex attitudes and developed multiple approaches to deal with cross-system educational differences. Their different responses to the academic inconsistencies in learning and adjustment in Australia helped answer the second research question (*What individual changes do Chinese students undergo in their articulated learning processes?*). As the findings showed, many students changed their identity, agency, and belonging dynamically in the cross-system transition. Some experienced positive changes, but several students also felt disempowered in relation to the cross-system differences. It is evident that the students' intercultural learning and adjustment during their articulation programs is "a multidimensional process that involves several factors" (Mesidor & Sly, 2016, p. 276). These research findings could add

many insights into the existing literature related to intercultural adjustment and TNHE.

Positive adjustment experiences reflected by many participants (i.e., Hao, Jing, Min, and Wen) partly affirmed the existing intercultural adjustment theoretical model: stress-adaptation-growth (e.g., Gill, 2007; Kim, 1988). In the initial stage, most students wished to “survive” in the new system; they were not familiar with the novel context and did not find suitable approaches to deal with the Australian learning styles. Their experiences are consistent with several studies that have stated that when Chinese students move to a new context, many of them are usually faced with initial stress, for example, language barriers and different teaching and learning methods (Dai, 2018; Gu et al., 2010; Zhu, 2016).

Through continuous negotiation with the new environment, many of the students actively found new approaches to adjust to the Australian learning context positively. These experiences further confirmed that many Chinese students who study in articulation programs could critically understand and deal with cross-system barriers when they move to a new educational setting (Dai, 2018; Li et al., 2018). Their negotiations are evidence that they comprehended the adjustment processes necessary for the new context (Gill, 2007). Although many students struggled with the influence of previous experiences in the new setting, they were able to deal with the issues they faced successfully. Finally, they positively transferred from their initial struggle of being in-between the two experiences to an adjustment phase in the new system (Dai et al., 2018).

The experiences of the participants also indicated that the contextual changes had a significant influence on how the students reconstructed their identities as intercultural learners (Jenkins, 2008). These students expanded their educational views and learned via the transformation of educational systems that created cross-system tensions (Engeström, 1987). According to the students’ experiences, Chinese and Australian lecturers adopt different teaching and assessment strategies, which suggests that there are limited correlations in educational practices between transnational program partners (Ng & Nyland, 2016). Such differences potentially may result in students feeling stressed in cross-system learning settings. For example, Xiao’s concerns about examinations reflect that the assessment formats and focuses on cross-system learning could have a significant influence on international students’ learning results in a new context (Heng, 2016). To improve students’ learning quality, Australian educators should become aware of transnational program students’ previous learning experiences for their teaching process. As Heng (2017) advocated, it is important for educators to

be familiar with international students' learning preferences and approaches when they teach groups of students from different cultural and educational backgrounds. Meanwhile, we also suggest that Chinese lecturers should understand the features of the Australian educational system and attempt to adopt the Australian mode in advance in China to help students have an impression of what they will experience in Australia.

Facing these cross-system differences, not all students achieve positive development after experiencing the initial stress. Influenced by various factors (e.g., language barriers, uncomfortable language school experiences, and different teaching strategies), some participants experienced negative attitudes toward the new learning system. As Qing's interview suggested, he found it awkward to deeply engage in the Australian teaching modes, which made him always feel stressed. As a result, although he insisted on studying in Australia, he became a passive learner in order to survive in the new educational system. Notably, Australian academic differences triggered in him a negative reaction toward the new context rather than a sense of belonging; he just wanted to "escape" from the new educational setting. It seems that he constantly struggled and negotiated with the different issues negatively. His experiences align with Mesidor and Sly's (2016) finding that some international students may encounter academic, psychological, and social adjustment issues in new sociocultural and educational environments. Furthermore, Qing's experiences could provide different insights into the theoretical assumption that people actively deal with cross-cultural issues and adapt to the new context (Gill, 2007; Kim, 1988).

Based on the above analysis and discussion, this study could make contributions to the under-researched topics of Chinese students' intercultural learning and adjustment in transnational articulation programs. Several implications emerged from this study. According to the research findings, such cross-system educational setting allows students to achieve *international mobility* and to reflect on the *values* and *issues* of the transnational articulation programs. In terms of *values*, many of the participants indicated that they were able to experience positive changes in agency, identity, and belonging through learning across two systems. In terms of *issues*, it seems that there are many gaps in teaching and learning between the Chinese and Australian stages; the participants' interviews suggested the important factors that influenced students' learning experiences in these programs. Findings on academic inconsistencies could indicate that some universities may not conduct programmatic (or consistent) teaching and learning practices when operating such programs. To help students engage in a cross-system transition, it is

essential for universities and educators from both sides to provide more supportive services, especially in the teaching and learning processes.

As a result, the students reflected on their various attitudes toward their cross-system transitions. These articulation programs are based on a series of agreements and policies from both academic sides. However, we argue that these programs may establish “mutual collaboration” in macro level theoretically. Practically, articulation in the micro level (e.g., teaching method and course content design) may not be symmetrically structured, which is reflected in disjointed teaching and learning practices that reveal the hidden agenda of cross-system transition process.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of Chinese students’ intercultural learning and adjustment journeys in articulation programs can add a series of insights into the under-researched subject of students’ experiences in TNHE. Students’ experiences demonstrate that their learning trajectories in this particular educational setting are complex and dynamic, which means that their studies in a new context come with twists and turns. As a conclusion, student learning in the transnational articulation program is not simply about adjustment or adaptation, but a process of experiencing and (re)shaping senses of agency, identity, and belonging with constant negotiations between home and host systems. Although this study provided several insights into the learning experiences of Chinese students in their articulation programs, several limitations should be noted. For instance, a limited number of students participated in this research, and different data collection approaches could be used to provide multiple resources that would provide a more thorough understanding of the research problem. For future studies, it will be important to investigate the teaching and learning practices in these articulation programs, as this study found that cross-system inconsistencies could have a significant influence on intercultural learning and adjustment. It is also essential to conduct longitudinal studies to track students’ learning changes in cross-system education from home to host universities. To operate articulation programs, universities, educators, and policymakers should carefully design the teaching and learning content to reduce potential barriers for students’ intercultural learning and adjustment.

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