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It's more than just food: the role of food among Chinese international students' acculturation experiences in the UK and USA

Rui He ^a, Sarah Köksal ^b, Heather Cockayne ^a and Dely Lazarte Elliot ^c

^aManchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; ^bDepartment of Intercultural Business, Justus Liebig University Gießen, Gießen, Germany; ^cSchool of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

Food is an indispensable element in every culture. However, it is often regarded as trivial, mundane, and inconspicuous in daily life and, in turn, its role has often been overlooked in intercultural research. Through the lens of food culture, this paper draws insights from three independent yet related studies which investigated Chinese international students' acculturation experiences in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (USA). Semi-structured individual interviews analyzed thematically were conducted with 23 participants in the UK and 29 participants in the USA. By applying the concepts of "invisible learning" and "unconscious competence" to food in Chinese international students' acculturation experiences, we highlight the crucial hidden learning and engagement opportunities to enrich the current appreciation of student sojourners' acculturation experiences. Findings in this paper suggest that food serves as a meaningful invisible or unconscious but powerful acculturation pathway in the personal, psychological, and social domains, which support these learners' acculturation experiences and facilitate their competence development in new cultural environments. Arguably, understanding this nuanced dimension could better assist student sojourners in developing more effective acculturative strategies, and for host universities or other stakeholders to better support international students with more diverse opportunities and resources.

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a rapid growth of food studies primarily focusing on the understanding of eating habits, dietary changes, culinary knowledge and skills, physical health (e.g., nourishment, obesity, dietary disorders), and social development (e.g., public foodbank) (Mintz 2008; Neuman 2019). As an indispensable part of human life, food is often regarded, and hence overlooked, as trivial and commonplace with a "routinized manner" and "devoid of much mental deliberation" (Neuman 2019, 80). Food serves as an essential source of nutrition for human development. Like everyone else, international students are not exempt because,

CONTACT Rui He  rui.elin.he@manchester.ac.uk

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undoubtedly, they need to continue this intake of nutrition despite the change of physical and cultural environment, which in turn, incurs some adjustment. However, very little research has been advocating that daily food is not only for nutritional gain, but also draws a potent mark of cultural identity, social positioning, and navigations between home and host cultures (Bell and Valentine 1997; Chapman and Beagan 2013; Labelle 2015).

Chinese students have remained the largest international student cohort over the past decade, even during the difficult COVID-19 pandemic (OECD 2021). While research focusing on the experiences of Chinese international students has steadily increased in-line with the increasing student number, the amount of research exploring the potential role of food in these intercultural experiences has been limited. Those linking food to international students or immigrant studies have also paid similar attention to physical health risks such as weight gain or the influential factors behind food consumption such as (e.g., financial instability or, lack of culinary knowledge) (e.g., Corcoran 2018). Likewise, most attention in education and student support at higher education institutions (HEIs) has been paid to physical health (e.g., food safety) and sustainable environment (e.g., food waste) (Garden-Robinson, Eighmy, and Ngale Lyonga 2010; Stapleton 2022). Nevertheless, the potential sociocultural functions beyond the physical health and nutrition that food may bring to Chinese international students' daily lives and how they negotiate home and host cultures are still underexplored. Thus, this study aims to elucidate more nuanced insights and likely overlooked perspectives on Chinese student sojourners' acculturation experiences in a new cultural environment using food culture as a lens. To avoid terminology confusion in this paper, we will use "food" to represent both food and its related practices (e.g., eating, cooking, grocery shopping).

Food and Chinese international students

Studying abroad has been widely recognized as a life-altering learning experience with expected meaningful intercultural gains (e.g., language proficiency, global mindedness, intercultural communicative skills) from acculturation experiences (i.e., the process of getting continuous first-hand contact with a second or additional culture) (M. F. He 2002; R. He 2021; The Quality Assurance Agency 2015). Often these intercultural sojourns, are portrayed as a rosy picture for Chinese international students, and the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (USA) have both managed to keep their top spots as the most appealing destinations, despite the international relations, travel regulations and restrictions and COVID-19 (Mok et al. 2021).

However, when physically moving to a different cultural environment, there are likely to be collisions between student sojourners' deeply rooted home cultural ideas, behaviors, identity, and the host culture (Antonakopoulou 2013). It then requires or even compels student sojourners to learn new cultural elements, examine both their home cultural mind-set and practices and the new norms and behaviors they have learned from the host environment, then effectively "manage and negotiate" them to establish a new sojourn mind-set, practices, and identities (Elliot et al. 2020; Elliot, Reid, and Baumfield 2016). The greater the differences between their home (e.g., China) and host (e.g., UK/USA) cultures, the more sojourners need to learn, manage, and negotiate. This learning, management and negotiation process could be an overwhelming experience for many student sojourners but on a micro level, food – as an indispensable component of student sojourners' daily life – is arguably a crucial part of this challenging experience. For example, international students who had access to a kitchen to be

able to prepare their preferred and familiar food were more satisfied than those who had to eat in a dining hall with limited options (Tolman 2017). For Chinese international students in particular, the traditional Chinese medicine principles and the diverse regional cuisines make food a more than essential but culturally meaningful part of daily life during their sojourns. Previous studies suggest that Chinese people/students are likely to spend more time (i.e., 2–3 hours per day) on food preparation and cooking (Ma 2015). Also, following Chinese traditional medicine principles such as the body's natural balance (Wu, Fang, and Cheng 2013), some Chinese students are likely to perceive cold and fast food (e.g., sandwiches, salads as prevailing daily meals in the UK/USA) as potential threats to their health (Banna et al. 2016; Jiang and Quave 2013).

As previously discussed, few previous intercultural studies focusing on the role of food have examined beyond the nutritional function of food for physical health and development. They have rarely explored food's potential symbolism and communicative and sociocultural functions in daily life (Neuman 2019). Despite the very small number of studies that exist, researchers who have paid attention to this potential suggest that there are correlations between food choice and identity negotiation (Alakaam et al. 2015; Ciliotta-Rubery 2016; Conroy 2016; O'Sullivan and Amirabdollahian 2016; Taylor and Ali 2017), also links between food neophobia (i.e., reluctance to eat, especially new food) or obsessions (i.e., intense attention to food, calories, etc.) and intercultural experiences (Brown, Edwards, and Hartwell 2010; Hartwell, Edwards, and Brown 2011). As Ciliotta-Rubery (2016) claims, the food system of a country is a repository of traditions and collective identity and as such a crucial vehicle for representation and cultural exchange. Hence, it is not surprising that Brown, Edwards, and Hartwell (2010) suggest that “food shock” (203) – excessive preoccupation with food – is a common symptom of culture shock when moving to a country with a different food culture. Although Collins (2008) argues that globalization has somewhat blurred the gap between the food of “here” and “there” (155), so people can easily access food from both their home and other countries in many food markets/shops across the world. Still, it is arguable that what we choose to eat and how we eat in everyday life might indicate “a sign of membership, social status, and spiritual worth” (Stone 1988, 71), as well as sources of accumulated nutritional wisdom, social acts, and accepted societal practices.

These food-related sociocultural challenges in Chinese international students' sojourns are somehow overlooked in the current education and support offered at higher education institutions (HEIs, e.g., universities in the UK, USA). Our current education, seemingly, fails to connect the mind and body despite the fact that food culture could serve an “ideal and practical way for teachers to know their students” (Stapleton 2022, 749). Most food education lies on food supply, safety and hygiene, waste and environment (Luo et al. 2020; Sackey et al. 2021; Stapleton 2022). It may also be taken for granted that Chinese international students can take good care of themselves and easily manage their daily meals as well as their signs of membership despite the massive changes in the physical and cultural environment.

Exploring the invisible learning and unconscious competence in Chinese international students' acculturation experiences

Previous studies have primarily focused on student sojourners' formal on-campus and academic learning and adjustment. The potential contributions outside-campus and from commonplace daily practice tend to be overlooked. Within academic research, Chinese

international students are often portrayed through a “deficit narrative” in which phrases such as “passive learner” or “silent learner,” “always in their own bubble” have been somewhat stickily linked to Chinese international students and their acculturation experiences (Perkins 2020). These students are, hence, regarded as being either “reluctant” or “unable” to effectively interact and engage with the local majority and intercultural learning (Heng 2018). Few studies have explored how non-academic activities may influence students’ experiences in the host country. For example, Yu and Moskal (2019) explore Chinese international students’ intercultural engagement through church activities, but, arguably, these explorations are somewhat limited within certain cohorts (e.g., students who have religious beliefs or are interested in developing one).

Notwithstanding, in the past two decades, scholars investigating learning argue that human learning is a lifelong practice that exists within a “much broader spectrum” (Elliot, Reid, and Baumfield 2016, 738). The formal on-campus learning through the institutional curriculum is likely to be the tip of the iceberg while there might be more invisible or often overlooked learning opportunities or practices in a student’s overseas sojourn. Kriek (cited in Salmi 1993) suggests an idea about “education by chance” (13) where such learning occurs unconsciously. De Laat (2012) supports this idea by raising that some learning is more informal or even invisible, and people learn new knowledge or skills when they are actually not active in learning – very likely in everyday problem-solving practices. “Unintentionality,” “inadvertence,” “concealment” and “taciturnity” are naturally embedded within these invisible opportunities and practices because they are “self-directed,” “unintended,” “implicit,” or even “incidental” while learners might even be unaware of them (Elliot, Reid, and Baumfield 2016, 740; Leask 2015; Schugurensky 2000).

Chinese international students are those who successfully passed the selection processes at host UK or USA universities. Still, the negative stereotype – “deficit narrative” (e.g., passive learner) – that has been associated with them in the current international education context is likely to impact the local or other international peers, staff and institutions, local societies, but also the students’ own views toward and interactions with this cohort. Nevertheless, a student’s motivation coupled with an understanding of their environment can be linked to a person’s level of consciousness and competence when approaching tasks (Cunningham 2006). While its origin is often contested it is thought that the conscious competence theory stems from the work of Robert Dubin. He suggests that when joining a new organization/place, individuals need to learn the specifics of the “circular course of social motivation” (Dubin 1961, 62) related to that organization (e.g., new surroundings and practices in social activities) if they were to progress and be successful within the new environment. However, when sojourning in a new environment, what the student learns about this new environment will impact his/her motivation, behavior and the levels of confidence and competence within that new environment will change over time. Thus, as successful students in China and individuals who have traveled thousands of miles (often on their own), there are varying levels of unconscious competence (i.e., where individuals are likely to perform their skills automatically without much effort or attention) that these students possess. Student sojourners are very likely to unconsciously demonstrate their competence in effectively learning and managing cultures, negotiating identities, and surviving in an unfamiliar environment since knowledge and skills relating to food might be “internalized” and “performed automatically” (Castle and Buckler 2018, 55) in their daily life. Food as a daily practice for surviving in an unfamiliar environment could arguably be one clear example of this – as they explore and negotiate with

their new environment, buy food in local shops, use the local language, cook and eat with friends. Then, the students are likely to use their unconscious competence associated with food as a daily practice, but arguably also acquiring new knowledge and skills, through less visible and formal learning opportunities – which, arguably, is worthwhile to be considered as a meaningful part of their education abroad.

Although it is unsurprising that invisible learning and unconscious competence often receive much less attention than those more visible and conscious ones (e.g., formal curricula) in terms of curricular and individual development, invisible or unconscious does not necessarily mean less valuable. The invisible learning that is happening outside of the classroom is likely to be a rare “treasure” (Elliot et al. 2020, 4) because of its potential flexibility in format (e.g., individually or in a group), space (e.g., home, school, workplace), age (i.e., from cradle to grave), and source (e.g., books, TV shows, friends) (Schugurensky 2000). Unconscious competence may also lead to meaningful changes in learners’ knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes even though they may not be aware of them (Simons 2012). How the invisible learning and unconscious competence could be identified or become more visible and/or conscious is one of the main questions we aim to address in this paper. Given that food is daily, commonplace, “socially coordinated and embodied activities” (Neuman 2019, 79), it may potentially interrelate with invisible learning and unconscious competence and impact Chinese international students’ acculturation experiences in managing their signs of membership and creating meanings within the community in which they live abroad. This paper, in line with others (such as Elliot, Reid, and Baumfield 2016; Leask and Carroll 2011), aims to remap Chinese international students’ intricate but dynamic acculturation experiences and explore potentially new or commonplace learning and interaction opportunities that might have been overlooked, i.e., food as an essential part of their daily practice. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the conceptual framework we propose from the literature on how food, invisible learning, and unconscious competence may form part of their acculturation experiences. Guided by this conceptual framework, we explore two main questions:

- (1) What role does food play in Chinese international students’ acculturation experiences in the UK and USA?
- (2) How does food impact their acculturation experiences?

Materials and methods

To explore this topic, we have used data from three independent, yet distinctly related, qualitative research projects. All three projects followed the ethics guidelines and obtained ethical approval from their respective institutions’ ethics committees. An overview of the three projects can be found in Table 1 below.

These three original projects were executed for another purpose, with different research and interview questions. However, most participants in the three projects mentioned “food” in their reflections, indicating food a significant element in their acculturation experiences. The present study was proposed after data analysis was concluded in each of the three projects when the authors incidentally noticed the shared emerging side findings (i.e., which are not main findings expected from each research project) on “food” and “acculturation” and hence, further examined the relevant data for exploring the potential role food plays in Chinese international students’ acculturation experiences in the UK and USA. With systematic

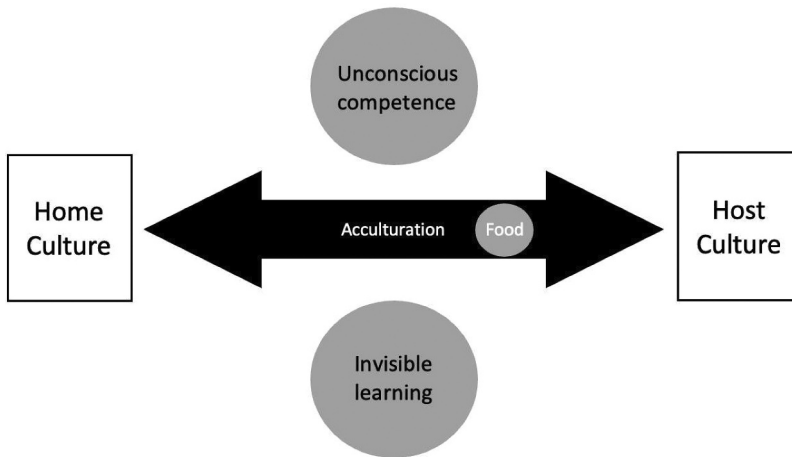


Figure 1. A framework to explore the role of food in Chinese international students' acculturation experiences.

comparison and evaluation of research data from all three studies, sound findings and meaningful insights appropriate to the new topic were obtained. Moreover, doing so improved the depth of data quality while mitigating potential data confusion. Given that the initial ideas for the present study bloomed from the emerging side findings from these three projects and there has been limited previous research on this topic, this study is exploratory by nature.

Stake (2006) claims that cross-case analysis supports the investigation of a collection of cases which share common characteristics. Each case is required to be able to demonstrate a rich and holistic picture of the phenomenon, and meaningful connections should be constructed based on the similarities and differences between cases (Khan and VanWynsberghe 2008). Hence, the three projects in this study could be arguably considered as three cases and the present study is developed upon a cross-case analysis.

Despite the different research sites, these three cases share similar characteristics in samples and main research foci. All research participants were from Mainland China, aged between 18 to 24 years old (all from the 1990s generation), single/unmarried, and without any caregiving duties. Nearly all of them are self-funded. The primary differences between these cases' samples were in subjects of study and duration of stay (see Table 1). However, all three cases aim to explore Chinese international students' experiences in a dominant "Western country" (i.e., the UK, USA), trying to understand their perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and the meanings they ascribe to the new cultural surroundings. To gain richness and depth of accounts of the shared social phenomenon (i.e., acculturation experience), all cases adopted a qualitative approach which allows researchers to discover the lived experiences of research participants and to understand social interactions (Bryman 2008). Semi-structured individual interviews were used as the primary method of data collection in all cases. Interviews were independently conducted and subsequently re-analyzed for this study. In each of the original studies, initial contacts with research participants were made through the university and social media and the samples were then increased through snowball sampling (Bryman 2008). Interview transcripts and documents were checked with participants to ascertain whether

Table 1. Cases profiles.

	Project (Case) 1	Project (Case) 2	Project (Case) 3
Project (Case) title	A 'Mirror-image' Investigation: Foreign Language Learners' Acculturation Experiences in Chinese and British Study Abroad Programmes (R. He 2021)	Unique, Ambitious, Global: Self-Identity Narratives of Chinese Students in the United States (2023)	An exploration of how Chinese postgraduate students reconcile their UKHE learning experiences through a cycle of action and self-reflection (2020)
Participants	(1) Chinese undergraduate students; (2) did English Studies subjects; (3) studied abroad for one academic year 2017/18	(1) Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students; (2) did English studies, STEM, sociology, psychology (3) studied abroad during academic year 2019/2020	(1) Chinese postgraduate students; (2) studied education-related topics; (3) studied abroad for one academic year 2015/16
	all are from mainland China, aged between 18 to 24 years old (1990s generation), single/unmarried without any caring duties, and the majority of them are self-funded		
Sample size	15 (all female)	29 (23 female, 6 male)	8 (all female)
Location	the UK	USA	the UK
Data collection	Interviews (2018)	Interviews (2019)	Interviews (2016)
Data analysis		Thematic analysis	
Number of participants that mentioned 'food' in their acculturation experiences	13 (out of 15 participants)	16 (out of 29 participants)	6 (out of 8 participants)

there was anything they wanted to include/remove in their discussions. Thematic analysis was conducted to make sense of the data collected in the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In this paper, the authors re-examined comparable data within each case and searched for themes specifically related to food. Member checking and triangulation of data across all three cases was conducted to ensure the study's trustworthiness (Bryman 2008; Carter et al. 2014). Similar themes emerged from the data, triangulated across different investigators and data sources which strengthened the collection of these three cases (Merriam 2009). We also engaged in reflective memoing through the data analysis process, peer-reviewed, and created an audit trail detailing each step (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). Additionally, our positionality as researchers provided insights into how our backgrounds may have shaped the data interpretation. The first author identifies as Chinese, the second and third author were proficient in Mandarin and have lived in China for years. All four authors are experienced in researching Chinese international students' journeys and impressions with a particular focus on acculturation and identity, which supported this cross-case analysis.

Results

As discussed earlier, our paper aims at further investigating the role food plays in Chinese international students' acculturation experiences in the UK and USA. This section discusses the most significant roles, concrete examples, and pathways constituting our participants' daily experiences in relation to food during their sojourns. Findings are categorized into three crucial aspects: personal transitions and development, psychological well-being, and social interactions (see Table 2 below). Given that there are three

Table 2. Positive impact and potential challenges of food on Chinese international students' acculturation experiences.

	Personal transitions and development	Psychological well-being	Social interactions
<i>Positive impact</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cultural learning opportunities</i> • <i>A sign of maturity and independence</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Stress coping strategies</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Pathways of community building and support exchange</i> • <i>Social positioning</i>
<i>Potential challenges</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ethnocentrism and patriotism</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Acculturative stress triggers</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Stereotype and discrimination</i>

cases involved in the present study, quotes will be attributed in the format as pseudonyms_gender_location_case number (e.g., Kang_F_UK_Case1).

Personal transitions and development

Cultural learning opportunities

A key theme shared by nearly all participants in this study is that food serendipitously offered meaningful cultural learning opportunities for them. As mentioned by Kang_F_UK_Case1:

Cooking is something, you know. . .I need to cook for myself, so I go to Tesco (a British local supermarket). I couldn't understand many food labels actually at the beginning, but I learned a lot of [English] words, and some British cuisine or recipes. It's a big improvement for me.

It is unsurprising that these Chinese international students were able to learn something new about the host culture since the process of grocery shopping brought the students into close contact with previously unfamiliar or even unknown aspects of the local society (e.g., a particular American or British cuisine, cooking ingredient, or kitchen utensil). Even if a student was very knowledgeable about cooking, they might learn the words in a different language (i.e., American or British English). In this way, food seemed to provide an often-undervalued invisible learning opportunity beyond the formal classroom settings, which implicitly happens on a daily basis. On the other hand, Chinese student sojourners were also likely to rebuild their daily routines in the new environment through this learning pathway, some of them even did it unconsciously. As Aries_F_UK_Case3 shared her story:

I don't know when it started, but I had a habit here [in the UK] that I will buy the coffee from Costa every morning before I go to lecture. Then I feel that maybe this coffee means, all right there is a new day starting . . . I am really enjoying the feeling that I have a coffee when listening to the lecture . . . This is a habit that I didn't have in China.

One of the biggest challenges student sojourners are likely to encounter is that when they physically move to another environment, they may lose "sources of support and familiarity" (Elliot, Reid, and Baumfield 2016, 2214) from their original daily routines. To regain the sense of familiarity and settling, sojourners need to relocate potential sources in the new environment to rebuild their daily routine (Elliot, Reid, and Baumfield 2016). Although Aries was not aware when the coffee from Costa was included as a potential source, this newly developed habit supported her to build up a new daily routine when

sojourning abroad. It is also likely to be a new cultural behavior she unconsciously picked up from the new cultural environment.

A sign of maturity and independence

Interestingly, another benefit from sojourning in a foreign country raised by most of the participants in this study is that they learned some cooking skills, a few even regarded it as “a sign of maturity and independence.” Nearly all participants in our study are from the “one-child generation” (i.e., the only child in their families). As previously mentioned, the easy access to food was likely to make cooking an unnecessary skill that they should learn before their sojourns. However, as previously discussed, with the concerns of living costs and expensive Chinese food in the host countries, some of participants needed to learn to manage their daily budgets, Amanda (F_UK_Case3), for example, tried hard to improve her cooking skills because “[I] can save money [by cooking for myself].” Also, when they learned some cooking skills and shared food with friends, these Chinese international students gained strong sense of independence from cooking for themselves or others for the first time, as Yuan shared with pride:

I never cooked before, but when I came here, I had to cook for myself. I think it’s really lovely because you could invite friends to your flat and cook for them. . . It made me feel like I’m genuinely mature now, I can also take care of other people. (Yuan_F_UK_Case1)

Also, either because it might be unrealistic to dine out every day or missing home food, all participants in this study had frequent grocery shopping and cooking experiences during their sojourns. For both those who learnt how to cook for the first time or were able to cook but did not do it often in China, cooking became “a life skill . . . you can cook and look after yourself . . . you are more independent” (Yang_F_UK_Case1). Like Yuan, Amanda, and Yang, learning how to cook and cooking daily meals for themselves seemed to become a sign of maturity and independence, which is a significant personal development they have achieved while sojourning in a different cultural environment.

Ethnocentrism and patriotism

While student sojourners shared the meaningful cultural learning opportunities through food, a few of them in both the UK and the USA developed ethnocentrism and patriotism when identifying and comparing the different eating patterns and food service with their home country (i.e., China). For example, Yu_F_UK_Case1 complained that “the food here [in the UK] is really not good” in comparison to that in China and Laura_F_UK_Case3 struggled with everyday cooking:

In China . . . we just eat in the canteen . . . we do not have to clean the kitchen [because there isn’t one in student hall] . . . It was really easy . . .

Living with parents (thus food was often cooked by parents), easy access to campus canteens, or the well-developed food delivery service in China was likely to make food easily accessible for most Chinese students in China. On the other hand, despite the various restaurants available in their host countries (i.e., the UK and USA), all participants in this study were self-funded and financial pressures mattered in their daily practices. As Ting_F_UK_Case 1 shared:

I never considered McDonald or KFC in China, but I have to choose them when I'm here. I need to eat everyday but Chinese food here [in restaurants] is so expensive so I have to find some cheaper options, pizza for example, I never touched it before. [in China]

When sojourning abroad, student sojourners lost all these familiar sources of food and had to spend additional time and money covering food every day, which is very likely to remind them of the accessibility of food in China and aggravate their homesickness. Their peers in America also grumbled about the efficiency of food delivery services:

... something like the Uber Eats in China, they can deliver within 30 minutes ... Here maybe 2 or 3 hours, especially after 6 p.m. when there are a lot of traffic jams, it will get longer... [that makes me really miss China]. (Huaguan_M_USA_Case2)

In line with a few studies on Chinese international students (e.g., Banna et al. 2016), participants in this study also placed great emphasis on food, as Yu argued: “[food] is a really big thing for Chinese people” This might be because of the strong attention to the ideas about health proposed by Chinese traditional medicine (Jiang and Quave 2013) or the developed cuisines in China that led the students in this study to have higher expectations regarding the quality and variety of food. When they experienced food shock in countries with unappealing reputation in food (e.g., the UK, USA), where students described local cuisine as bland, fattening, and uninviting, it seemed to strengthen their ethnocentrism and patriotism toward their home culture, or food culture at least.

Psychological well-being

Stress coping strategies

Interestingly, many participants in this study noted the positive functions delivered by their home food, either from a Chinese restaurant in the UK/USA or cooked by themselves. As in Shuo's story:

... sometimes you are homesick, you miss your hometown food and [me and my Chinese friends] will go out to the Chinese restaurants together ... [although the flavor] is different from the Chinese restaurant in China, I think they want to adapt to the American flavor ... sweeter ... saltier ... I still enjoy these [Chinese] food, because they make me feel better. (Shuo_F_USA_Case2)

Although Chinese international students were often criticized as “always in their own bubble,” enjoying Chinese food in the host country together became a coping strategy for the acculturative stress (e.g., homesickness) and a source of comfort for them. Despite the “modified” flavor of “American-ized” or “British-ized” Chinese food, as Shuo complained, the general sense of familiarity still brought her some psychological relief from familiar food and the activity of sharing home food with her intragroup friends. Seemingly, the familiarity of food and shared food preferences contributed to a sense of belonging and identity security in a foreign country and hence, facilitated interpersonal and intercultural interactions. This is also illustrated in Zai's (F_UK_Case1) story, who was a very shy girl and felt uncomfortable about the sociocultural pattern of socializing in bars with alcohol and “I'd feel better if [she and her non-Chinese peers] go to a Chinese restaurant.”

Additionally, sojourning in an unfamiliar environment and managing various cultural differences for finding a way through in the new environment on their own could be quite overwhelming and frustrating for these student sojourners. However, Laura noted that cooking familiar home food became a source of comfort for her to take a short break from the overwhelming, continuous cultural management and negotiation process. As she shared:

I think the world is so quiet and just me doing these things [cooking], because making dumplings is a kind of complex thing you have to spend maybe an hour . . . it makes me feel really good [when cooking]. (Laura_F_UK_Case3)

Acculturative stress triggers

However, when there are large differences in eating patterns and dietary habits between sojourners' home and host countries, it is also likely to stress these differences on a daily basis and hence, aggravate some student sojourners' acculturative stress (e.g., homesickness, isolation), as Yu stated:

It's not about your language. . . it's just different. . . the food you eat. . . so many daily habits that remind you you're different. (Yu_F_UK_Case1)

Even though there are Chinese restaurants in both the UK and USA, "you can't always eat the most authentic [Chinese] food here" (Amanda_F_UK_Case3). Student sojourners might be excited to enjoy familiar Chinese food in host countries, but the unanticipated different flavors might upset them. This strong sense of "difference" might cause mental health and well-being issues and make student sojourners "really unhappy [during the sojourn]" (Ting_F_UK_Case1).

Also, shared by another two participants in particular, this "unhappiness" even played a crucial and negative role in their future plans and decision-making. Both Yang (F_UK_Case1) and Huaguan (M_USA_Case2) gave up their initial intentions to develop their career abroad primarily because of the "unpleasant" local food in host countries: "I just don't like the food [in the UK/USA]." Coincidentally, although in different host countries, Yang and Huaguan described the "Western food" in their host countries such as fish and chips, fried chicken, sandwiches, or salads as "cold," "unhealthy," and "uninviting." Additionally, as the only child in his family and a family-oriented person, Huaguan initially wished his parents could move to the USA so that they could live close to each other while he was also able to develop his career abroad. However, the fact that his parents did not enjoy the living environment and especially American food strongly impacted his decision on returning to his hometown after graduation.

Social interactions

Pathways of community building and support exchange

In line with the communicative and social functions claimed by Neuman (2019), another key theme shared by the majority of participants in this study is that food served as an important pathway to community building and support exchanges during their social interactions. In this sense, food became a connecting medium, through which Chinese students in this study developed two primary ways: 1) strengthening home cultural

identity and exchanging support within their Chinese groups; and 2) interacting and building communities with peers from other cultural backgrounds.

Within their Chinese groups, these student sojourners noted the efficiency in building this intra-group connection and developing confidence in making contributions to groups while living in a foreign environment (Cai et al. 2019), as Yixin (F_USA_Case2) mentioned:

Do you know hotpot? I love it. This is the similarity for me among my Chinese friends . . . Most of us, we love similar foods . . . that maybe is the reason why we hang out together mostly because our habits [and tastes for food] are similar.

Shuo (F_USA_Case2) agreed that the “shared” eating patterns facilitated her to develop a stronger sense of belonging while she was away from her family and friends at home. It remained the same for those who lacked cooking skills such as Amy (F_USA_Case2), who said the dinner her Chinese friends cooked for them “enrich[ed]” her life in the USA. Although Amy did not cook, she would “find other ways to contribute” and friends in her intragroup community “help[ed] each other in a lot of different ways.” For instance, they frequently helped each other with study or other life stuff. Also interestingly, the bonding function of shared food might even prevent student sojourners from quarreling. Ting (F_UK_Case1) shared that she would think twice when got mad at other Chinese peers during the sojourn because “if I fight with them, who should I go for a meal with?”

On the other hand, food also served as the pathway of community building and social interactions with people from other cultural backgrounds. It seemed that despite the different cultures, the “shared love of cooking and enjoying delicious food” created a “way to connect with local peers” and “this kind of communication and interaction, it made me feel much less lonely” (Yuan_F_UK_Case1). Additionally, by introducing Chinese cuisine to local or other international peers, participants in this study highlighted the creative way to interact with people from different backgrounds while not entirely leaving their comfort zones. The dishes or dining habits subsequently offered topics for either group or potential future interpersonal conversations and connections, as in Ting’s (F_UK_Case1) example:

I took my group members [in the Buddy Scheme] to try Chinese food, the hotpot, all of them found it “amazing” and we had a really good time. I felt really good that day, feeling like I’ve made a big step forward . . . It’s like being finally recognized and accepted by others.

Some of them even practiced English with local shop owners and developed an interesting and strong sense of familiarity from these interactions. Aries (F_UK_Case3) shared the reason for going to the same café every day was because “[the owner] knows me, they say ‘oh [here] you come . . . [same] vanilla coffee?’” This interaction was likely to contribute to her rebuilding of daily routine and enhancement of familiarity with the new environment. She also gained linguistic, psychological, and social support from it, though unintendedly.

Social positioning

Some participants in this study had strong motivations of interacting and integrating with people from different cultural backgrounds as a part of their sojourn goals and thus, interestingly suggested how they, either consciously or subconsciously, positioned

themselves in social interactions via food. Celia, for instance, criticized those who stick to familiar home cultural groups:

...there are a couple of Chinese students ... they always stick together ... only eat Chinese food. ..Honestly, I don't really like it. I'm not saying I keep distance with other Chinese people here, but I feel like while we're abroad ... we have a lot of foreign people here and if you. . .just hang out with Chinese friends ... you're kind of being stuck in the Chinese culture. You don't really [be able to] know other things.
(Celia_F_USA_Case2)

Celia's negative description of her Chinese peers as "being stuck in the Chinese culture" indicates her willingness to maximize her intercultural learning opportunities while she was abroad. Possibly, she has overcome feelings of culture shock and insecurity which draw others to seek comfort within familiar cultural groups. Instead, she positioned herself as "don't like [staying with Chinese peers and only eating Chinese food]" and social interactions as engaging with "foreign people" such as local Americans or other international students seemed more enriching and interesting to her. As a result, she "learned a lot from my Salvadorian friend . . . [Her family] invited me for Thanksgiving and I learned what Salvadorian cuisine is like" and found it "a good way to practice English."

Unlike Celia, some other participants noted the eating pattern as a big challenge for them to interact with local students. For example, Aries (F_UK_Case3) was surprised about the drinking culture in the UK: "[Some British students] will have a party, they will scream, sing, dance, and drink a lot of alcohol, it is not a traditional way that we experience [in China]." The conflicts between deeply rooted home values with the local culture were interestingly demonstrated through food. Positioning themselves with certain labels, it is likely to either encourage (as in Celia's case) or hinder (as in Aries's case) student sojourners to learn and interact with the host environment. Although there is also a chance that some sojourners might compromise because of the host conformity pressure (Kim 2001), as Kang (F_UK_Case1) shared her story about joining her British friends for fish and chips. She was not very fond of this British food, but she encouraged herself to try them because "I think if you eat together [with local British], you have to accept it."

Stereotype and discrimination

Lastly, it is also necessary to note that food does not only connect groups across cultural distances, but it can also be a vehicle for discrimination and stereotyping, as two participants in both countries highlighted. Haidong (M_USA_Case2) was hurt by rumors of Chinese people eating dogs which he hastily clarified as "generally not true." He saw some "dirty looks" toward him and interpreted these as hostility. He also pointed out:

I've known Americans who eat dogs, right? Just because you've got good people and bad people everywhere, it's just sort of bias coming from their mind [because I'm] a foreigner, not one of [American], so the bias naturally leans towards the negative part.

Similarly, his peer in the UK (Yang_F_UK_Case1) also experienced such stereotypes and discrimination when she overheard her new roommates ridiculing their Asian classmates' habits of cooking rice for daily meals. She said sadly:

It feels very bad, that is discrimination, which really has a great impact on my psychological well-being. At that time, I really felt that I was the marginalized group. Why did I come to this place?

As previously discussed, although food could provide creative and meaningful learning and interaction opportunities among Chinese international students and their peers from host or other international cultures; seemingly, it also delivered unfriendly messages derived from stereotypes and discrimination. This could result in student sojourners experiencing poor mental health and well-being, which could hinder their attempts to engage in and interact with the host society and different cultures.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite it often being considered as trivial and commonplace, findings in this study suggest that food plays an important role as an invisible and unconscious pathway in the acculturation experiences of Chinese international students in both the UK and the USA (as illustrated in Figure 2). Food choice, transition and negotiation between home and host eating patterns and habits, and food-related social practices (e.g., having a meal with peers) convey their symbolism and communicative and sociocultural functions (Neuman 2019) in Chinese international students' daily life in their host countries (i.e., the UK and USA). Being deeply rooted that food is a "big thing" (Yu_F_UK_Case1; Jiang and Quave 2013; Ma 2015) and within this more daily and routinized setting, Chinese student sojourners might unconsciously demonstrate their "internalized" and "automatically performed" (Castle and Buckler 2018, 54) unconscious competence in cultural learning, managing, and negotiating cultural differences, and building new routines or connections to certain groups during their sojourns. In line with previous research on food and acculturation experiences (e.g., Ciliotta-Rubery 2016; Hartwell, Edwards, and Brown 2011), this study further supports the potential connections between food and acculturation which are illustrated in three dimensions: personal, psychological, and social (see Figure 2).

First, food functions as an important invisible and unconscious cultural learning pathway for Chinese international students. Through food, findings in this study suggest that student sojourners learn new cultural knowledge and/or skills naturally and more easily as part of their new life and rebuild new daily routines to promote their sense of settling and belonging. They are also likely to unconsciously practice their independence

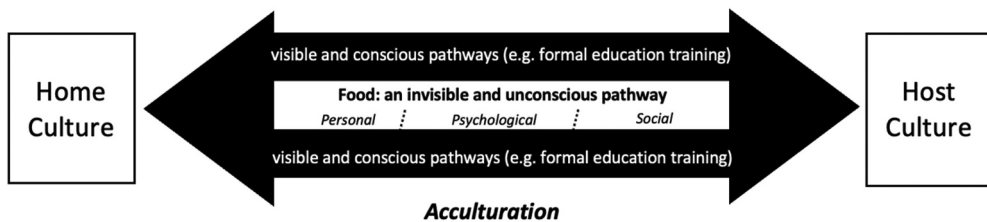


Figure 2. The role of food in Chinese international students' acculturation experiences.

through cooking. However, if food shock was too overwhelming, it led to strengthened ethnocentric or patriotic attitudes. From the psychological perspective, this study strongly suggests an interesting discrepancy as food might be a notable acculturative stress trigger but also a powerful coping mechanism for Chinese international students in the UK and USA. This discrepancy is also likely to have emerged from the “routinized manner” without “much mental deliberation” (Neuman 2019, 80) in their daily life so that food could easily stir their emotions. It could be considered the “last straw that broke the camel’s back” at one time while the “final spell that saves all” at the other. Then, in the social dimension, findings in this study suggest that food fulfilled important social duties, functioning as a significant mediator or a bridge for social connections among people either from similar or different cultural backgrounds. Through these enhanced social interaction opportunities, student sojourners were able to build up their groups and communities, unconsciously or subconsciously, as sources of closest support when their family and friends were far away in China (R. He 2021) or hurt by the negative and unfriendly messages with discrimination and stereotypes relating to food. Yet, this study highlights that with either positive or negative effects, food is an excellent example of an invisible and overlooked learning opportunity that Chinese international students are bound to experience during their sojourns in the UK and USA. However, this pathway which food exemplifies might be less recognized by stakeholders (i.e., institutions, staff, parents) and/or even by student sojourners themselves. Still, we argue invisible does not mean of no or less value, as the findings in this study support.

Additionally, this study further highlights that “food shock” (Brown, Edwards, and Hartwell 2010, 203) is arguably not only demonstrated in an excessive occupation with food but also in the challenges in managing and negotiating different cuisines, ingredients, and eating patterns along with related practices (such as eating habits, meal together). These are crucial parts of “shock” that the student sojourners are likely to experience and must learn, manage and negotiate. Findings in this study suggest that food offers more concrete examples of how student sojourners demonstrate their unconscious competence through invisible learning opportunities in an unfamiliar environment, surviving and supporting their own learning and development while making contributions to the new environment. Hence, this study suggests that there are very likely to be two parallel acculturative pathways for Chinese international students in the UK and USA. Apart from the widely recognized visible, conscious pathway (e.g., formal education training), the invisible, unconscious pathway is, arguably, equally crucial and powerful in their acculturation experiences. This pathway – though invisible and unconscious – still shapes their, either individual or group, learning and development of intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and mind-set, and creates effective interaction and engagement opportunities, as well as impacts on the process of identity negotiation during their sojourns (Leask 2015).

Although Chinese student sojourners may develop through the invisible learning pathway and demonstrate their competence unconsciously, it is pivotal that stakeholders recognize the significance of this invisible and unconscious pathway and acknowledge the impact this pathway may have on their visible and conscious engagement and development (i.e., formal education training). We argue that a better understanding of useful daily resources such as food could better assist Chinese (and other) student

sojourners in developing more effective acculturative strategies in an unfamiliar environment during their time abroad. Hence, stakeholders should utilize this pathway in the education and student support planning, such opportunities will make the invisible or unconscious learning and competence more visible and conscious, then strengthen student sojourners' own or other stakeholders' confidence in these "passive learners." International evening, for instance, could be an opportune time for fostering greater intercultural interaction through sharing of cultures where food is at the center. Students (and staff), either international or domestic, will be able to see and learn about food and cultural stories as well as taste a variety of food.

Nevertheless, given that data in this study emerged and was combined from three independent research projects, further empirical investigation of this potential invisible and unconscious pathway is necessary. Quantitative methods such as surveys and longitudinal approaches are worth considering acquiring both the depth and breadth of understanding of this crucial concept (e.g., potential pattern or trend across different ages/generations). Demographic and geographic comparisons (e.g., urban versus rural, high- versus low-immigrant demographics, coastal versus inland) under the umbrella of diaspora studies or foreign exchange education studies, for instance, could support a more comprehensive understanding. We are also aware of the legitimacy of this critique and likewise do not claim that findings from our study are representative of all international students or even of all Chinese students. Yet, the focus on Chinese students in this study provided a starting point for looking into food-related intercultural learning processes. Arguably, while this study solely focused on one specific group of international students, the concept of food being an invisible and unconscious pathway (see [Figure 2](#)) can be extended to other international groups. Equally important, the concept about the existence of two pathways during the acculturation experience as well as that food either serves as an acculturative stress trigger or a coping mechanism offer novel insights for further understanding international student experiences. Therefore, expanding the sample to non-Chinese students, staff members, or even local people in future research might offer a more holistic picture of acculturation from diverse perspectives.

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ORCID

Rui He  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6809-6710>

Sarah Köksal  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-1568-4009>

Heather Cockayne  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1966-4507>

Dely Lazarte Elliot  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0711-5719>

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