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Likened to “A Boiled Egg”: Understanding Chinese Postgraduate Taught Students’ Transitional Experience in the UK

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ABSTRACT

International students make significant contributions to UK higher education and studying in the UK brings various potential benefits to international students. An in-depth exploration of the academic journey of Chinese international master’s students, the largest body of overseas students in the UK, is needed to provide better insight into how to best support this cohort. In this longitudinal study, interviews with 34 participants were conducted using a photo-elicitation technique and diagrams. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed for data analysis. Nine superordinate themes emerged which comprise academic, social, linguistic, and psychological aspects of students’ experience. These themes were brought together in a model, adapted from Malow’s Hierarchy of Needs, to provide a longitudinal representation of the student experience transitioning in, through, and out of their journey abroad. This study illustrates the various needs of this cohort by sequence and importance, and highlights English proficiency and social connections as two influential factors.

Keywords: Chinese students, intercultural adaptation, international students, transitional experience, the United Kingdom

The significant global presence of international students underscores the increasing importance of research on internationalization in higher education (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). International students are defined as “students who left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study” (OECD, 2023, p. 253). Top destinations for international students include the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Russia (Project Atlas, 2023). Students from Asia are the largest body of overseas students in higher education, which accounts for 57% of all mobile students across the OECD in 2021 (OECD, 2023). Chinese international students represent the largest cohort (22.3%) among 679,970 overseas students in the UK in 2021/22, with postgraduate taught (PGT) programs (e.g., a master’s degree) being especially popular (HESA, 2022). As this enrolment trend shows no signs of stopping, the Chinese PGT student experience must be given due attention.

The UK has been a popular study destination for Chinese international students who take on postgraduate taught programs. The most frequent reasons for Chinese students pursuing a UK degree include personal growth, employability, life experience, speed of gaining qualification, English language skills, and the high reputation of UK universities (Zhao & Cox, 2022). Moreover, postgraduate taught programs in the UK are highly attractive to Chinese international students due to China’s intense domestic competition for master program entry, social networks, China’s traditional culture, short duration of the master’s program, global competence, and parental influence (Zhai & Cao, 2022).

However, research on Chinese international students suggests that they may encounter various challenges in their intercultural experience, especially when completing a condensed one-year postgraduate taught program in the UK. Some Chinese international students are generally concerned about their oral and written English language competence (e.g. Li & Han, 2021; Liu et al., 2022), which leads to academic challenges in classroom participation and academic writing (e.g., Holliman et al., 2023; Li & Zhang, 2022), social obstacles such as having difficulty socializing with native students (e.g., Scally & Jiang, 2019; Spencer et al., 2017), and psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and a lack of sense of belonging (e.g., Cena et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2021). Furthermore, the duration of a master’s program in the UK is usually shorter than other Western countries, such as the US and Australia (Zhu & Reeves, 2019). Compared with undergraduate students who study in the UK for three or four years, Chinese PGT students usually spend one year, which means that the known challenges of Chinese undergraduate students may differ from Chinese PGT students in the UK (Quan et al., 2016). The scale and intensity of PGT programs in the UK make it particularly worthy of study.

Existing studies investigating the experience of Chinese international students tend to focus on their struggles, rather than providing explanations on why problems occur and how students respond and adapt to their environment (Heng, 2020; Zhang-Wu, 2018). Throughout their year of PGT study in the UK, Chinese students’ unique needs may evolve, yet studies on Chinese PGT students in the UK usually do not consider the full journey, but focus on one point in time, or separate elements such as academic challenges (e.g., Holliman et al., 2023) and

social obstacles (e.g., Spencer et al., 2017). To better understand how to maximize the benefits for this cohort, we need to see the whole picture of the overall transitional experience from the beginning to end of their academic journey. A longitudinal approach, bolstered with creative methods, could help capture the nuances, seek explanations, and identify patterns across the whole overseas study experience (Neale, 2021). To address this gap, we proposed the following research question: How do Chinese postgraduate taught students transition in, through, and out of a new academic and social culture in the UK?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese international students who take on PGT programs in the UK may have a complex journey. Chinese PGT students can face language barriers such as difficulties in academic writing (Clark & Yu, 2020). Although preparing for IELTS (International English Language Testing System) provides an important first step to help students develop basic writing skills, the challenges of academic writing are beyond IELTS including the transition to presentation, content, and structure in the British academic culture (Clark & Yu, 2020). In terms of social experience, the interaction with local students tends to be limited and superficial rather than deep and meaningful, e.g., classmates rather than close friends (Pho & Schartner, 2019). Some Chinese PGT students express concerns about academic study, such as adapting independent learning style and developing critical thinking skills (Liu et al., 2022). The above language barriers, academic pressure, and social exclusion can lead Chinese PGT students to feel stressed, anxious, and depressed (Yu & Moskal, 2018).

Moreover, scholars in the field raise an important critique of the prevailing dominant deficit narrative of the international student experience. Previous literature frequently uses words such as barriers, challenges, problems, and struggles to highlight international students lacking skills, competencies, or experiences (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023). For example, Chinese international students are characterized as passive and silent (Heng, 2018), but this could be due to personality, cultural norms about saving face in social situations, or being unfamiliar with a new teaching style (Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020). Also, Chinese international students are reported as lacking critical thinking skills (Liu et al., 2022), but this presumption is arguably inappropriate, and may be associated with language barriers or unclear understanding of assessment criteria (Zhong & Cheng, 2021).

Therefore, it is suggested to pay greater attention to the complexities of the international student experience and develop critical voices in the field (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023). Aligned with this perspective, the current study adopted a theoretical framework focused on motivation to consider the needs of international Chinese PGT students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was chosen as a suitable framework for this research. The most widely used version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs describes five needs that motivate human behaviour: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; 1954). More specifically, physiological needs refer to basic survival requirements such as water, shelter, warmth, sex and sleep; safety needs include security, stability, protection, and freedom from fear, anxiety and chaos; love and belonging needs involve giving and receiving affection, and sense of belonging within a group; and esteem needs refer to the desire for stable self-esteem and achievement, competence, confidence independence from others, importance and dignity (Maslow, 2014; Maslow & Frager, 1987). Finally, self-actualization is defined as "people's desire for self-fulfilment, namely, the tendency for them to become actualized in what they are potentially" (Maslow, 2014, p. 225).

The use of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs addresses a call for more engagement, explication, and diversification of theory in qualitative research on international students in higher education (Heng, 2020). Traditionally, there has been a keen focus on acculturation theories (e.g., Berry, 1997; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) in research on international students. However, acculturation frameworks can sometimes further a deficit approach. For instance, acculturation theories propose ideal adaptation and Chinese international students are assumed to be problematic when they fail to adapt to expectations (Heng, 2020). In contrast, in a more empowering perspective focusing on the needs of the individual, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs proposes that individuals are motivated to achieve certain needs and meet lower levels of needs before progressing to higher levels, although with some individual differences (Maslow, 2014). The theory also proposes that different needs become motivated across time and therefore it is useful for explicating the dynamic needs of international Chinese PGT students as they begin their move abroad, adapt to the academic experience over time, and eventually transition to the end of their studies. To the best of our knowledge, while Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been widely used in the context of higher education, its application to the Chinese international student experience seems to be very limited (e.g., Martirosyan et al., 2022), and offers a more dynamic, and less of a deficit approach, to help make sense of Chinese PGT students' overall transitional experience.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach to capture a detailed account of the journey of Chinese PGT students in the UK (Bryman, 2016). This study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which stems from a philosophical approach to studying experience, to investigate the depth and breadth of Chinese PGT students' transitional experience in the UK (Smith et al., 2009). IPA involves a dual interpretation process, or a double hermeneutic, where "the participants are trying to make sense of their world, and the researcher is

trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 26). In this study, students made sense of their experience by describing and reflecting on their lived experience during in-depth interviews, and the first author, as an insider with personal experience as a previous Chinese PGT student in the UK, interpreted the findings to make sense of participants’ experience. Also, since IPA is ‘participant-oriented’ to apprehend the real ‘lived experience’ of the participants, the process begins by coding inductively from the student experience, rather than using a pre-existing theory to identify codes that might be applied to the data (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Thirty-four participants were recruited at a British research-intensive university. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants meeting the following criteria: a) Chinese international students; b) registered in a postgraduate taught program at the targeted university; and c) from the following schools: School of Law, School of Education, and the Business School. Student experience may vary depending on the proportion of international students in one’s cohort. Thus, these schools were targeted to represent relatively higher and lower percentages of international students among all PGT students: the Business School (91% international students among all PGT students), the School of Law (25%), and the School of Education (13%) (Headcount student data from X university, n.d.). Snowballing techniques were also used to reach the targeted number of participants. Table 1 presents more details of the recruited participants in the study.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	School	Length of Stay in the UK (at the beginning of the study)
Lyn	27	Female	Business	≤ one month
Sophia	>30	Female	Business	one month ≤ six months
Niki	22	Female	Business	one month ≤ six months
Yami	22	Female	Education	≤ one month
Alice	22	Female	Business	≤ one month
Angela	23	Female	Education	≤ one month
Erin Goh	37	Female	Geographical and Earth Sciences	≤ one month
Coco	22	Female	Business	≥ six months (1 year)
Neil	23	Male	Business	one month ≤ six months
Sining	26	Female	Law	one month ≤ six months
Sabrina	23	Female	Business	≤ one month
Chao	23	Male	Business	≤ one month
Ken	22	Male	Business	one month ≤ six months
Stephanie 1	22	Female	Culture and Creative Arts	one month ≤ six months
Coco Gui	22	Female	Business	≥ six months (2 years)
Rika	24	Female	Business	≥ six months (1 year)
Artimis	27	Female	Business	≥ six months (2 years)
Eisley	21	Female	Business	one month ≤ six months
Wenqiang	25	Male	Business	≤ one month

Tao	21	Female	Business	≥ six months (1 year)
Wendy	23	Female	Business	one month ≤ six months
Bruce	23	Male	Business	≥ six months (1 year)
Zoe	23	Female	Business	one month ≤ six months
Ashley	23	Female	Education	≤ one month
Ke	24	Female	Business	one month ≤ six months
Stephanie 2	24	Female	Education	one month ≤ six months
Kaya	23	Female	Culture and Creative Arts	one month ≤ six months
Bella	21	Female	Business	one month ≤ six months
Savanna	23	Female	Education	one month ≤ six months
Yuqi	23	Female	Business	≥ six months (7 months)
Vivian	23	Female	Education	≥ six months (1 year)
June Teng	>30	Female	Education	one month ≤ six months
Summer	23	Female	Law	one month ≤ six months
Lydia	25	Female	Education	one month ≤ six months

In response to previous literature that suggests future research should adopt a longitudinal design when focusing on a specific international student group (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), this study was conducted in two phases. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews facilitated by photo- and diagram-elicitation techniques at Phase 1 (transition in-at the beginning of the study program) and Phase 2 (transition through and out-near the end of their journey transition, approximately 7 months later). All 34 participants participated in both phases.

Before each interview, participants were sent ten interview topics and asked to prepare one photo for each topic. Students were asked about aspects such as British academic culture and social connections, while Phase 1 interview included motivations and expectations to study in the UK, and Phase 2 interview added overall transitional experience and plans after the degree. During the interview, the first author asked participants to describe and explain their experience with the provided photos. The first author also asked participants to draw a Social Network Diagram, which was adapted from the Communities Plot (Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2017), to draw circles representing their social connections. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted a maximum of one hour. All interviews were conducted in the participants' native language to help the participants feel comfortable to express ideas clearly. The first author transcribed the interviews and sent these to participants for an accuracy check.

The analysis followed the recommended steps for carrying out Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), including reading and re-reading the two interview transcripts for each participant, initial annotation, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next participant case, and then finally, looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2015) and Smith et al. (2009), the first author selected subordinate themes from the texts, those with sufficient richness to highlight the themes and superordinate themes that could not be particular to a

single case, but also informed and represented higher order concepts shared by other cases. Interview transcripts were coded in NVivo.

FINDINGS

Nine superordinate themes were identified through the analysis of the data from the interviews, photographs, and Social Network Diagrams. Themes mentioned more frequently during the first phase of the interviews are presented first and those mentioned more frequently during the second phase of the interviews are presented afterwards. Thus, the sequence of the superordinate themes indicates their importance to students from the beginning of their study to the end of their journey. The following conventions are used to indicate the origin of the quotes provided: M = male; F = female; Bus = Business School; Edu = Education School; Law = Law School. 1 = Phase 1 interview; 2 = Phase 2 interview.)

Theme 1: Motivations and Expectations to Study in the UK

Chinese students in this study were motivated by new horizons, employment prospects and English proficiency improvement, similar to other findings in the literature (Zhao & Cox, 2022; Zhu & Reeves, 2019). Interestingly, English proficiency improvement appears to be the weakest motivation while broadening horizons was the most important factor. For example, Eisley (F-Bus-1) noted a popular saying: “The world is so big. I just want to go out and see it.” The participant, like many other Chinese young people, were likely under considerable pressure to conform to traditional Chinese culture to settle down, but they had the desire to explore a bigger world outside of China by living in a different environment. Chinese international students might be prompted by many different motivations to study in the UK, and it’s not necessarily about language learning, but more on the experience and its impact in the long term.

Theme 2: English Proficiency

Similar to previous studies (Li & Han, 2021; Liu et al., 2022), insufficient English proficiency has been a major concern for Chinese PGT students in this research. For instance, frustration with reading in English can be explained by Ashley (F-Edu-1):

It is so hard! Really hard, more than I expected. I needed to look up new words all the time when I was reading materials prepared by lecturers. It has many terms, and sometimes I still don’t understand them even if I translate the terms (Ashley, F-Edu-1).

Chinese students’ previous English learning experience in China focused on testing strategies to pass exams, while they needed to have an in-depth understanding of the subject learned in the UK (Liu, 2015). Moreover, in contrast to the literature that Chinese international students only encountered language barriers at the start of their study in the UK (Wang, 2018), this study suggests that

Chinese PGT students tended to encounter language-related challenges throughout their whole journey, and were not limited to students who were abroad for the first time or stayed in the UK for a short time, but also for those who had previous overseas studying experience.

Theme 3: A Different Approach to Academic Learning

Interdependent learning, self-directed learning, and academic writing in British academic culture were raised by Chinese students in this study, in line with previous literature (Tian & Low, 2012; Wang, 2018), considering that they were not allowed to fully develop these competencies. Around 40% of the Chinese students in this study reported challenges in academic writing due to language barriers and academic writing conventions (Heng, 2018; Tian & Low, 2012). Meeting tight deadlines was also raised as a big challenge, a topic which seems to be missing in the literature. As Yami described:

Modules finished at the end of March, and I need to submit three assignments at the end of April. To me, I usually need a month to finish a 4,000-word assignment, but this semester requires finishing three within a month. I stayed up every day under enormous pressure. (Yami, F-Edu-2).

In China, Chinese students conventionally have final exams as the only important assessment at the end of the semester, rather than “three assignments within a month” as coursework in the middle of the semester. Arguably, completing assignments while studying the course was unexpected for Chinese PGT students, not to mention more time needed to adapt to writing in the English language and British academic writing conventions.

Theme 4: Critical Thinking

Understanding and applying critical thinking was also raised by participants as an important aspect to develop during their academic study in the UK (Liu et al., 2022; Tian & Low, 2012; Zhong & Cheng, 2021). Although English proficiency has been identified as a factor (Zhong & Cheng, 2021), students from this study reported that rather than English proficiency alone, they also needed to further develop sufficient critical thinking skills and learn how to use written expressions to critically present their ideas in academic writing. Chinese educational context tends not to encourage critical thinking (Heng, 2018; Wang, 2018) and culturally avoids giving critiques to seek harmony (Tian & Lowe, 2013). For example, as indicated by Wendy (F-Bus-2), “I used to trust lecturers a lot. I believed everything they’ve said.” Chinese students get used to not questioning “the only right answer” in the Chinese education context, but they noticed that questions from lecturers and students in the UK provided different and critical ways of considering things. Generally, the participants in this study eventually developed their critical thinking skills through critical reading and writing. Examples include “To read with your questions, not always nodding

along” from Yami (F-Edu-2)” and “Writing requires you to be clear with your ideas and supporting evidence. You also need to be persuasive and find weaknesses in others’ opinions” from Vivian (F-Edu-2).

Theme 5: Interaction with Social Connections

Findings from this study illustrated patterns in Chinese PGT students’ social connections with Chinese and non-Chinese peers (see Figure 1 as an example). This research supports previous literature that Chinese PGT students experienced challenges when making interactions with non-Chinese students such as cultural differences and language barriers (Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Pho & Schartner, 2019). Co-nationals, i.e. fellow Chinese students, were the primary social network for Chinese students in this study (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). It is surprising to note that some Chinese PGT students also found it difficult to make friends with fellow Chinese students in the UK. As Ashley (F-Edu-1) describes: “I really want to join the girls, but I cannot get in. Most of them are already familiar with each other since the pre-sessional language course.” It seems the Chinese friend circle was relatively a “closed” one once it had been formed, locked to the outside to make everyone within the circle feel safe and comfortable. Apart from social connections in the UK, Chinese PGT students in this study also maintained contact with friends and families in China (Schartner, 2015) and ranked family as their most important social connection. This study suggests that Chinese PGT students may generally maintain relatively superficial social relationships in the UK context and deep connections with friends and families in China.

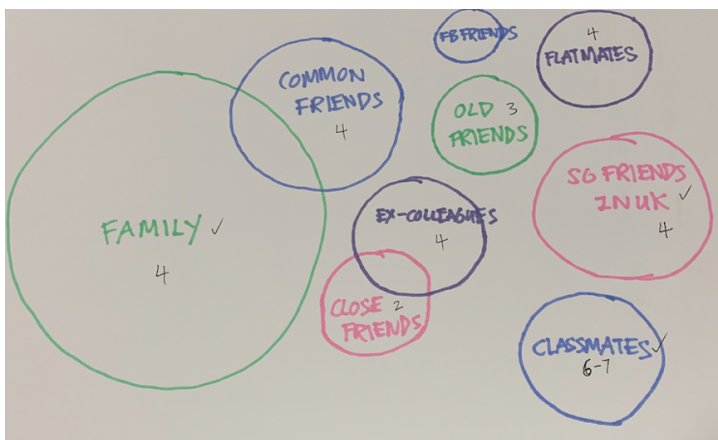


Figure 1: Social Network Diagram from Teng (F-Edu-2)

Theme 6: Influence from Social Connections

Chinese PGT students’ overall social connections have exerted an impact on them while studying in the UK. In the UK, fellow Chinese students provided

academic, emotional, and practical support (Wang, 2018; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). Non-Chinese students, although to a more limited degree, helped Chinese students with their studies and promoted personal growth (Schartner, 2015). For example, Coco (F-Bus-2) noted: “In our study groups (with fellow Chinese classmates), we can share things. This one offers a point, and that one offers a point, and just feel it is very strong when we are all together.” Interaction with conationals is observed as one of the most helpful strategies to cope with academic challenges (Wang, 2018). Apart from academic support, having study groups with fellow Chinese students could remove language barriers and provide emotional support by sharing concerns and encouraging each other. Additionally, although Chinese PGT students in this study mentioned receiving academic support from staff, such as professors, lecturers, tutors, and supervisors (Wang, 2018), they tended to offer limited and undetailed examples and descriptions of this aspect. It suggests that Chinese international students and academic staff hold different expectations, perhaps due to differences between Chinese and British academic culture: Chinese students expected explicit and detailed guidance from academic staff whereas academic staff in the UK expected students to study independently (Wang, 2018).

Theme 7: Loneliness and Homesickness

Many Chinese PGT students in this study had various experiences of loneliness and homesickness in the UK and reflected on their coping strategies. This study was in line with the literature that loneliness among Chinese international students comes from two sources: a) feeling of disconnect from family and friends back home; and b) inability to form a new social network in the host country (Tsai et al., 2017). Findings from other studies have shown that international students experience loneliness, especially at an early stage after arrival in the host country (Sawir et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2023), yet students in this study reported feeling lonely at a similar high frequency in Phase 1 and Phase 2. For example, Wendy missed Chinese food while studying in the UK:

After I came to the UK, Chinese food is what I miss the most [smile]. We would cook all together. I feel ...we need to spend most of the time together ... If you are with yourself for too long, you will feel lonely (Wendy, F-Bus-1).



Figure 2: “Tasty food” from Wendy (F-Bus-1)

As seen in Figure 2, Wendy missed the food from home, but, more importantly, the atmosphere of home, where Chinese friends could “cook altogether” rather than “with yourself”. Co-national social connections could be helpful to ease feelings of loneliness and homesickness (Cai et al., 2019), but Chinese students in this study felt lonely and homesick again shortly after spending time with fellow Chinese students. Therefore, Chinese PGT students in this research explored a variety of coping strategies, such as contacting family and friends in China or developing new hobbies.

Theme 8: Transformative Growth

Chinese PGT students in this study reported their development of independent living skills, communication skills and maturity. Studying in the UK has provided Chinese international students a chance to develop personal independence (Gu et al., 2010), as Bella explained:

When I was in China, I did my undergrad study in my city and my parents helped me with many things. I never cooked or did laundry myself. But here, everything is on me. I need to buy food, cook, do the laundry, clean the room, and set the bed, just everything (Bella, F-Bus-2).

Bella never lived outside her city before studying in the UK. Many Chinese international students were born under the One-child Policy in China, and thus may have grown up with extra care and love from their families (Gu et al., 2010). Despite some students may have lived elsewhere, Chinese do not usually have a laundry room, nor do they use washing machines and drying machines separately in China; they may never or only occasionally cook at home, but they may take a long way to go to a grocery store, buy vegetables and meat unfamiliar with and cook on a different kind of stove in the UK. There was a certain pride in Bella’s

voice for her newly developed abilities to live independently. Aside from meeting academic, social, linguistic, and psychological challenges, learning to take care of themselves was an essential lesson for Chinese students. In this connection, metaphors such as “a boiled egg” were proposed to describe and explain their transformative journey; while you may not see any difference between a raw egg and a boiled egg from the outside, it has changed significantly inside. Chinese PGT students have learned many things through various elements of their experience, and these elements have “grown” them as a whole.

Theme 9: Transitioning Out

By the time Chinese PGT students were about to finish their studies in the UK, they reported new understandings of Chinese culture and expressed their concerns about future employment. Chinese students in this study learned more about their own culture and were more appreciative of Chinese traditions and values while studying in the UK (Elliot et al., 2016). Some other students also stated that they had not changed their understanding of Chinese culture. Some asserted that being immersed in Chinese culture for over twenty years cannot be re-written during one year of master’s study in the UK. This may indicate that these Chinese students may not be aware of changes about understanding of Chinese culture or do not have a sufficient understanding of British culture to draw comparisons. In addition, the existing literature focuses on the initial and middle phases of international students’ sojourns, but few studies explore student transition from university to work (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014). Participants also reported that Chinese students lack time to search for potential job positions and prepare for job applications due to the pressures of academic study. For instance, Zoe (F-Bus-2) explains: “Just no time. Coursework starts from the beginning of the semester, group work is till the end of the semester, and then we need to prepare for the exams.” Taking a master’s program in the UK usually takes one year, which is an intense period of study. As there is a different recruitment season between China and the UK, by the time students graduate from the UK, they have already missed the best time to apply for jobs in China.

DISCUSSION

Bringing together the findings across the themes, we adapt Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 3) to offer a model representing Chinese PGT students’ transitional experience in the UK. Our findings suggest that Chinese PGT students confront different needs during their journeys, which is in line with the principle of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs; individuals meet lower levels of needs before progressing to higher levels of needs (Maslow, 2014). There are three parts to the model: (1) the pyramid, (2) two arrows, and (3) two factors.

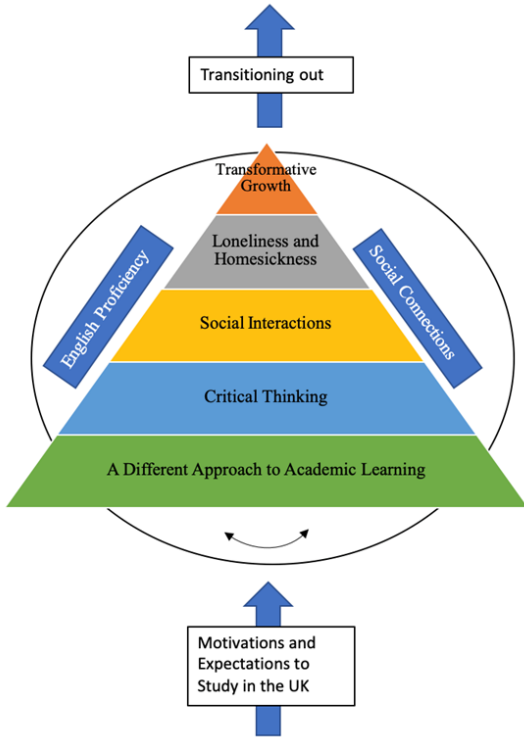


Figure 3: Chinese Students’ Transitional Experience at One-Year Postgraduate Taught Programs in the UK

The themes “Motivations and Expectations to study in the UK” and “Transitioning out” are placed outside of the pyramid because they are before and after students’ actual transitional experience. Motivations and expectations are likened to “seeds” that motivate Chinese students to apply for PGT programs in the UK and influence their transitional experience afterwards. Transitioning out is regarded as the educational outcome and looking ahead to post-PGT studies with the influence of their intercultural experience.

Chinese PGT students meet various needs in a similar time and importance sequence while studying in the UK, also comparable to different levels of needs in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs pyramid (Maslow, 2014; Maslow & Frager, 1987). “A Different Approach to Academic Learning” is placed at the first level in the pyramid at a safety needs level. Academic achievement frequently serves as the primary goal of Chinese students studying in the UK (Yan & Berliner, 2011), but it is also possible for students to feel insecure, anxious, lost, and fearful (Maslow, 2014; Maslow & Frager, 1987) on early arrival due to differences between British and Chinese academic cultures. Next, “Critical Thinking” is also

seen as a safety need and placed at a higher level than the previous theme. Having become familiar with general British academic culture, e.g., attending seminars and joining group discussions, Chinese PGT students progress to advance their critical evaluation skills. However, poor performance in academic assessments may have a knock-on effect on their emotions, i.e., feeling insecure and fearful.

Within “Social Interactions”, Chinese PGT students may focus on academic study when they first arrive, and they subsequently become more familiar with British academic culture and begin to establish meaningful interpersonal connections with others. Notably, fellow Chinese students are the primary social network for Chinese international students in this study, which indicates the need for giving and receiving love and belonging (Maslow & Frager, 1987) between the Chinese international student cohort who share the same language, culture, and the experience of studying in the UK. Moreover, “Loneliness and Homesickness” is placed higher level than “Social Interactions” because social interactions can meet basic love and belonging needs, but sometimes can be superficial with a short-term effect. Although co-national social networks could help ease feelings of loneliness and homesickness (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017), students in this study felt lonely and homesick shortly after spending time with fellow Chinese students, which suggests a further desire to pursue more in-depth love and belonging needs in the long term.

Next, “Transformative Growth” is situated at the top of the pyramid consistent with self-actualization needs in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 2014; Maslow & Frager, 1987). Self-actualization needs are defined as “people’s desire for self-fulfilment, namely, the tendency for them to become actualized in what they are potentially” (Maslow, 2014, p. 225). In this study, developing independent living skills is a primary example of Chinese PGT students’ transformative growth. The process of learning how to take care of themselves independently indicates the transformative journey undertaken to unlock their independent living skills.

Furthermore, “English Proficiency” and “Social Connections” have been highlighted and placed on the left and right sides of the pyramid, and the circle around the pyramid is used to emphasize these are underlying factors that intertwine with and influence other elements of the journey. English proficiency, for instance, greatly affected Chinese PGT students’ academic performance and fellow Chinese students (social connections) could provide both academic and psychological support. While English proficiency may at times, hinder their critical evaluations in academic writing, discussing with peers and academic staff could also uncover ways of demonstrating critical thinking for academic assignments. Participants reported that a key challenge to making non-Chinese friends was the language barrier which indirectly affected students’ psychological well-being too, by generating feelings of isolation. Surprisingly, Chinese students commented on the difficulties of making quality friends with fellow Chinese students, which also raised feelings of loneliness and homesickness. By contrast, English proficiency facilitated Chinese students to improve independent living skills such as understanding labels when purchasing goods. Making friends in a diverse environment helped improve social and communication skills as one of

the transformative growth aspects of overseas study, as reported by participants in this study.

This study has adapted Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943; 1954) to provide a longitudinal, comprehensive, and dynamic picture to understand Chinese PGT students' experience in the UK. First, the model has not only covered the actual transitional experience, but also motivations and expectations before the experience, and transitioning out to connect with the next chapter of their lives. Second, although previous literature has explored various aspects of Chinese international students' experience, e.g., academic experience (e.g., Li & Zhang, 2022), social experience (e.g., Spencer-Oatey *et al.*, 2017), linguistic experience (e.g., Li & Han, 2021) and psychological experience (e.g., Cena *et al.*, 2021), the model in this study has covered and drawn these fragmented elements together to represent a whole picture of student experience. Third, among different elements of the experience, the model indicates that students tend to focus on elements in a time and importance sequence by meeting different levels of needs, which could signpost what students are concerned with first and subsequently.

Despite these contributions, some limitations exist in the research. Participants in this study were recruited from one university, thus findings may not apply to Chinese PGT students from other HE institutions. For instance, Chinese international students may have different experiences due to various percentages of international students on campus. Also, there are exceptions in our adapted model. For instance, Chinese PGT students may desire friends before academic achievement, or decrease their need for belongingness to improve academically. One model cannot capture every condition; thus, this model may offer a possible explanation for Chinese PGT students' transitional experience in the UK, in this study. These findings offer insight for educators, support teams and international students themselves, offering information about different needs and factors that can help understand Chinese PGT students' international education journey from beginning to end.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated Chinese PGT students' transitional experience in Britain. In response to the literature, this study has filled gaps by employing qualitative longitudinal methods and seizing a phenomenological perspective to explore student experience. Many studies previously focused on only one element of the international student experience (e.g., Spencer-Oatey *et al.*, 2017; Wang, 2018). In this study, however, we proposed a model to encapsulate the different elements of this international student experience. Our model shows that Chinese PGT students' transitional experience can best be described as multifaceted, dynamic, and comprehensive. It is worth noting that the new proposed model drawn from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is not limited to the challenges Chinese PGT students face but is designed to include explanations of the context and changes in these students' responses and adaptation to studying in the UK.

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Some sections, with minimal or no editing

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