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Mei Tian¹ and John Anthony Lowe²

Abstract

The number of international students in China is increasing rapidly, but their experiences in China remain largely unknown. This article reports an intensive longitudinal multiple case study that explores eight American students' intercultural experiences and the impacts of such experiences on individual identity during their study in a Chinese university in 2010. Data come from monthly interviews and diaries that the students kept. Findings support Kim's depiction of the processes by which intercultural identity emerges, notably the *stress–adaptation–growth* cycle and the concurrent processes of *acculturation* and *deculturation*. These findings reveal the journey of participants from cultural naivety to an emergent intercultural awareness and cultural critical capacity. Despite considerable ignorance and misunderstanding about China as an exotic “other” at the beginning of the program, all participants underwent some degree of cultural identity shift toward the more “open-ended . . . self–other orientation” of Kim's “intercultural identity.”

Keywords

study abroad, intercultural experience, intercultural identity, China, international exchange program

Background

Between 2001 and 2011, the number of international students at Chinese universities increased from 52,150 to 292,611 (Ministry of Education, China [MOE], 2002, 2012), making it the fourth most popular destination in the world for such students, after the United States, the United Kingdom, and France (Project Atlas, 2011). The majority of

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these students are from Asia, with just 16% from Europe and 8% from North America in 2011 (MOE, 2012), and unlike those in the other major host countries, they are mostly taking short-term language and culture courses rather than full degree-awarding courses (Hao, 2009). In 2010, the Chinese government declared its intention to increase the numbers further, to more than half a million by 2020, with a better balance across the countries of origin (MOE, 2010). Of interest, President Obama has also declared a target of 100,000 U.S. students to be studying in China in the near future (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Taken together, the two countries' policy statements suggest that a large increase in the number of U.S. students studying in Chinese universities can be expected over the coming years.

Little appears to have been written, however, specifically on the experiences of international students in China. Riggan, Olitsky, and Jackson (2011) report on a 2-week visit by American students to China, but it would be irresponsible to extrapolate their findings to more extensive exposure to life as a student in China. In the Chinese research literature, we have traced a few recent studies of international students, most of which adopted quantitative research methods (Chen, 2003; Lei & Gan, 2004; Yang, 2009).

Chen (2003) surveyed international students' cross-cultural adaptation in China across various dimensions, obtaining 88 responses, all from universities in Beijing. These respondents reported that they found certain Chinese values to be alien to their previous experience and that this had a negative impact on their adaptation to Chinese society. Chen attempts to explain this by drawing on what we feel is something of a stereotyped view of Chinese culture: Chinese people's differentiation of "insiders" and "outsiders," their attempts to maintain positive self-images among "insiders" but caring little about the views of "outsiders," a different perception of "friendship" (i.e., one can ask personal questions and blame friends directly), and a tendency to handle problems flexibly based on interpretations of the specific situations, rather than following rules or regulations. Lei and Gan (2004) also surveyed a relatively small sample ($N = 96$) of students from 47 countries studying in China—once again, all at universities in Beijing. The respondents reported problems in adapting to the Chinese pace of life, participating in religious worship, buying their favorite foods, finding accommodation, and shopping. In their very brief report, the authors note that what might appear in some cases to be quite trivial difficulties could lead to depression and other mental health problems and urge the universities to take them seriously.

By far the most thorough study of international students in China was carried out by Yang (2009), who focused on the daily life experiences of more than 200 international students in six universities across China (although mostly in Shanghai), using two questionnaires and follow-up interviews with 18 students. Yang's findings showed that these students had great difficulty in getting involved in Chinese society, particularly in making Chinese friends, which she attributed to differences between China and the students' home countries in "cultural values" and "social styles." She also points out, however, that there was considerable variation in the processes and degree of social and cultural adaptation among her respondents, linked to factors such as gender, cultural background, and length of stay in China.

Apart from the projected rise in the number of American students studying in China, there are other reasons why it is important to find out more about their experiences. These reasons include the geopolitical—the significance of contacts between ordinary citizens of the world’s two largest economies and, arguably, the world’s two most powerful countries—but also the ambiguous cultural relationship between these two countries. In terms of Hofstede-type “cultural metrics,” China and the United States stand poles apart (Hofstede, 1980), and images of each other that various media distribute in each country are heavily colored by long-standing ideological antagonisms; and yet, in China’s drive toward “modernization,” the United States has undoubtedly represented an aspirational goal for many Chinese in material, if not political respects. It seems to us, therefore, that studies of intercultural contact between members of these two nations are of significance on several levels.

Given the dearth of research literature on international students in China, we decided that an exploratory qualitative study would provide some insights into the characteristics and possible peculiarities of the field. This methodological thinking led us to a research design that was small in scale, exploratory, qualitative, longitudinal, and driven primarily by the wish to capture the participants’ perspectives on their experiences in China in their own terms. Specifically, the study reported here focuses on a group of American students with whom we kept in frequent contact throughout their participation in a 5-month Sino–U.S. student exchange program. We investigated whether the students’ intercultural experiences facilitated their personal growth and development in terms of deepening intercultural understandings, enhancing tolerance of cultural diversity and the formation of an “intercultural identity.”

Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

Social Constructionism, Antiessentialism, and Cultural Identity

The design and implementation of our research is based on the analytical concept of cultural identity and the ontological and methodological position of social constructionism. In the former respect, we find it useful to adopt Kim’s (2008) interpretation of cultural identity as an umbrella term covering similar terms such as ethnic, linguistic, racial, gender, and class identity. In the latter respect, we embrace a form of social constructionism, which is taken to be an umbrella theoretical paradigm covering the common interests of poststructuralism, Derrida’s deconstruction, and discourse theory (Burr, 1995). Its essential feature is that interpretations, knowledge, and meanings held by individuals and collectivities are constructed through specific social practices in specific social contexts and, as such, it advocates critical attitudes toward objectivity, reality, and knowledge.

Cultural identity is therefore treated as being socially constructed—in particular, being created in and through discourse, which refers not only to oral or visual representations but more often to social practices (Burr, 1995). This implies two significant points about cultural identity. First, cultural identity is continually being produced and

elaborated in an individual's mind, but not by that mind working in isolation from social contexts and their discourses (Ivanic, 1998). As such, it is more appropriate to investigate the *processes* of identity formation and reformation and their social mediation, than to present the final *product* of identity as a research focus. Second, these social processes of "identification" are not value-neutral but are processes through which individuals receive and produce "culturally recognised, ideologically shaped representations of reality" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 17). Therefore, only when they are investigated as something formed and reformed in social relationships can fuller understanding of identities be attained.

A distinctive feature of social constructionism is its position of antiessentialism. Essentialism refers to the belief that "things and phenomena have a real, true core or essence, a consistency and a determined ability which defines what the phenomenon is" (Buciek, 2003, p. 53). An essentialist view of cultural identity, therefore, is that individuals are identified as belonging to a particular cultural group based on prescribed features extracted from a diverse range of possible candidates for inclusion. This extraction of particular "essential" features in preference to others leads to the formation of stereotypes which are, therefore, only a partial and particular representation of the group to which they become applied. Membership of the cultural group is claimed (or allocated) not only on the basis of shared similarities in these "essential" characteristics among the in-group "us" but also on differences from the out-group "others."

We acknowledge, however, the validity of the critical realist position on essentialism, that mutual comprehension requires at least a minimal shared attribution of "essences" to the subject under discussion. What we are rejecting in cultural analysis is a strong form of essentialism, which is ontologically fallacious as it points to homogeneity and fixity (Sayer, 1997). Cultural identity from a weaker social constructionist position is more diverse and flexible than stronger forms of essentialism allow (Anderson, 2003).

This position enables us to approach cultural identity not as being fixed in terms of timeless essences but as open to continual change through the individual's engagement with diverse social contexts. This is particularly an issue for the participants in our research, who traveled abroad for the first time, from the familiar "West" to the alien "East," and studied in a "strange" cultural environment, thereby exposing themselves to significant possibilities for change in their cultural identity. To deal with this, we turn next to Kim's (2008) notion of an open-ended "intercultural identity" as an alternative to the fixity that too easily becomes attached to "cultural identity," both in popular usage and as an object of analysis.

Intercultural Experiences and Intercultural Identity

Kim (2008) criticizes currently prevalent treatments of cultural identity as static and monolithic and she proposes instead the concept of *intercultural identity*, as "an open-ended, adaptive and transformative self-other orientation" (p. 364) that better suits a pluralistic world of increasing interconnectedness, where "us-other" boundaries are

blurred. Such an identity emerges from experiences of intercultural communication that stimulate cycles of a *stress–adaptation–growth* pattern. That is, people experience stress due to challenges arising from exposure to a new cultural environment; this stress is more severe at the initial period of exposure and persists until a satisfactory adaptation is achieved. Kim argues that intercultural adaptation is an advancing, cyclical process. It involves interwoven processes of *acculturation*, the learning of new ideas, values and practices, and *deculturation*, the questioning and rejecting of ideas and practices from the past; the continuous interplay between *acculturation* and *deculturation* defines identity development. Through their intercultural experiences, individuals attain “cognitive complexity” and “new cultural aesthetic and emotional sensibilities” (p. 363) with respect to the new cultural environment.

The emergent *intercultural identity* denotes a new type of “us–other” relationship. It includes two capabilities, those of *individualization*—an ability to go beyond social and categorical stereotypes and appreciate others as unique individuals—and *universalization*—an ability to locate commonalities in human nature among “different” members of cultural, ethnic, or other social groups. Kim argues that, conceptually, intercultural identity overcomes the simplistic categorization of people based on stereotypical understanding of cultural differences and helps to promote an awareness of human beings as both individuals and as a collective human whole.

Kim recognizes similarities between her concept of intercultural identity and those of “global citizenship” (e.g., Nussbaum, 2006). We prefer Kim’s concept as a theoretical basis and analytical tool in our own research because of its focus on the *process of emergence* of intercultural identity rather than simply defining a completed project. The developmental components Kim ascribes to this identity—cognitive, aesthetic, and affective—provide an interpretive framework for our data that we use in this article, although we interpret “aesthetic” in the broader sense of perception by the senses rather than Kim’s (2008, p. 363) narrower interpretation of “appreciation of beauty.”

Research Design

Participants

In 2010 a group of American students joined a student exchange program between a prestigious university in Western China and a public university in the United States. At that time, they were the only American group among more than a thousand international students from 51 countries in this Chinese university. During their 5-month stay in China, eight students in the group agreed to participate in this research, two male and six female, all aged between 17 and 23 years. Two had taken Chinese courses at a beginner’s level for 2 years; others barely knew any Chinese. Some students joined the program for academic reasons, such as to study Chinese literature in a Chinese context; others made the decision out of curiosity about Chinese society and culture. During their stay at the host university the students took intensive Chinese courses; they were also allowed to select academic courses that were taught in both Chinese and English. Tuition fees were waived by the Chinese university, and living costs were

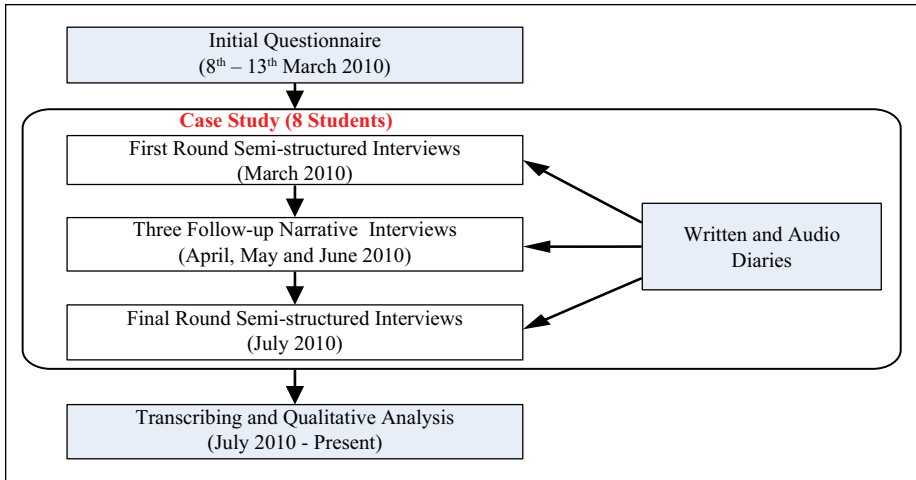


Figure 1. The data collection process.

covered by the American university. This and the availability of scholarships were important to the students, who mostly came from modest rather than wealthy family backgrounds.

Data Collection and Analysis

Figure 1 summarizes the data collection process, which extended over the full period of these students' stay in China. The major part of the data comes from monthly interviews. Two rounds of semistructured interviews were carried out at the beginning and the end of the program respectively to explore the students' expectations and evaluations of their experiences, and further rounds of unstructured interviews were held each month, which began with open questions that encouraged students to freely talk about recent experiences and personal feelings. These interviews were supplemented by a short demographic questionnaire and diaries kept by the participants throughout the program. The diary recordings were listened to and used as a starting point for the monthly interviews. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed in terms of the components of Kim's intercultural identity formation and events that individuals identified as being personally significant. The participants are referred to in what follows as S1 to S8; S1 and S2 are the two male students.

Findings

Our findings are presented under four headings, which represent both a chronology of the students' visit and stages in the process of their personal development: (a) pre-departure perceptions of China, (b) encountering others, (c) adapting, and (d) intercultural identity emergence. Two experiential arenas are examined, the classroom and course-related contexts on one hand, and social contexts on the other.

Predeparture Perceptions of China

Although the students had received lectures before departure on “Chinese culture,” they admitted that they embarked on the trip largely ignorant of what they would find. S8, for example, talked of not knowing “how big the city is . . . where we are going to stay” and, at the outset, “we had no idea what is going on.” Having seen a film clip of a baby girl abandoned in the street in China, S4 thought there would be “dead people in the street.” S3 had been warned by friends and family “don’t take your Bible with you to China; they kill Christians,” and that “the government is watching you . . . controlling everything.”

The affective consequences of this ignorance or incorrect, decontextualized information were, in S8’s words that “we were just afraid,” whereas S4 felt “China is a terrifying place” and S3 was apprehensive in “being prepared to be watched . . . very careful about what [I] do and say.”

Echoing Dervin’s (2009) findings with European students studying abroad, aesthetic anticipation was often essentialized, reduced to a single image, devoid of diversity:

Before we arrived I thought everything here would be old . . . because we had been shown the pictures of the city wall and it looked pretty old. So I thought the city is old, the buildings are old and there are only old people. (S1)

Some students acknowledged American media as influencing their perceptions of China and the Chinese, although they were not necessarily prepared to accept received images at face value. The following comments on the portrayal of Chinese women in American films provide examples that are of particular interest in view of experiences and observations among these students that are reported later.

Most of the time Chinese women are sexualized in American movies, like they are quite passive beautiful women who have no opinion beyond like a sexual creature, or beyond being a servant of another human. (S5)

A lot of people in America think Chinese women are just passive but I don’t know. I want to know more about it. (S7)

S7’s final comment provides a hint that was reinforced by other students in their first interview: Despite the ignorance and misinformation with which they embarked on this first overseas visit of their lives, and despite the apprehension or even fear that this generated, these young people were curious and generally positive about personally experiencing the “otherness” that China and Chinese society represented in their minds.

Encountering “Others”

The term *encountering* was chosen to describe the students’ initial experiences to emphasize that, although they now had firsthand experience with this “new” society, they were not yet engaging with it in a meaningful way. Our participants were

receiving sensory input but were often unable to process and interpret it, other than to record their sense of “difference.”

An intensive Chinese language course was provided with the aim of facilitating the students’ interaction and engagement with their new environment, but the students’ comments focused on its unfamiliarity and new demands rather than anticipating benefits.

At home we don’t have Chinese classes every day. . . . It’s very tedious. It is very difficult and we have to wake up and sit for four hours. (S4)

They sought the kind of information they were used to receiving in courses back at home, on the syllabus, assessment, and grading. They experienced a new classroom culture that involved a relationship between the teacher and the topic that was different from their previous experience and left them feeling frustrated, ignorant, dependent, and helpless:

I like to have a syllabus. . . . We would like to know. . . . Here our teacher skips chapters without telling us, so I cannot prepare. . . . This is frustrating. I am sitting in my class without knowing what is going on. (S7)

I don’t know what [the teacher] wants me to put there. . . . Is it wrong? . . . I literally returned to junior mental status. (S3)

This inability to understand the new situation in which they found themselves threatened their self-confidence and self-image. S7 comments that, in class, “I am not worried about the grades; I am worried because I look stupid all the time without knowing what is going on.” As a means of preserving their self-image, some blamed their teachers: “She’s just bothered by us. Like this is just a job for her or something like that” (S5). Wherever the “blame” was placed, however, the overall aesthetic and affective consequences were negative: “It didn’t make us like China at first” (S4).

Encounters with Chinese people outside the classroom left the students feeling similarly unable to interpret important sensory inputs—not just the language: “Most Chinese I came across, you can never tell what they are thinking; their faces have no expression” (S7). This in turn encourages a comparison with the familiar that reinforces an “us and them” perspective; thus, S7 continued her account with, “We [Americans] are very expressive.” S4 and S8, in a joint interview, drew a similar contrast with “home” that invokes the “fantasy of unicity” (Maffesoli, 1995), of an absolute and essentializing division: “[The program administrator] told us you have to bear ambiguity. . . . You know, we [Americans] have to always be very organized.”

In making this distinction, however, the students are “otherizing” themselves in this alien society and see their own treatment by the hosts as an objectifying experience. They report being “intimidated” at the constant attention, stares, and unwonted photography to which they are subjected by the local population. This leads to a concern over the image they present to these “others,” which they may see as one of an undifferentiated American “us.”

We were worried about manners. . . . And I was worried the way I dressed was inappropriate. . . . I was obsessed at first that I would make myself look like a western whore, some over-sexed 23 year old American girl. (S7)

In an interesting mirror image of the objectification and sexualization of Chinese women in Western media noted earlier, S7 also commented that “we are approached by Chinese people in bars because they think we are more sexual . . . we are sexual beings.” The “eroticism of difference” that was identified in representations of the “other” prior to departure has become a personal experience of objectification and otherization of the “self.”

Even in their contacts with other international students with whom they share accommodation on campus, a sense of “them and us” emerged. In social gatherings, participants reported that they were “outsiders”:

You know, America is very isolated. We don’t have exposure to very many countries. . . . Like my friend from Denmark can talk to any European because they have common identity, they know each other’s culture and they can speak their languages. They can go round and round and round but we cannot interact with them. (S4)

For the first time the participants experienced, firsthand, negative perceptions of their own country by others, and this initial encounter with criticism of the United States was bewildering. S5 responded to this aggressively: “They do not like us. . . . They hate the Americans”; and as a defense mechanism in the face of social exclusion, which allows a distancing from “others” while preserving self-esteem, S2 declared that, “Europeans think themselves above everyone else.”

Adapting

Kim (2008) describes adaptation as a process in which individuals “through direct and indirect contacts with an unfamiliar environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal and functional relationship with the environment” (p. 363). The central focus of this theme is internal change observed in the students, at the core of which is the blurring of boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders,” between “us” and “them.” Here, “internal changes” covers two layers of meanings. Cognitively (and “aesthetically” in the sense of the capacity to make sense of and to appreciate), it implies increased awareness and understanding of rules, norms, and practices of the new culture and a growing level of appreciation of their possibilities and value, with an emerging capability to reflect critically on their existing cultural judgments. Emotionally, it refers to increasing effectiveness in addressing stresses arising from being in this different culture and ultimately an achievement of overall “fit” and emotional stability in the new environment. Together, these developments lead to an enhanced sense of personal empowerment in place of the earlier helplessness.

In the Chinese classroom, progress in their understanding replaced previous bewilderment and frustration at the unfamiliar pedagogy and hostile emotions subside.

In the beginning of the semester we couldn't understand what [the teacher] was saying. Now I feel like if she says something I can understand her. I can understand almost one third. . . . I like the teaching. . . . I think I learn more in the class. (S6)

In the following account from S4 we can see progress in the classroom appearing as a sense of achievement and empowerment through her capacity to engage with the world outside. Her pleasure at gaining the teacher's approval suggests a growing bond between them with a hint of emotional dependency which, unlike the previous cognitive dependency, is no longer threatening.

We went to [a local landmark]. . . . There was a sign and we were not sure what that meant. And she told me one character and then I read the rest. She said "can you believe how good you are." She is very encouraging. It is so much fun. I want to show her I can do it. She always says "awesome you can do it." She is so encouraging and I am happy she is so proud of me. (S4)

Increasing interactions, rather than mere encounters, with the teacher led to a further development in S5 toward Kim's (2008) "universalized" identity, when she discovers similarities in her teacher's personal history and that of her own family. Her teacher is no longer merely a representative of "them," to be distinguished from "us," but a person who shares similar life patterns to her own.

One of my teachers told me her mother doesn't know how to read and write but she got to university and she wanted to go to America to get a master's degree. . . . She just had much more opportunities in two generations. . . . My family is very similar, like my grandma is definitely illiterate but my mom went to university. (S5)

This blurring of the boundary between "them" and "us" promotes reflection on the students' own experiences in terms of the experiences of the "other."

[O]ther people treat you differently because you are a foreigner . . . because I look really different from anyone else. . . . I think that is pretty good for me because it links to the literature I read, like when Asian Americans came to America they had an initial culture shock. (S7)

The earlier sense of hostility toward the European international students with whom they shared accommodation is modified by an emergent capacity to empathize with their perspectives.

I don't think European students have that attitude or try to have the attitude that they are superior. Maybe they just think America is not as good as their country. Maybe they see the flaws of other countries, like we always talk about flaws of other countries but not of their own. (S6)

In some cases this decentering of their perspective leads the students to a critical evaluation of their own country to replace its position as an unquestioned and personally necessary source of self-identity during the earlier period of disorientation and fear.

In America, we just don't care about other countries. 90% people I know just cannot point out where Denmark is. 50% I know think there is no difference between China and Japan. . . . On the global stage we are the teenager with a gun because we are a young country but we are very strong. So we have this sort of self-certainness going on. (S3)

Emergence of Intercultural Identity: Individualization, Universalization, and Self-Reflection

Toward the end of their 5 months in China, the experiences of studying abroad helped the participants transcend the essentialist perceptions of China and *the* Chinese people that they held before arrival. Over time, S2 made many Chinese friends, and at the end of the program he talked about his refreshed understanding, characteristic of Kim's (2008, p. 367) more "individuated" identity:

I don't think there is such a thing like a typical Chinese student because people are just different. I don't think there are typical American students too. It is like nature versus nurture. How you are brought up is a factor.

Stereotypical images from the American media that had led S3 to believe "China is not like other countries" became rejected as being "almost completely against what we experienced in China." A more "universalized" perspective emerged that dissolved "them" and "us" in a recognition of human commonalities.

People just live and move on every day for a new day, like people in America. (S8)

S7, who had questioned the passive images of Chinese women in American media, took this further in her ability to see China not as an alien community but as one in which she could imagine a future for herself.

In this university . . . I have seen women with higher education have been the head of the school. That's been very eye-opening, like if I were in the position that I am married and I am ready to have a child and I think that it's a girl, now I would give birth to her if I am in China because I know she could reach the high level of the ladder.

This still-emergent intercultural identity "liberates" them from the necessity to preserve a positive self-image through an identification with the superiority of being American. They can now continue to see themselves as American ("our people"; S3) while being empowered with the "capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions" (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 388), which may shock them but no longer threatens their sense of who they are:

I saw a program on the [Sichuan] earthquake. There are thousands and thousands of volunteers. I was so moved . . . you are in the same country and you should care . . . but the flood in New Orleans . . . we just labeled them. We don't see them as people. They were from African countries. They were poor. . . . We treat them like refugees with no separate room

for families, for mothers. Even if we don't take care of anybody we need to take care of our people . . . we were shocked. (S3)

In the light of their new knowledge and understanding of China, the stresses of their initial bewildering experiences were commonly replaced by an emotional attachment that appears in some cases to border on the euphoric.

I love people here, they are generous, always want to help, always want to give. . . . I am nervous about leaving. I don't want to leave. Oh I love here. I mean I always knew I love here but it is time to leave, I just realize how much I love here. (S2)

Discussion and Conclusions

Our participants began their journey with a mixture of curiosity and somewhat fearful apprehension about encountering an exotic "other," and with considerable ignorance and misinformation about what they would find. They ended it with a new cross-cultural empathy and emotional attachment to the "other," who had in the process been transformed from a homogenous, alien "them" to gain "individualized" identities. They themselves had gained a greater sense of a shared humanity that fractured the boundaries between "them" and "us." The above account does not represent the experiences and development of any one individual, nor should it be regarded as depicting the experiences and transitions of a "typical" student. Individual personalities and circumstances played an important part in their experiences and their reactions to them. Nonetheless, we conclude with some confidence that all of our participants did undergo some degree of cultural identity shift that included the more "open-ended . . . self-other orientation" of Kim's "intercultural identity."

Our data provide support for Kim's depiction of the processes by which this nascent intercultural identity emerges, notably the stress-adaptation-growth cycle and the concurrent processes of acculturation and deculturation. Kim's (2008, p. 364) model of repeated, advancing cycles in this process is not something we can comment on, perhaps because our data are insufficiently detailed or perhaps simply because the students' stay was only long enough to accommodate one major cycle. For most (but not all) of our students the degree of acculturation achieved was very limited, for two main, related reasons: They lived in a community of fellow Americans and other international students, making daily contact with Chinese people generally rather superficial, and their Chinese language skills, though developing enough to deal with many daily encounters, remained moderate. Similarly, the degree of deculturation shown by most was limited to the "questioning" but not necessarily the "rejecting" of American cultural ideas and practices (Kim, 2008, p. 363), but this represents a significant shift from their initial position of confidence in their American identity. This deculturation not only was a response to contact with Chinese society, but also was reinforced by the students' experience of other international students.

Kim's (2008) article also allowed us to identify three strands in the process of identity development: the cognitive, affective, and aesthetic. Figure 2 summarizes the changes we observed within these three strands in terms of the somewhat arbitrary

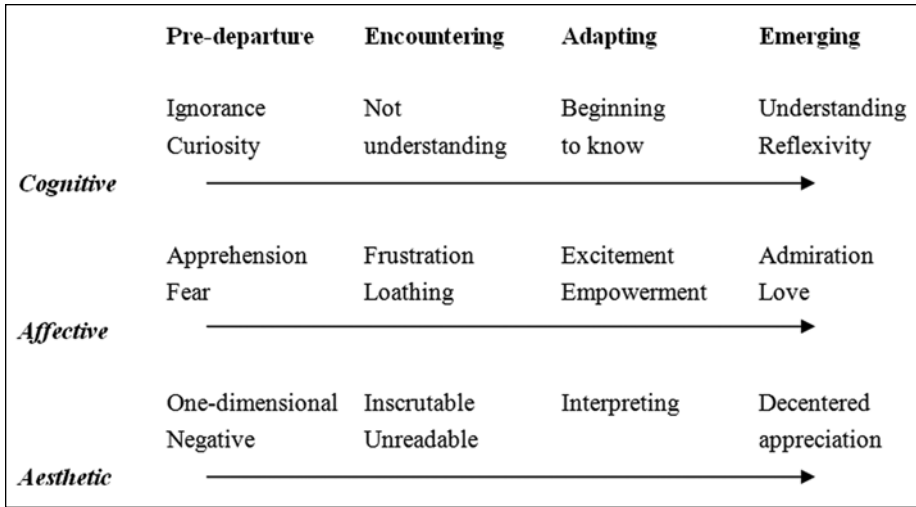


Figure 2. The cognitive, affective, and aesthetic strands in the process of identity development.

chronological and developmental divisions we imposed on our data. Once again, this represents the range of developments across the group as a whole rather than the specific changes in any one individual; individual students began and ended their journeys in different positions, although the trends were the same for all. The impression we gain from our data is that differences in individual personalities and life histories play a significant role in these observed differences of degree of adaptation, either directly or through intermediate variables such as motivation; but limitations in our data and our disciplinary backgrounds inhibit us from going beyond simply making this observation. It is an area that clearly merits further study, however. We also realize that developments in these three strands are not independent of each other. For example, initial ignorance and misconceptions make it difficult to make sense of what is seen and heard, which in turn contributes to initial apprehension and fear; the three strands are not entirely separable within the individual, but provide a useful analytical approach nonetheless.

We have avoided using the term *culture shock* in describing the students' initial responses on arrival in China. As we have discussed elsewhere (Tian & Lowe, 2013), in this respect we concur with Berry's (1997) preference for "acculturation stress," suggesting that the observed effect is associated with the process of cross-cultural learning and adaptation and that it is more open to resolution than the term *shock* suggests. In the case of our students, the stress levels for many appear to have been particularly high, leading to the severe emotional responses we have identified. This may be a result of several factors, including the relatively extreme nature of the cultural disjunction between Chinese and U.S. society (and classrooms, where we noted particularly severe problems), the lack of any previous foreign travel by our students, and the

inadequate preparation they received before departure. In attempting to deal with this initial high level of stress, the students relied strongly on each other as a source of the familiar to cope. This natural reaction almost certainly, however, reinforced the initial sense of difference and of mutual otherization that they felt, with conscious auto-stereotyping as a means of preserving identity and self-image.

Our study provides an interesting comparison with Dolby's (2005) study of American students in Australia, which led her to conclude that "American students' strong national identity" (p. 101) inhibited their capacity for cultural decentering and taking on a greater sense of global identity. In our case, the students did manage to gain a degree of intercultural identity that is similar to Dolby's notion of "global affiliation." Their initial strong sense of national identity, which we also observed and which may have been reinforced by their early experiences, was crucial as a coping strategy in the initial encounter with a culture—and a language—that was more deeply different from their own than that encountered by Dolby's students in Australia. This "deep cultural difference" is harder to invoke as an explanation for the reinforcement of an American identity and accentuated sense of "them" and "us" in interactions with the European international students, however. Here, it seems to have been the Americans' perception of shared cultural and linguistic identity among the European students, with which they could not engage, that triggered retrenchment into a heightened sense of their unique national identity.

Transition from this state of stress to one of adaptation owed much to the determination of individuals, and this is one reason why the process was not uniform across the group. Intriguing, however, is the role played by those teachers whose practices were often identified as a source of stress at the beginning. The confusion and alienation the students had felt in classes was an important focus of attention in the early days. The cultural differences in teaching practices identified by students but ignored by teachers hurt some participants and resulted in a sense of being excluded. With time, however, at least some students learned to appreciate the different approach and accepted that the intensive Chinese course was leading to an improvement in their Chinese language skills. The teachers, particularly those who were encouraging and showed understanding of the difficulties the students were going through, helped them, slowly, to build a sense of belonging in the host society. Their limited skills in Chinese and the circumstances under which they lived and studied (largely separated from Chinese students) meant that our participants had few chances to interact with local people. In this situation, Chinese tutors were seen not merely as language instructors, but as offering a window on Chinese culture and as important mediators between lecture rooms and the outside world. In Chinese classes, the students grew more informed about China, its culture of learning, and the broader culture beyond the academic setting, through exposure to a Chinese approach to teaching and to informal conversations and other activities undertaken with the Chinese teachers. Although it might be argued that this process could have been made less stressful through a better orientation program for the students and by providing Chinese staff training opportunities which address international students' needs and anxieties, it could also be noted that this "sudden immersion" provided an "authentic" introduction to Chinese culture

rather than offering them an experience that was a blend of the familiar and the strange. Such a blended approach might have provided a less painful introduction for the students, but it is not clear that it would have offered real opportunity to make the engagement with difference demanded for the transition to a form of intercultural identity.

This period of early adulthood, however, is one in which an individual's identity is likely to be undergoing considerable change in any circumstances. Levinson (1986, p. 5, cited by Berk, 2009, p. 370) describes it as the period of "greatest energy and abundance, contradiction and stress." Arnett (2002) suggested that one of the psychological impacts of globalization on the individual has been the elongation of the period in which identity formation takes place, with many important life choices being deferred beyond the age at which they were made in earlier times. We might have anticipated, therefore, that our participants would have gone through further elaboration of their sense of their own identity whether they had traveled to China or not. The nature of their experiences in China, their contact with a society that was initially incomprehensible—even threatening—undoubtedly had an enormous influence on the nature of the changes that took place, however. One participant (S3) declared at one stage that she thought her home country wanted her to go to China so that she would return with a heightened belief in the cultural superiority of the United States. Similarly, the Chinese government has stated that one of the reasons they wish to encourage foreign students to come to China is as part of their "soft power" approach to gaining admiration for Chinese culture (MOE, 2010). Our findings suggest that these young people are perhaps more sophisticated than their elders believe and that they emerge with a greater intercultural understanding that is more valuable for the future of human kind than are narrow cultural nationalisms.

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