

## Research Article

Andrew J. Holliman\*, Amanda S. Bastaman, Hiu S. Wu, Shuyue Xu  
and Daniel Waldeck

# Exploring the experiences of international Chinese students at a UK university: a qualitative inquiry

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**Abstract:** The largest group of international students pursuing their overseas higher education in the UK come from China; and yet, little qualitative research has explored the experiences of Chinese students who have recently made this transition, with even less focusing on the experiences of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The present article set out to explore the unique perspective of a small sample of first-year undergraduate and first-year postgraduate students ( $N = 18$ ), on their experience of transitioning to a higher education institution in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was used to explore their experiences in greater depth. Two superordinate themes are reported here: “Education Dialogues and Scholarship” and “Intercultural Relations and Notions of Difference.” The findings suggest that despite advances in institutional practices to support international students’ transition to higher education in the UK, more work needs to be done to redress the sociocultural (and other) challenges that continue to exist for international Chinese students.

**Keywords:** China; higher education; international; thematic analysis; university

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**\*Corresponding author: Andrew J. Holliman**, Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University College London, 25 Woburn Square, London, WC1H 0AA, UK, E-mail: [a.holliman@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.holliman@ucl.ac.uk). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3132-6666>

**Amanda S. Bastaman, Hiu S. Wu and Shuyue Xu**, Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK

**Daniel Waldeck**, School of Psychological, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University, Coventry, UK. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6542-706X>

# 1 Introduction

An increasing number of students (referred to as ‘international students’ from hereafter) are choosing to go abroad to pursue their higher education. Along with the US and Australia, the UK is a popular overseas destination for international students; for example, in the 2019/20 academic year, the number of non-UK domiciled students who were studying at UK universities exceeded half a million (Higher Education Statistics Agency, HESA, 2021), representing approximately one-fifth of all students at university. The largest group of international students pursuing their higher education in the UK come from China, which has seen a 56% increase (at UK universities) over a five-year period, accounting for approximately one-third of all non-EU (European Union) students (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021). While this might be celebrated, there are accompanying concerns that due to the magnitude of change associated with this transition (e.g., Zhai, 2004), international Chinese students may find it difficult to adapt and subsequently experience a range of negative emotions and stressor (e.g., Zhang, 2020), which threaten to compromise their university experience. A developing literature has begun to emerge, which explores some of the personal and situational predictors of psychological wellbeing among international Chinese students (see Holliman et al., 2022); however, few studies have explored, via qualitative inquiry, the experiences of international Chinese students who have recently made this transition to a UK university, and even fewer studies have considered the experiences of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. This signifies the unique contribution of the present study.

## 1.1 International Chinese students at UK universities: a challenging transition

In addition to the well-documented and more universal challenges associated with the transition to higher education (see Matheson et al., 2018), Chinese students also have to adjust to the transnational experience of moving across cultural boundaries (Bethel et al., 2020), which could pose sociocultural challenges (Young, 2017). One of the most prominent sociocultural challenges that Chinese students experience is to establish relationships with host nationals and integrate into the local society. Chinese students report difficulties in interacting with host students due to cultural differences, social expectations, language barriers, limited contact outside of class, and the fear of being rejected (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Belford, 2017; Yefanova et al., 2017). Therefore, they tend to socialise more with co-nationals of similar cultural backgrounds with whom they feel more comfortable, resulting in ethnic clustering

or the so-called “Chinese ghetto”. Although this natural inclination to gravitate towards co-nationals does not necessarily reflect a lack of desire to integrate with host nationals, barriers of sociocultural differences exist, obstructing such integration (Gu, 2009; Wang, 2018; Young, 2017). For example, lifestyle differences in socialising, such as the unfamiliar drinking culture in the UK for Chinese students, have been reported to aggravate their isolation in the host society (Bartram, 2007).

Another issue is the language barrier, which is already anticipated before the Chinese students arrive in the country (Haxton et al., 2019), and consequently originates further difficulties in social situations. As non-native English speakers, Chinese students may feel inferior to and threatened by host nationals, as they fear negative evaluations based on their English skills (Liu, 2016; Wang et al., 2017). Additionally, since most Chinese students have only learned English in grammatical contexts prior to arrival and were unexposed to the sociocultural discourses in the UK, they may struggle to find the socially and culturally appropriate language to prevent miscommunications. These transitional challenges can, in turn, negatively affect Chinese students’ psychological well-being (Gu & Maley, 2008; Turner, 2006). Being in a foreign country is a challenge as Chinese students must learn to live alone, solve daily problems and cope with homesickness (Bethel et al., 2020; Young, 2017), which can elicit feelings of confusion, loneliness, discomfort, and alienation (Belford, 2017; Gu & Maley, 2008). Furthermore, according to the intercultural adjustment theory, students can experience strong emotional reactions in the face of cultural changes (see Wang, 2018). The pressure to adapt socially and culturally evokes stress, and if they fail to do so, they might lack a sense of belonging (Gu, 2009; Wang, 2018). The psychological difficulties can then impact the sociocultural adjustment of Chinese students, creating a vicious cycle of maladaptation (Wang, 2018).

To understand some of the academic challenges Chinese students encounter in UK universities, it is necessary to first disentangle the cultural roots of the Chinese education system which they are accustomed to, in other words, the Confucianist tradition. It encourages respect for authority, collectivism, and harmony, manifested in a formal, disciplined, teacher-centred, and didactic approach. First, respect for authority within education systems promoted compliance among students to keep teachers in high regard instead of questions and criticism. Therefore, even though teachers serve as friendly, personal mentors outside the classroom, distance is greatly maintained in the teacher-student dynamic. Indeed, some studies (e.g., Gu & Maley, 2008) have shown that Chinese students have difficulties adjusting to the Western student-centred classroom environment. Second, collectivism and the necessity to maintain harmony and ‘face’ in classrooms result in the habit to avoid conflict among students (Huang, 1999; Xiaohong & Qingyuan, 2013). As a result, learning focuses more on the factual accumulation of knowledge from teachers, discouraging peer discussions and debates. Thirdly, a highly pressurised and

competitive environment is also characteristic of the Chinese education system. This includes routine assessments and exams in which student rankings are presented publicly and used for streaming based on abilities. In this environment, students are accustomed to relying on the external source of stress as motivation. Lastly, the respect to Confucianism values accentuate rote learning as the principal pedagogy method of education, which emphasises the importance of memorisation, ultimately disregarding students' independent and critical opinions. With the profile of the Chinese education system in mind, it is easy to conceptualise a 'model' Chinese student as a passive-receptive (Hsieh, 2012) and obedient learner who only accepted knowledge imparted by the teacher and the curriculum (Bush & Haiyan, 2000; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Turner, 2006).

Chinese students have been reported to achieve fewer good degrees than host students, with the odds having been reported as low as 32% in the past (Iannelli & Huang, 2014). When these students come to the UK, they tend to maintain their native framework of learning despite its radical difference from the British one, potentially shaping false expectations and beliefs towards UK universities and impacting their learning experience (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Consequently, learning shock is a common experience of Chinese students in British HEIs, which refers to the unpleasant psychological, cognitive, and emotional struggles encountered when exposed to and adapting to a new learning environment. Not only does learning shock hinder their learning success in UK universities (Turner, 2006), but it has also been found to be more overwhelming and acute than sociocultural adjustment (Gu, 2011).

Critical thinking, independent studying, and classroom discussion are prominent aspects of learning shock. Due to the aforementioned emphasis on rote learning in China, students were not trained for reflective thinking and independent interpretation (Bush & Haiyan, 2000; Turner, 2006). Ryan and Viete (2010) found that Chinese students struggled with critical thinking upon initial entry to Australia, as they had no prior experience of thinking independently for themselves and struggled to learn without explicit guidance. It is also somewhat easy for them to misuse independence as a licence to not work hard in the absence of supervision from teachers (Gu, 2009; Gu & Maley, 2008; Wang, 2018). Western educators also regarded a lack of active participation as another characteristic of Chinese students compared to their Western counterparts (Ryan & Viete, 2010; Wang, 2018). They are often observed to be 'silent' during group discussions and may not ask questions in class as a critical appraisal of the learning material is deemed disrespectful towards educators (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Montgomery, 2019).

Additionally, the student-teacher dynamics in the UK is different from Chinese students' perception cultivated by the Chinese tradition. As mentioned above, teachers are regarded to be highly respected as well as a mentor for academic and personal instruction, whereas lectures in UK universities often aspire to be regarded

equally to students in status yet maintain boundaries in personal lives. Chinese students may attribute academic failure to ‘poor’ teacher quality and express disappointment towards insufficient support received. Therefore, outgrowing their overreliance on teachers’ instructions in UK education contexts would be beneficial (Wang, 2018).

## 1.2 Summary, rationale, and research question

To summarise, a substantial (and increasing) number of international Chinese students are pursuing their overseas higher education in the UK. However, this transition can be challenging due to a number of sociocultural factors, associated with difficulties adjusting to changes in lifestyle, language, and learning approach (not exhaustive), and this can negatively impact upon their learning and attainment, psychological wellbeing, and overall student experience. Recent studies (e.g., Holliman et al., 2022) have emphasised the need for qualitative research in this important area, to provide a more in-depth and nuanced investigation of international Chinese students’ lived experiences. We add here that most studies in the literature on international Chinese students, have focused on undergraduate students and yet, a sizable (and relatively neglected) sample deserving of more research attention, concern the experiences of postgraduate students.

The research question for this study is: “How do international Chinese students describe their experiences of transitioning to a UK university to pursue their undergraduate or postgraduate education?”

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Design

This study sought to explore the experiences of international Chinese students; therefore, a qualitative interpretative approach was adopted. We selected thematic analysis over other approaches due to it not being wedded to any particular epistemological approach and affording the researcher flexibility in selecting the appropriate analysis structure to reflect the reality of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were conducted with 8 first-year undergraduate students and 10 first-year postgraduate students, from a single higher education institution in the UK.

## 2.2 Sample

Participants were recruited from a single, public, world-leading, London-based higher education institution in the UK. The participating institution can be regarded as a ‘global university’ with almost 50% of its students coming from overseas (over 10,000 of which are from mainland China). As such, the participating institution offers a designated international support service, as well as student mentors for new students, language courses, and elective modules on academic writing (not exhaustive). Purposive sampling was used to ensure participating students met the following inclusion criteria: their reported ethnicity was Chinese; they previously lived and studied in China and in a Chinese language; and they were enrolled in their first year on either an undergraduate or postgraduate psychology course (we acknowledge level of study is not identical here). The undergraduate sample comprised eight first-year Chinese students ( $M_{age} = 19.25$ ) including: 6 females, 1 male, and 1 other. The postgraduate sample comprised ten first-year Chinese students ( $M_{age} = 23.24$ ) who were enrolled on a Master’s programme including: 8 females and 2 males. Note, the increased number of female participants relative to males, is representative of the gender grouping statistics for the subject of psychology in the UK (HESA, 2021).

## 2.3 Procedure

After receiving ethical clearance from the participating higher education institution, eligible participants were approached during and/or shortly after their psychology lessons and invited to take part. They were provided with an overview of the research in the form of a participant information sheet and were invited to ask any questions. If they were still able and willing to take part, they were required to complete an informed consent form.

The interviews with undergraduates were conducted in English but with Mandarin translations to facilitate clarity and understanding. The interviews with postgraduates were conducted in Mandarin, again for clarity and understanding, but also to make them feel more comfortable, and to enable them to provide more complete answers that correspond with their true feelings. Undergraduate participants were interviewed online via Zoom and postgraduate students were interviewed either in person, at a safe, quiet, and mutually convenient location, or online through WeChat, depending on student preferences following the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 min and were audio-recorded. Afterwards, participants were fully debriefed and signposted to relevant support services (e.g., welfare), if needed, within the participating higher education institution. The interviews were later transcribed, translated, and then

analysed. All participants were provided with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity: in the Results section UG and PG are used to denote undergraduate and postgraduate students, respectively.

## 2.4 Materials

### 2.4.1 Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted due to their exploratory and flexible nature to provide in-depth information on each student's accounts on the topic, while retaining systematic structures of the targeted research questions. The interview schedule was inspired by the findings of past literature in this area (e.g., exploring the issues typically encountered by international Chinese students studying at overseas universities) and initially comprised up to 19 questions. Prompts and probes were used, where appropriate, to elicit further detail. Following some pilot work, the number of questions was reduced, and questions were refined, where appropriate, to optimise clarity and focus.

## 2.5 Data analysis

The analysis closely followed the procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Specifically, the first step of the analysis was to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis, which included: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

## 3 Results

This study aimed to explore international Chinese students' experiences of transitioning to a UK university to pursue their undergraduate or postgraduate education. Four sub-themes were compiled into two superordinate themes: "Education Dialogues and Scholarship" and "Intercultural Relations and Notions of Difference."

## 3.1 Theme 1: Education dialogues and scholarship

### 3.1.1 The language barrier and “ineffective communication”

All participants reported that they were not confident about their English language proficiency. This seemed to negatively impact upon their confidence, classroom participation, and discussion. For example, PG09 reports:

I was quite worried about my English ability, whether I can follow what the teachers say and whether I can communicate smoothly with the native speakers ... I sometimes still struggle to understand what the teacher is saying.

Additionally, PG07 states:

I know that my close friends also have these worries, such as the language barrier and writing struggles. Because they came from China too and had no experiences of learning in an English environment.

PG07 goes on to say:

Having effective communication with the teacher is very important ... but this would be much harder in the UK, where I have to speak to teachers in English, and there could be misunderstandings between me and them, which leads to ineffective communication.

Clearly then, although the importance of effective communication is highly valued, it is seen as problematic for international Chinese students in UK classrooms. This was further supported by the experience of PG06, who commented:

For students like me, who have relatively poorer English, it takes longer for us to raise a question or to communicate with teachers during class, and when teachers are answering the question, it also takes time. Therefore, it's not ideal to ask a question during class.

UG02 states further:

When I speak Chinese, I have more confidence ... Chinese is my first language that I can use ... to communicate with no barriers.

PG10 also points out some distinctions between conversing with UK and Chinese students in classroom contexts:

I would feel more relaxed in discussions with Chinese students because we could speak in our home language, which makes everything much easier, such as expressing or understanding ideas. PG10 went on: But when talking to foreign students, I sometimes would struggle to express some ideas in English, and they would be quite confused and stared at me, which would make



me feel very nervous. So, in the end, I would just listen to them discussing, and I would say whether I agree or disagree with the opinions.

It would seem then, that international Chinese students are keen to participate actively in classroom discussions, but there are inhibitions about doing so as non-native speakers, and this sometimes results in a reluctance to say anything.

### 3.1.2 Academic writing and learning preferences: *“I didn’t expect it to be so different”*

Another common experience concerned the difficulties associated with UK scholarship i.e., reading academic material and adapting to a new writing style. For example, as UG02 put it:

Grammar or words, vocabulary ... when I read some paper, I feel wow, so hard.

Not only is reading perceived to be more difficult, but it is also the case that writing is intimidating and challenging for international Chinese students. As UG04 reports:

I don’t know what academic writing is and which style I need to write because (the) teacher didn’t tell us the academic styles stuff in specific course.

PG07 explains further how writing essays was worrying to students from China:

It got worse when the actual semester started when the writing style was completely different ... Even until now, I am still not sure what is meant by ‘critical writing’, it’s a thing that never existed in China.

PG07 went further:

... and one thing about exams in China is that you have to write what the teachers want to see and to do that, you have to memorise the points that the teachers put in their presentations ... whereas in the UK, most of the time would be spent on reading all kinds of literature, depending on which direction you want your essay to focus on. In China, this would be unnecessary, and you might not get high marks even by doing so.

Other students, such as UG02, also struggled to adapt to the differences in teaching-learning style, and had difficulties managing the increased autonomy, independence, and self-regulation that prevail in the English system:

In the UK, a lot of free time to study whatever you want, to develop your interests ... it is really a big challenge for me actually because, like, time playing, and self-regulation is a big problem.

This experience was echoed by PG06, who mentions:

... it is still difficult if you are not guided by the others and have to do everything on your own.

UG03 goes further:

I didn't expect it to be so different ... I've actually found that really challenging to formulate my own opinions, because that was not something I was used to doing in high school. I think, maybe it does have to do with the education system back home, where a lot of stuff was standardised answers that you have to memorise.

Finally, UG07 thought that more could be done to support the transition to university, so that expectations are enlightened and supported 'prior to' the commencement of university study:

Maybe they can have like ... (an) event focusing on the transition from high school to the university before school year has started ... specifically for different students ... since there is no transition, I feel like it's jumping from one place to another ... there's a huge gap between them.

Taken together, English language, in its verbal form, as well as in its written form, present significant difficulties for international Chinese students. The challenges are not limited to language, but also learning preferences, with the English system seemingly involving heightened autonomy, independence, and self-regulation, which is perhaps more at odds with a more 'teacher-led' system in China, as reported by some of the participants in this study.

## 3.2 Theme 2: Intercultural relations and notions of difference

### 3.2.1 Socialisation and loneliness: *"I expected to have more foreign friends"*

International Chinese students encountered a range of interpersonal difficulties that hindered the development of close and supportive relationships during their studies. However, integrating with Asian students was seen as easier and more common compared with non-Asian students. For example, speaking on native English speakers, UG08 states:

They speak too fast and sometimes I cannot engage in the conversation ... I expected to have more foreign friends so I can practise my oral speaking and know more about culture.

Shared social activities (with native English students) were also experienced as more challenging to develop and maintain for international Chinese students. As UG04 puts it:

We have different lifestyles.

UG07 argued:

Sometimes their values are so different that I had a culture shock. That made me afraid to talk to them.

UG06 goes further, to explain:

For people like me who don't like to go to pubs and to clubs ... there's basically nowhere to socialise ... it's easier for them (native English students) to integrate because they share the same set of culture.

International Chinese students, therefore, found it difficult to socialise with native English students, due not only to language barriers (capture here and previously in Theme 1), but also to differences in culture. Unfortunately, this often contributed to feelings of isolation and loneliness; for example, according to UG08:

I'm quite shy and I don't have courage to talk to each other, to talk to foreigners.

UG05 went further:

I do not have activities in my free time. Most of the time, I am alone. No friends, No people, nothing. No one can help me to adapt. Staying in the studio alone. I cry most of the time. I expected to go to school to meet friends instead of staying in the studio.

For others, such as UG03, feelings of loneliness were experienced as overwhelming and the loss of social contact with loved ones was taking its toll on their psychological wellbeing:

I cried for three days straight (when I first got here) because I was just missing home.

To address these kinds of difficulties associated with socialisation and subsequent experiences of loneliness, UG06 thought that more could be done to support the integration of international Chinese students with native English speakers:

I would just say organise more inter-degree events so I can know more people from my, from the same degree. Just in terms of social life, I wish they could do more to help the international students integrate.

### 3.2.2 Prejudice and discrimination: exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

In some instances, notions of difference escalated to experiences of prejudice and discrimination—this was reportedly exacerbated by the recent (at the time of writing) COVID-19 pandemic. For example, according to PG05:

Coronavirus has pushed Chinese students into a horrible situation. The foreigners looked at us with different eyes, and there was always the news that Chinese students were treated unequally during that period.

PG03 also shares some personal experience of prejudice and discrimination associated with the COVID-19 pandemic:

Chinese students in the UK who are wearing masks in the underground are always discriminated against. I think discrimination is based on cultural shock. PG03 went on: Racism and the spread of COVID-19 make me stressed and fearful. Some people have returned to China successfully, some people have not ... this is a difficult time for me, and I do not know how to deal with it.

These kinds of experience were also reported by other international Chinese students; for example, PG04 said:

I wear masks when I take the underground, people always get away from me and shout verbal abuse at me, such as 'Chinese virus.' I am really sad about racist attacks, and I feel in danger when staying outside. I really was eager to go back home.

Taken together, it seems apparent that current efforts to integrate international Chinese students with non-Chinese students has proven difficult due, in part, to differences in language, culture, and an apparent lack of opportunity to do so. Notions have difference have also escalated to experiences of prejudice and discrimination: this negative experience has been exacerbated following the COVID-19 pandemic and, collectively, this has made many students feel lonely, aggrieved, and upset.

## 4 Discussion

The findings from this study reveal that international Chinese students face a number of challenges when transitioning to a UK university to pursue their undergraduate or postgraduate education. Interestingly, there were commonalities across the sample indicating that the issues experienced are not unique to any individual education level (e.g., to undergraduate students). These findings corroborate and extend prior work and give rise to a number of important implications for educators and researchers regarding how best to support the transition of international Chinese students to UK universities.

One of the most persistent issues, which we labelled "Education Dialogues and Scholarship", related to the challenges associated with language and the learning environment. Participants experienced language difficulties, as anticipated

(Haxton et al., 2019), that impacted upon their capacity to learn optimally: for instance, it was difficult for Chinese students to understand the English language verbally, from the educator and students, but also in its printed form as used in reading and writing. This finding is in line with previous research (e.g., Wang, 2018), which identifies language and language-related conventions as a particular challenge for international Chinese students' that hampers their ability to adapt to the English-speaking environment and make full use of the teaching and other academic materials that are available.

Participants also experienced 'learning shock' due to different learning approaches in China and the UK. Due to the more intensive and teacher-guided nature of the Chinese education system, participants struggled to adapt to the more autonomous, self-navigating, and student-centred learning approach typically employed within the UK system. As students from China are typically trained on the factual construction and memorisation of knowledge (see Turner, 2006), the freedom given by flexible allocation of workload in UK to allow more room for independent studying, critical thinking, and discussion of opinions, was not optimised. This is perhaps reflective of the model passive-receptive Chinese student who has difficulty learning beyond the constraints of the teachers' instructions and textbooks (Turner, 2006). Participants also refrained from discussing opinions as an attempt to avoid making mistakes and maintain 'face' within the classroom (Huang, 1999; Xiaohong & Qingyuan, 2013). Additionally, with respect to teachers, participants were not actively asking questions as it may be viewed as defiant of teachers' knowledge (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Young, 2017). As such, language difficulties and learning style featured prominently in this study.

Another persistent finding, which we labelled "Intercultural Relations and Notions of Difference", concerned the reported difficulties in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. In line with prior work (e.g., Arkoudis et al., 2013; Belford, 2017; Yefanova et al., 2017), students from China found it difficult to integrate with their cohorts, particularly non-Asian UK students: this was largely due to aforementioned difficulties in English proficiency and ineffective communication (see also Wang et al., 2017) but also to limited and hampered opportunities to socialise (Arkoudis et al., 2013). Further, the difference in values that provoked culture shock as an obstacle to socialising with local students was consistent with the findings of Bartram (2007), among others.

Participants reported the phenomenon of ethnic clustering in both Asian and non-Asian students, which obstructed their interaction with their native peers. This was in line with Bochner's et al. (1977) functional model of friendship networks, which suggests that monocultural friendships were more likely to be formed owing to the need for cultural similarity to feel comfortable in a relationship (see also Belford, 2017). As a result, they preferred socialising with their fellow international

Chinese students, which may be deemed negatively by the host society as rejection to integration. Additionally, participants experienced intrapersonal challenges in mental wellbeing as they must learn to live alone in a foreign country and reassess their values and beliefs to adapt to the host culture (Belford, 2017; Bethel et al., 2020; Young, 2017). Participants found it difficult to achieve a sense of belonging necessary to feel accepted and secure, which contributes to overall satisfaction of their experience (Bethel et al., 2020). In more extreme cases, and in line with Guilfoyle and Harryba (2011), notions of difference sometimes resulted in experiences of prejudice and discrimination among international Chinese students: something that was only made worse by the recent Covid-19 pandemic, where some UK students treated Chinese students differently.

## 4.1 Limitations and future directions

There are some limitations to this study that will now be acknowledged. First, for the analysis, we combined experiences of both undergraduate and postgraduate students, who are clearly at different levels of study. We felt justified in doing so, given that anecdotally, the issues are similar, and the undergraduates and postgraduates in our sample were similar in that their reported ethnicity was Chinese, they previously lived and studied in China and in a Chinese language, and they were enrolled in their first year on either an undergraduate or postgraduate course. There were also commonalities across students with some nuanced findings, as discussed. Despite this, future work might delineate different levels of study, to explore and uniqueness associated with each. Second, this study focused solely on 'student' perspectives; therefore, to shed further light on the issues at hand, future work might also explore the experience of other key stakeholders, such as teachers, using multi-informant approaches. Finally, the work reported here took place close to the Covid-19 pandemic; therefore, the findings might have been influenced by factors associated with this (e.g., there was some evidence of discrimination of international Chinese students associated with the pandemic; Guilfoyle & Harryba [2011]). It remains therefore, that some of the experiences here may not reflect the experiences that may occur in a virus-free environment.

## 5 Conclusion

To conclude, this study explored international Chinese students' experiences of transitioning to a UK university to pursue their undergraduate or postgraduate education. Our findings suggest that despite advances in institutional practices to

support international students' transition to higher education in the UK, more work needs to be done to redress the sociocultural challenges that continue to exist for international Chinese students. Specifically, it is argued here, that universities need to consider further the usefulness and quality of current language screening tools (e.g., IELTS scores, for admissions) and make efforts to improve current English language provision (i.e., spoken, listening, reading, and writing). Relatedly, universities need to consider how to align the previous learning experiences of international Chinese students more closely with those employed, developed, and desired in, UK higher education institutions to improve 'goodness of fit'. Finally, it is argued that universities should consider further how they can successfully integrate international Chinese students (and other students) in a UK university, so they are more able and willing to converse with other students, socialize with them, and feel a greater sense of belonging with reduced incidence of loneliness and discrimination.

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