Linguistic, Sociocultural, and Hybrid Identity Development: A Literature Review of International Students' Experiences in China

Mengke Li [1, *]

[1] Moray House School of Education and Sport, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, The United Kingdom

* Correspondence:

Mengke Li

mli33@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

This literature review synthesises existing research on identity development among international students during study abroad (SA) programmes, focusing specifically on studying in China. It explores how language learning and engagement and sociocultural interactions and adjustments influence students' perceptions of identity and their hybrid identities. The review reveals that while SA experiences generally enhance students' linguistic skills, intercultural sensitivity, and sociocultural adaptability, outcomes vary significantly due to factors such as individual personality experiences, motivation, culture, duration of the stay, etc. Existing literature also indicates that adaptation challenges, including stereotypes, academic pressures, and reverse culture shock, critically shape students' identities. Despite extensive research, gaps also remain, particularly regarding detailed, long-term qualitative investigations into students' personal narratives and identity shifts throughout their SA journeys.

Keywords: Study Abroad; Linguistic Identity; Sociocultural Adaptation; Hybrid Identity; Intercultural Competence; International Students; China

1. Introduction

As students engage in the development of linguistic skills in the target language within their home country, their understanding of the cultures associated with the language is often limited, and opportunities for authentic conversation in the target language may be scarce (Kim & Elder, 2009). Consequently, it can be argued that students' engagement with these cultural elements remains restricted. When given the opportunity to study abroad (SA), however, and to experience authentic interactions with the host culture, students may encounter challenges related to their sense of identity. These challenges may arise as they transition from their home country to the target language (TL) country and, eventually, back home. It is during these potentially turbulent

transitions that an investigation into learner identity becomes particularly crucial. Such inquiry may provide valuable insights into how students of second language acquisition (SLA), especially those experiencing non-Western cultural contexts such as China, respond to and are shaped by their interactions, relationships, and the challenges they face within the target culture (Block, 2007; Kinginger, 2013).

The primary objective of language learners during SA is often to improve proficiency in the TL (Pérez-Vidal, 2014). Some, particularly those at intermediate or advanced levels, may pursue further academic programs in the host country once language requirements are met (Isabelli-García & Isabelli, 2020). However, SA extends beyond language acquisition. It fosters intercultural competence, enhances global awareness, and cultivates a sense of global citizenship—skills increasingly essential in today's interconnected world(Twombly et al., 2012). Beyond these linguistic and intercultural outcomes, SA also initiates complex processes of identity development, making it an ideal context for exploring how individuals evolve across cultural boundaries.

This form of temporary immersion in both language and culture offers a unique opportunity for students to leave behind familiar sources of identity reinforcement, such as friends, family, and the knowledge of how to navigate social interactions. The transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar—including changes across academic environments, social activities, and group memberships—constitutes a particularly significant and dynamic period, where identity shifts may occur. Given the growing prominence of China as a study-abroad destination, it becomes especially meaningful to review and reflect upon students' experiences within this specific socio-cultural and linguistic context.

In this review, I critically examine existing studies on international students' engagement with host cultures—focusing primarily on learners in China—to explore how such engagement shapes learners' beliefs, perceptions, and identity construction. The review is structured around three key dimensions of identity: linguistic identity, sociocultural identity, and hybrid identity. Through this lens, I explore how cultural interactions during SA both facilitate and complicate language development, intercultural competence, and evolving self-understanding.

2. Theoretical Framework of Identity in Study Abroad
2.1. Social Identity Theory and Acculturation

From a sociopsychological perspective, identity is also shaped by group membership and intergroup dynamics. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), language use positions individuals within social hierarchies and cultural affiliations. For language learners, this positioning affects how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.

Acculturation theories offer a related but distinct framework, focusing on how individuals adapt to a new cultural environment. Berry's (Berry, 1997, 2005) acculturation model outlines four strategies—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation—based on attitudes toward the host and heritage cultures. While useful, this framework has been critiqued for its categorical rigidity and lack of attention to individual agency (Rudmin, 2003). More recent

studies highlight that learners often move fluidly between these strategies rather than adhering strictly to one (Lee & Yoo, 2004).

Moreover, Ward and colleagues (Ward, 1996; Ward & Kennedy, 1999) propose a dual-process model distinguishing psychological adaptation (emotional well-being) from sociocultural adaptation (behavioural competence), both of which are significant to learners' identity reconstruction during SA.

2.2. Investment, Power, and Identity

Peirce (1995)'s (actually Norton) concept of "investment" provides a more critical lens, linking identity to power, access, and legitimacy in linguistic interactions. Unlike "motivation," which is seen as internal and individual, "investment" reflects the structural conditions and social relationships that enable or constrain learners' participation. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Chinese context, where international students may experience power asymmetries due to language status, institutional practices, or cultural stereotypes (Darvin & Norton, 2018).

Additionally, learners' willingness to communicate, social network integration, and perceived social inclusion play significant roles in identity development. These factors intersect with learners' background (e.g., race, age, gender), personality (e.g., openness or extraversion), and prior linguistic experiences (Mitchell et al., 2020; Silvia, 2018).

2.3. Hybrid Identity and the "Third Space"

The concept of hybridity, derived from postcolonial theory (Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006), has developed language identity research to some degree. Kramsch (1993) introduced the idea of the "third place" in language learning, where individuals negotiate between home and host cultures, creating a space for hybrid cultural identities. Learners in SA contexts often find themselves suspended between linguistic worlds, which can lead to identity conflict but also to the emergence of flexible, transcultural selves (Block, 2007).

However, hybridity should not be romanticised. While it offers potential for identity expansion, it can also entail feelings of dislocation, ambiguity, or marginalisation—particularly when learners face discrimination or cultural exclusion (Gillespie, 2014; Norton, 2013).

These frameworks are applied throughout this review to analyse how international students develop linguistic, sociocultural, and hybrid identities while studying abroad, especially studying in China. Rather than listing every relevant theory in detail, this section establishes the conceptual lens through which the literature is interpreted in the following chapters.

3. Linguistic identity through the lens of Study Abroad

Learning a new language can significantly alter an individual's linguistic identity and self-representation, suggesting that acquiring and using a new language can lead to the development of a distinct identity (Block, 2007; Norton, 2013). Language acts as a critical medium through which identity is constructed and negotiated, as individuals attempt to engage with others and the world around them (Benson et al., 2013). Acknowledging the pivotal role of social interactions, it

becomes clear that identity can be challenged, confirmed, refined, or enhanced through these dynamic exchanges.

According to Benson et al. (2013), identity is a dialectical relationship involving both internal perceptions and external positioning. The former reflects how we perceive ourselves; the latter refers to how we are represented and treated by others. However, this social view of identity (Jenkins, 2014) is also fragile, fragmented, and dynamic, constantly shaped by the interaction of individual traits and broader sociocultural or political narratives.

Much of the existing research on language learning and identity development focuses primarily on learners acquiring English as a second language (Clément & Norton, 2021; Darvin & Norton, 2018; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), because English is generally characterised as a lingua franca (Sifakis & Tsantila, 2019). In many contexts, including international business, English language proficiency is highly valued and considered an important skill. As a result, successful English language learners may have more advantages and opportunities in the social community than individuals who do not possess this skill (Mitchell et al., 2020). The dominance of English language learning and its positioning as a *Lingua Franca* could lead to native speakers of English being satisfied to remain within a monolingual identity (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

However, there are English native speakers who pursue multilingualism and hybrid linguistic identities through additional language learning (Mitchell et al., 2020). Rather than being purely instrumentally motivated (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), these learners may be driven by early language experiences, intrinsic interest in other cultures, or career aspirations. In recent years, traditional foreign languages in UK schools, such as French, German and Italian, have seen declining enrolment (McLelland, 2018), same as Chinese. However, compared with twenty ago, Chinese has actually gained popularity, with training programmes now preparing future Chinese teachers in the UK (Zhang & Li, 2010). The rise of Chinese as an academic subject reflects its growing influence on learners' linguistic identities.

Study abroad (SA) experiences can significantly shape these identities. Immersion in Chinese-speaking contexts can lead to shifts in learners' language confidence and sociocultural awareness (Benson et al., 2013). SA offers rich opportunities for language input and output beyond the classroom (Pérez-Vidal, 2014). Foundational SLA theories—including the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), Output Hypothesis (Swain & Lapkin, 1995), and Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996)—highlight the advantages of real-world communication. While classroom learning tends to be instrumental, authentic interactions abroad offer deeper engagement (Sánchez Hernández, 2017). Still, meaningful outcomes depend on learners' personal motivation and resilience.

The next section critically examines specific outcomes and factors influencing linguistic identity development during SA, with particular focus on students studying Chinese.

3.1. The Outcomes of Language Development from Study Abroad

Study abroad (SA) provides a naturalistic context for second language development, and numerous studies support its positive effects (Pérez-Vidal, 2014). Research suggests that students who study abroad often achieve higher proficiency compared to those who remain in their home country (Freed et al., 2003; Freed et al., 2004; Isabelli, 2003; Llanes & Muñoz, 2013; Magnan &

Back, 2007). However, outcomes vary across different skill areas—speaking tends to benefit the most, especially in terms of fluency, rate of speech, and mean length of utterance (Huensch & Tracy–Ventura, 2017; Leonard & Shea, 2017; Llanes, 2019).

Vocabulary and listening comprehension also show noticeable gains (Freed et al., 2004; Llanes & Botana, 2015). Still, not all results are consistent. For instance, Yi et al. (2012) investigated 145 international students from four universities in Beijing about their Chinese language exposure. The results of a fifteen-minute questionnaire show the uneven development of participants' Chinese language learning outcomes. This means that this particular research agrees with there being positive results in listening comprehension development, but could not confirm the prominence of development in oral skills (Yi et al., 2012). Zhao (2021) conducted a case study to track the development of a (female) participant's Chinese oral skills over four months. During this period, the results showed an increase in the complexity of her spoken Chinese, but a decrease in both accuracy and fluency, and such changes were nonlinear, influenced by both internal and external conditions (Zhao, 2021).

In sum, SA can enhance linguistic proficiency, particularly oral and receptive skills, but the outcomes are shaped by personal factors and learning environments. The following sections examine these factors—external and internal—in more detail.

3.2. External Factors

This section examines two key external influences on linguistic identity development: (1) the duration of study abroad, and (2) the nature of the formal learning environment.

3.2.1. Length of Stay

Duration of SA is often correlated with linguistic progress. Research shows that longer stays enhance pragmatic awareness and grammatical development (Sánchez Hernández, 2017; Vidal & Shively, 2019; Xu et al., 2009). However, other studies argue that duration alone is not a decisive factor—well-designed short-term programs (e.g., 6-week intensive courses) can also yield strong gains (Alcón-Soler, 2015; Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Beltrán, 2014; Dwyer, 2004; Han, 2005).

Llanes and Serrano Serrano (2011) found no significant difference between 2- and 3-month programmes in terms of speaking and writing development, suggesting that marginal extensions may not yield proportionate benefits. Ultimately, long-term immersion often supports broader development, but individual motivation and engagement remain crucial in shaping outcomes.

3.2.2. Nature of the Formal Learning Environment

The quality and context of formal instruction also significantly impact language learning. In China, international students often choose major urban centers like Beijing or Shanghai, where infrastructure and academic resources are strong (Wang, 2021).

However, environments rich in English may reduce exposure to Chinese (Song & Xia, 2021; Wang, 2021). Song and Xia (2021) did a study to compare international students' living experiences in two Chinese universities. One university is in Shanghai, the other is in the

hinterland of China. According to the results, for students in Shanghai, when they were pursuing both academic and social activities formally or casually, English as a communication tool played a very important role. English as a dominant medium, to some degree, obstructed their engagement with local society, as well as the practice of speaking Chinese. But in the hinterland university, where both lecturers and local students found it relatively hard to communicate in English, Chinese was regarded as a communication medium (Song & Xia, 2021), which prompted the students to learn Chinese.

Beyond geography, factors such as curriculum design, teacher feedback, and assessment methods affect classroom learning (Wang, 2021). Homestays, often presumed beneficial, do not always guarantee improved language acquisition (Kinginger, 2009). In short, both geographic and institutional contexts shape linguistic engagement in meaningful ways.

3.3. Internal Factors

Internal factors—such as gender, personality, motivation, and self-perception—play a significant role in learners' linguistic identity development.

Some studies have found that some female students experience more difficulties than male students in communicating with native speakers and integrating into the target language society during SA (Kinginger, 2013; Shively, 2016). However, broader gender effects remain inconclusive.

Age research primarily compares children and adults, with younger learners often showing advantages (Llanes & Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz, 2010, 2014). Less is known about age-related differences within adult learners, such as undergraduates vs. postgraduates in SA contexts.

Personality also influences willingness to communicate. While extroverts are often assumed to be more communicative (Marijuan & Sanz, 2017), empirical studies show mixed results. For example, Baker-Smemoe et al. (2014) found no consistent link between traits like openness and second language gains.

Motivation is widely accepted as a dynamic factor in language learning. Rather than fixed levels, it shifts with context and time (Allen, 2010). Norton's (1995, 2013) concept of "investment" reframes motivation as a socially and emotionally situated commitment.

In a doctoral dissertation about learning Chinese as a second/foreign language, Yu (2013) conducted a regression analysis and found a positive correlation between international students' desire to speak Chinese and their motivation, language attitude, and view of their target language. In Hao's (2015) study, her respondents all believed that making mistakes when speaking Chinese was ordinary and did not negatively impact their desire to speak. Chu and Zhang (2019) also proposed that if teachers have an in-depth understanding of students' Chinese language ability, know their learning needs in the Chinese classroom, and make better use of classroom feedback, international students' desire to speak Chinese can be further stimulated.

Overall, internal factors affect not just linguistic outcomes, but learners' evolving relationship with the target language and their emerging linguistic identity. These dynamics are deeply interwoven with cultural perceptions, personal agency, and learners' positions in the social world.

4. Sociocultural Identity Development in Study Abroad

During the processes of learning a second language, the target language culture should also be considered. Since the end of the 19th century, many linguists and language educators have begun to pay attention to the cultural influence on language learning (Hinkel, 1999; Kramsch, 2009; Nieto & Zoller Booth, 2010; Rachmawaty et al., 2018; Tsou, 2005). As Hymes (1964) noted, communication across cultures inevitably involves the negotiation of social and cultural norms. Thus, developing linguistic competence requires not only grammatical mastery but also sociocultural understanding (Canagarajah, 2005).

Culture reflects not only a civilisation's achievements but also the cognitive frameworks, value systems, and social practices embedded in language (Kecskés, 2013). Additionally, investigations into the connection between language and culture produced many impressive and seminal works, such as that of Kaplan (1966), who propounded definitive ways in which rhetorical conventions vary across different cultures, languages and styles of second language writing. Gumperz (1982) tended to draw distinctions between social identity, which referenced the relationship between the individual language learner, cultural identity, and the social world. Lyons (2017) noticed the effects of the first culture on second language learning, such as the influence of L2 by the L1 culture, and the cultural norms and values that transferred from the L1 culture. Lyons also suggested that the interdependence of language and culture is not as widely appreciated as it ought to be and teaching culture in the language class is important to improve learners' awareness of the target language culture (Lyons, 2017).

Learning a new language often leads to transformations in cultural identity. Gałajda (2011) found that learners develop new identities influenced by the target culture, reflecting broader changes in their sense of self and cultural affiliation. Fail et al. (2004), in a longitudinal case study of former international students, highlighted both positive transformations—such as adaptability and global outlook—and challenges like cultural dislocation. Devens (2005) noted how cultural transitions can affect psychological well-being during SA. Van Kerckvoorde (2007) further argued that language shapes belief systems, behaviour, and worldview. Darvin and Norton (2015) suggest that immersion in a new language and culture through SA allows learners to renegotiate their identity in relation to shifting social and cultural contexts. Thus, the process of learning a language goes beyond linguistic acquisition, involving a profound reconfiguration of one's sociocultural identity and sense of belonging.

4.1. Cultural Adaptation and the Acculturation Process

The study abroad (SA) experience often involves intercultural challenges and cultural transitions that significantly influence learners' identity development. This section reviews the concept of culture shock, key theories of cultural adaptation, and findings on the dynamic nature of individual adjustment in intercultural settings.

Early studies on SA in the 1950s–1970s emphasized the psychological stress associated with cultural transition. Oberg (1960) introduced the influential term "culture shock", describing a sequence of four stages—honeymoon, negotiation, adjustment, and adaptation—to capture learners' evolving emotional responses to a new culture. He argued that unfamiliar customs,

language difficulties, and shifting self-perceptions contribute to anxiety and discomfort in the early months of residence abroad.

While Oberg's model laid the foundation for later theories, it was criticised for its generality and lack of empirical support. Scholars such as Ward and Kennedy (1999) and Searle and Ward (1990) conducted longitudinal studies with international students in New Zealand, revealing that emotional lows often occur in the first and twelfth months, challenging the fixed-stage model. Similarly, data from Japanese students showed that depression was highest immediately upon arrival but did not follow predictable patterns thereafter (Ward et al., 1998).

More recent research supports the idea that cultural adaptation is nonlinear and individualised. For example, Chien (2016) found that student adjustment cannot be neatly categorized into stages. Viol and Klasen (2021), studying participants in the European Era Snow exchange programme, proposed an alternative framework based on three domains: success (e.g., linguistic gains), personal growth (e.g., independence and confidence), and a three-phase experiential arc (pre-departure, during SA, and return). This perspective highlights both the practical and psychological transformations that shape learners' evolving sociocultural identities.

At the same time, many Chinese scholars were also investigating the culture shock of international students in China. An earlier scholar is Liu (1995). She believes that international students in China have to experience adaptation to the living environment and cultural differences. However, she did not conduct longitudinal research on these adaptations but only proposed the structure and content. Lyu (2000) divided 112 European and American international students into three groups according to the length of study abroad in China (1-3 months, 4-6 months and more than 6 months) to measure the cultural adaptation of European and American students. According to the results, she placed participants' adaptation into three main stages: the stage of sightseeing, severe cultural shock, and general cultural adaptation. Chang and Chen (2008) conducted an international study satisfaction survey of 179 international students in China. She divided the samples according to the length of their stay in China: 1-6 months, 6-12 months, 12-24 months and more than 24 months. The conclusion showed that international students who lived in China for 6-12 months were least satisfied with their life compared with the other three groups. These studies have inherited and developed the theory of culture shock from the perspective of Chinese as a second (foreign) language about the stages of adapting the Chinese culture in China. However, these studies have the same drawback as Lysgaand 's (1955) study: there is no longitudinal comparison, making it hard to deeply understand a person's long-term changes.

Xu and Hu (2017) conducted a two-year long-term study on first-year and third-year undergraduate international students in China through questionnaires and interviews. The results showed that international students exhibited a more positive attitude when they first came to China feeling curious about Chinese academic and social culture. During the period of 3 months to 1 year in China, international students were more likely to experience discomfort, especially regarding language learning, interactions and attitude towards life. The international students studying in China for two years showed different degrees of adaptation and strove to become communicators between the two cultures. In Xie (2017) Master's dissertation in the same year, she collected 49 questionnaires and conducted longitudinal observations of 13 participants one

year later. Her results show that students' adaptation is dynamic. After one year of study in China, adjustment improved significantly in terms of their personal well-being, but their social and cultural adjustment and academic adjustment declined (Xie, 2017). However, it is not suggested that all students experience the same journey as so much will depend on the individual.

These findings underscore that cultural adaptation is highly individualized and often uneven across dimensions (e.g., personal, social, academic). Most importantly, these cultural transitions are deeply tied to learners' evolving cultural and linguistic identities, influencing how they perceive themselves in the host society.

4.2. Acculturation Strategies and Identity Negotiation

This section explores how international students adapt through study abroad (SA), focusing on the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of acculturation. Identity, language proficiency, beliefs, and values all influence how students respond to cultural differences. Berry (1980) described acculturation strategies as comprising both attitudes (preferences toward cultural retention or change) and behaviors (actual actions), while Ward et al. (1996) differentiated between psychological adaptation (well-being, emotional health) and sociocultural adaptation (ability to fit into the host culture). These dimensions are interconnected and collectively contribute to the development of learners' evolving identities. For instance, one may follow cultural behaviors of the host country while still emotionally aligned with their original cultural background.

As mentioned previously, Berry's (1997, 2005) model identifies four acculturation strategies reflect how individuals relate to both their heritage culture and the host society. However, international students' experiences often shift between these categories rather than fitting neatly into one. The integration strategy is seen as most beneficial, associated with greater emotional well-being and development of bicultural identity (Berry, 2005; Hui et al., 2015).

Chen (2004) found that Chinese students in the U.S. rebuilt their cultural identity by transitioning between outsider and insider roles, undergoing internal processes of adaptation and self-repositioning. This supports the idea that identity construction during SA is dynamic, affected by social position and cultural power (Norton, 2013).

In the Chinese context, Rui (2008) applied Berry's framework to Korean students in China and categorised them into separative, transitional, and integrative types. Integrative students—those maintaining Korean cultural roots while actively forming interpersonal connections with Chinese peers—reported the most positive experiences. In contrast, separative students, who avoided meaningful engagement with the host society, exhibited lower satisfaction and limited sociocultural growth.

This typology reveals that successful identity negotiation is closely tied to both relational engagement and cultural flexibility. However, Rui's (2008) study also raises questions about the instrumental motivations behind interactions. Transitional students often interacted with locals for academic or transactional purposes, suggesting that mere contact with host nationals does not automatically lead to identity transformation. Rather, the *quality* and *intention* of intercultural engagement seem more influential than the quantity alone. Moreover, these findings highlight an

important research gap: the lack of longitudinal, qualitative data tracing how students' acculturation strategies evolve over time.

4.3. Social Belonging and Interpersonal Relationships

Adaptation also involves emotional regulation and the impact of social support. Ramsay et al. (2007) and Shu et al. (2020) highlight the importance of emotional and practical support from institutions and peers in facilitating intercultural identity development. Chinese schools support international students in three aspects (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China, 2019). First, the Chinese government and universities have set up a variety of scholarships and grants for international students to provide timely assistance to those in need. Second, unlike the previous preferential policies for overseas students (Li & Zhai, 2021), the policy gradually adopts the same attitude towards overseas students as towards Chinese students, so as to help overseas students better experience the real life of Chinese college students and help them integrate into Chinese culture and society. Third, activities such as "Chinese Bridge" should be held to encourage foreign students to learn Chinese and promote exchange and understanding between Chinese and foreign cultures.

Although such support can be beneficial in helping students adapt to life in China, it's important to note that acceptance and integration levels may vary among individuals. Therefore, a sense of social belonging among international students is not solely the result of institutional policy; it also depends on everyday interpersonal experiences, including opportunities for meaningful engagement with local individuals and communities.

Another important factor affecting the adaptation of international students is possible stereotypes and prejudices held by individuals. While stereotypes may not directly lead to discrimination, they shape expectations and perceptions, potentially impacting identity negotiation (Spencer et al., 2016). For example, Yang (2005) and Gillespie (2014) revealed that some international students, especially from African and Latin American regions, might encountere stereotyping in China, affecting their ability to integrate.

There is little research on Chinese perceptions of British students; however, anecdotal evidence suggests traditional views about "British elegance," "tea culture," or "royal loyalty" may influence interactions. These impressions—whether positive or distorted—impact both sides' willingness to engage openly.

4.4. Classroom and Academic Identity Construction

Academic environments significantly shape identity during SA. International students face not only typical academic pressures but also additional linguistic and cultural challenges (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Misaligned expectations about academic success or unfamiliarity with teaching styles can create stress (Aubrey, 1991; Mori, 2000). Power dynamics in teacher-student relationships can also affect students' academic identities (Cummins, 2001). Liu (2005) started with the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and analysed the differences in the relationship between teachers and students in Western countries and China. For example, Western students in universities can directly call their teachers by teachers' first names, but in China,

students must use the title "Teacher". Actually, "Teacher" is not just a title but also conveys respect for and politeness towards the teacher (Liu, 2005).

A classroom is also a site of intercultural learning: when students and teachers mutually engage with diverse worldviews, identity growth is possible. Though academic stress may not always correlate with overall adaptation (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008), academic identity remains a critical facet of the broader intercultural experience. As such, the classroom experience not only may influence students' academic performance but also serves as a key context in which they renegotiate their roles, identities, and sense of competence within the host academic culture.

5. Hybrid identity through the lens of Study Abroad

Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) argue that when international students have become accustomed to or have adapted to life in the host country and return to the home country, they will also experience a culture shock. On this basis, more and more scholars have noticed this phenomenon and put forward the term reverse cultural shock (Gaw, 2000; Gill, 2010). This means that after the international students adapt to life in the new culture, they need some time to re-acculturate when they come back to their home country. Similarly to the culture shock model, the influences of the reverse culture shock also depend on individual experience, e.g., the original cultural background, length of stay abroad, and their acculturation or otherwise in the new community (Gaw, 2000). Dettweiler et al. (2015) also show students' reverse cultural shock after returning home from a six-month study abroad. Presbitero (2016) studied the relationship between cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) and cultural adaptation of international students, and the results show that reverse cultural shock is negatively correlated with students' sociocultural adaptation. In other words, the more students experience reverse culture shock, the more they will suffer from adapting to their original home country's culture. At the same time, cultural intelligence could alleviate the pressure caused by the reverse cultural shock to a certain extent.

If studying abroad is viewed as a holistic experience, then this experience may have some specific effects on the identity of participants (Barron, 2003; Kinginger, 2011; Regan et al., 2009). For example, Kinginger (2004) conducted a four-year follow-up study of an international (American) student in France. She was originally born into a working-class family. After returning to the United States on completion of her studies, she believed she was no longer a "homeless" person but a French graduate student. She could fulfil her desire to be a language educator and help more people learn a new language. From this participant's viewpoint, the relationship between herself and the social world had changed. Wilson et al. (1996) also proposed the concept of "transnational imagination", whereby the sojourning experience may build connections between the travellers and others who share the same or similar experiences abroad. For international students, studying abroad may involve   established relationships with other international students from the same country as themselves, or may lead to building relationships with alumni of the foreign university, after their return home (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

Block (2007) also proposed that SA increases students' identification with their own country, which refers to their national identity. As Heusinkveld (1997) said, the most significant shock

may not be the collision with a new culture but rather the influence of native culture in shaping one's own identity and behaviours. Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) investigated Chinese students' return experience after studying in the UK. They discovered that their participants reinforced a strong sense of being Chinese, but simultaneously developed a self-consciously international horizon, which highlights the benefits of SA programmes in reinforcing national identity, promoting intercultural understanding, and facilitating the development of a mutual cultural identity.

In addition, some authors have proposed that SA students may also find their self-knowledge and self-awareness have been enhanced in some way. Aveni (2005) studied changes in the self-awareness of international students in the United States after studying abroad and found that students gained a better understanding of their own culture and the target culture. Meanwhile, they discovered that they became more confident, independent and tolerant towards different circumstances. Patron (2007) studied the identity of French students who experienced culture shock and language shock and issues around the nature of their identity and self-awareness during their study time in Australia and highlighted the value of SA programmes in helping students develop the skills and abilities to overcome challenges such as culture shock and language difficulties. Montgomery (2010) proposes that studying abroad allows students to form a more open, social, and independent self.

However, Benson et al. (2013) investigated two respondents from Hong Kong who had experienced English language learning in Australia. They expressed different views when they were asked about their relationship to the English language after studying in Australia. One thought that she was much closer to English, was becoming more aware of and confident in her English ability and could perceive that native speakers regarded her as an English speaker. However, another participant said that she did not learn English in order to become a member of the English-speaking community but used English as a communication tool. Such differences existed because the students' views of themselves when using English were different (Benson et al., 2013). The first participant viewed English as a key to entering the target community and tried to find a sense of belonging there, while the second participant viewed English solely as a tool for communication. The second participant did not desire to fully engage with the target community or to assimilate, but rather wished to maintain their original cultural identity while still being able to communicate effectively. However, they both mentioned the same phenomenon: they thought they were always considered "foreigners", no matter how good their English was. They felt that physical reasons determined this aspect, as they were Hong Kong people, and were different in appearance from Australians although it is important to acknowledge that Australia is multiracial in make-up (Benson et al., 2013). At the same time, they suggested that there were deep reasons related to cultural identity which may have affected their experiences. As Wang (2011) argued, although people try to acculturate in a new country, and some values, behaviours, and ways of thinking might change, the underlying structure of their own culture may hardly change fundamentally. This causes LLs and NSs to feel different from each other, and this difference in turn may give LLs an outsider feeling.

All these studies have shown that the whole process of studying abroad, not only a process of self-development but also a process of self-reflection. International students live in a second language society and may interact with local people during this process. They learn and adapt to a new culture and simultaneously reflect on their own culture and consider others. When they return to their home country, students may find that they are no longer the self that they used to be. Like the third place described by Kramsch (1993), which is an undiscovered place between the native culture and the target culture, international students may bring their own culture to exchange and negotiate with the new culture, which brings them to a new third place. In this dynamic fusion of time and space, they may find that they can shape themselves into intercultural persons (Montgomery, 2010), which means they have both the home country self (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015) and the host country self, forming dual or multiple identities (Vertovec, 2009).

6. Conclusion

This literature review critically examined how international students construct and negotiate their linguistic, sociocultural, and hybrid identities through study abroad (SA), with particular attention to those studying in China. The review highlights that while SA environments often facilitate language acquisition and intercultural competence, these outcomes are neither uniform nor guaranteed. Identity formation is a complex, fluid process shaped by the interaction of internal factors—such as motivation, personality, and prior experiences—and external conditions, including institutional environments, social networks, and cultural distance.

Despite an expanding body of research, significant gaps remain. First, much of the literature relies on cross-sectional designs or short-term observations, limiting insights into the temporal and developmental nature of identity shifts. Second, there remain conceptual and theoretical tensions between Chinese language learning and existing identity theories. While much of the research draws on Western-originated identity frameworks, these may not fully capture the complexities faced by international students in Chinese sociocultural contexts. The integration of Chinese language learning into broader discussions of identity development is still evolving, and theoretical alignment remains not that sufficient. Third, although China has become a popular destination for international education, research that situates Chinese language learning within a sociocultural identity framework remains limited in scope. Many existing studies focus on linguistic proficiency or surface-level cultural adaptation, with fewer exploring how learners engage with the deeper social meanings, power structures, and identity negotiations embedded in the Chinese cultural and institutional context.

To address these limitations, future research should adopt longitudinal, mixed-method, and narrative approaches that can better capture the dynamic, situated, and evolving nature of identity. Studies should examine how institutional structures, pedagogical practices, peer relationships, and media discourses shape international students' sense of self, belonging, and agency—not only during their stay abroad but also upon re-entry. Particular attention should be paid to the negotiation of dual or multiple identities across cultural contexts, and to the emotional and psychological dimensions of these transitions, including reverse culture shock.

A more nuanced understanding of identity development in SA contexts holds important implications for both theory and practice. It can inform more inclusive, responsive, and ethically grounded international education policies, helping institutions support international students not only linguistically and academically, but also socially, emotionally, and interculturally.

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