

Cultural Identity and Cross-Cultural Adaptation: A Qualitative Study of Social Integration among China's mainland Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The present study looks at the mechanism of cultural identity negotiation that influences the cross-cultural adaptation and social integration of China's mainland students attending universities in Hong Kong. The study is based on reflexive thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 25 participants, and draws on Berry's acculturation model and Kim's integrative communication theory of cross-cultural adaptation as a conceptual framework. The data revealed the following three themes. China's mainland students face unique acculturative stressors in the culturally ambiguous context of Hong Kong, such as linguistic marginalisation in Canton, felt discrimination and stereotyping due to being China's mainland and differences in interpersonal expectations and communication norms. Second, the participants enacted three different, but dynamic, identity negotiation strategies to deal with these challenges: heritage preservation, in which strong co-national networks and conscious management of mainland cultural practices were evident; selective adoption, in which pragmatic incorporation of surface-level local cultural elements and maintenance of core mainland values were evident; and bicultural bridging, in which trilingual code-switching, diverse cross-group social networks, and reflexive meta-cultural awareness were evident. Third, these strategies produced markedly different social integration trajectories across academic, interpersonal, and psychological dimensions, with bicultural bridging consistently associated with the most favourable outcomes across all three, while heritage preservation sustained moderate psychological well-being primarily through co-national support. Inter-coder reliability assessment yielded a Cohen's kappa of 0.82, indicating substantial agreement. The findings extend Berry's categorical acculturation model by demonstrating the situational variability and dynamic modulation of acculturation strategies, and support Kim's theory by documenting the communicative pathways underlying the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic. Practical implications are drawn for Hong Kong universities, including intercultural mentoring programmes, conversational Cantonese support, and diversity-inclusive campus communication policies.

Keywords

Cultural identity negotiation; cross-cultural adaptation; social integration; China's mainland students; Hong Kong; acculturation strategies; qualitative research.

1. Introduction

We aim to explore the mechanisms by which cultural identity shapes the cross-cultural adaptation and social integration of China's mainland students (MCSs) enrolled at universities

in Hong Kong. Although MCSs share a broader Chinese heritage with Hong Kong society, they encounter distinct cultural, linguistic and socio-political differences that give rise to adaptation challenges comparable to those faced by international students in entirely foreign settings [1]. A qualitative approach is used here to explore the process of MCSs' cultural identity negotiation in the process of adaptation and the effect of this negotiation on their social integration in the unique context of higher education in Hong Kong.

In particular, three aspects of the MCS experience which are interrelated are explored. First, the acculturative problems faced by MCSs after they come to Hong Kong are explored, such as language problems, perceived discrimination and cultural misunderstanding. Second, the identity negotiation strategies used by the MCSs in dealing with these challenges are examined; how MCSs negotiate with their identity of being China's mainland and how they pick up elements of Hong Kong local culture. Third, the relationship of these identity negotiation strategies to the observable social integration outcomes in academics, social and psychological dimensions is analyzed.

The Hong Kong universities have been increasingly serving the growing number of China's mainland students, making Hong Kong a major regional educational hub in the last 20 years [2]. According to the Education Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), the proportion of non-local students in the total number of university students is increasing and MCSs form the largest group of non-local students [3]. This demographic trend has drawn considerable scholarly attention to the question of how these students adapt to an environment that is at once familiar and foreign.

A rich theoretical foundation for understanding the experiences of sojourning students has been established by international research on cross-cultural adaptation. Berry [4] suggested the widely cited acculturation framework that identifies four strategies individuals may adopt when navigating between heritage and host cultures: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. Integration, defined as the simultaneous maintenance of heritage culture and adoption of host culture, has been consistently found to be associated with the most favourable adaptation outcomes in studies that have used this framework [5]. Kim [6] further developed the integrative communication theory of cross-cultural adaptation. This theory conceptualises adaptation as a continuous, cumulative process of internal transformation driven by communication competence in the host environment. It emphasises that host communication competence and host interpersonal relationships are central to the facilitation of functional fitness.

Research focusing specifically on MCSs in Hong Kong has shown that these students undergo levels of adaptation difficulty comparable to those experienced by foreign students [1][7].

Cantonese proficiency has been identified as a key barrier in research on the linguistic dimension of MCS adaptation. Research also has demonstrated that willingness to communicate in L2 is positively correlated to good sociocultural adaptation [8].

Aside from the linguistic factors there are also social factors that serve as a crucial mediating factor in the adaptation process. Ng et al. [9] found that integration with local Hong Kong people was a mixed experience on the sociocultural and psychological adaptation depending on the amount of social support they received. Ye et al. (2018) [10] showed that culture mixing aversion among local residents affects the acculturation context for mainland sojourners, and that the inclusivity of the local communities mediates the effects of the integration strategies on their wellbeing.

However, there are some key gaps in the current literature. Most quantitative studies have focused on the statistical correlations among various forms of acculturation and adaptation outcomes, and do not offer much information on the lived experiences and subjective processes of identity negotiation [11]. Although providing richer accounts, most qualitative investigations

explore either the language barriers or psychological well-being separately, which do not reflect the dynamic and integrative interplay between cultural identity and social integration as a whole [12]. A lack of research exists that adopts cultural identity negotiation as the main analytical framework for understanding how MCSs negotiate, build, and rework a sense of self vis-à-vis the host environment [13].

To tackle these gaps, we use a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews with MCSs studying at local universities in Hong Kong. The goal of this study is to gain a more nuanced understanding of the identity negotiation mechanisms involved in social integration by using a conceptual framework that combines Berry's acculturation model [4] and Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory [6] and applying reflexive thematic analysis [14]. The research can be divided into seven parts. The introduction is presented in the first part. The second section discusses conceptual definition and theoretical underpinning. The third part talks about research design and methodology. The fourth part provides the results. The fifth part discusses the results. In part six implications and limitations are discussed. Conclusions and future directions are given in the 7th part.

2. Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Definition of Core Concepts

2.1.1. Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is one's sense of belonging to a cultural group and the extent to which one has taken the attributes of that group, such as its values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and symbolic systems, into his/her self-concept [15]. Cultural identity is a dynamic process, not fixed; it is constantly re-negotiated when people are in contact with and/or experience culturally different environments [16]. Cultural identity is a composite of one's China's mainland heritage identity and the bicultural/hybrid identity that may arise from continued interactions with Hong Kong society for MCSs in Hong Kong.

2.1.2. Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the complex process through which individuals who relocate to a culturally unfamiliar environment achieve increasing levels of functional fitness and psychological well-being with respect to the receiving society [6]. Kim [6] conceptualized this process as a continuous and cumulative evolutionary phenomenon involving both growth and stress, characterized by a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic. In this context, adaptation does not just involve behavioral adaptation, but also a change in the individual's internal psychological patterns, making it possible to function well in the new environment.

2.1.3. Social Integration

Social integration can be measured as the degree of involvement or entrenchment one has in the social networks, institutional structures and community of the host society [17]. In the Higher Education context, social integration is considered as academic integration, indicating the orientation and involvement in academic norms and academic communities; social integration in the narrower sense, that is the establishment and maintenance of relations with peers in the host country; and psychological integration, that is the subjective feeling of being integrated or belonging to the host country [18].

2.2. Basic Theoretical Support

2.2.1. Berry's Acculturation Framework

A basic framework for understanding the processes of negotiating between the heritage culture and the host culture is Berry's acculturation model [4][5]. The two dimensions assumed in the model are: maintenance of heritage culture and participation in the host culture. These two

dimensions combine to make four acculturation strategies: integration (high heritage maintenance and high host participation), assimilation (low heritage maintenance and high host participation), separation (high heritage maintenance and low host participation), and marginalisation (low heritage maintenance and low host participation). The results from many empirical studies have indicated that, in general, the integration strategy is linked to the most positive psychological and sociocultural adaptation outcomes [5].

2.2.2. Kim's Integrative Communication Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Kim's integrative communication theory [6] provides a theory that explains the cross-cultural adaptation process at the systems level. The theory sees host communication competence as the main mechanism of adaptation, which consists of linguistic competence, host cultural knowledge and affective orientation to the host culture. The theory also identifies the importance of host interpersonal communication, host mass communication and ethnic interpersonal communication in adaptation trajectories. A unique feature of this theory is the stress-adaptation-growth process, which suggests that adaptation is a recurring process of challenge, stress adjustment, and/or growth of the individual [19].

2.2.3. Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) [20] offers a psychological base to understanding the effects of group membership on self-concept and intergroup actions. The theory assumes that part of one's self-concept stems from their self-categorization as belonging to a social group and that they are motivated to retain positive distinctiveness of the in-group with respect to relevant out-groups. Social identity theory sheds light on the processes behind how students categorize themselves and others in mainland-local terms and how this categorization affects one's actions, attitudes and coping strategies in the context of MCSs in Hong Kong.

2.2.4. Constructivist Grounded Theory Perspective

Constructivist approach is the view that knowledge and meaning is not passively discovered, but actively constructed as a result of social interaction [21]. In the context of cross-cultural adaptation research, this means that cultural identity is not a fixed property, but rather a continuous project accomplished in the daily interactions, in the sense-making through narratives and in the social positioning in the host environment. This theoretical orientation has led to the adoption of a qualitative and interpretive research approach in this study, which gives emphasis to the subjective interpretations and meaning making activities of the research participants.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

Based on the conceptualization which incorporated Berry's acculturation model and Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory, three research questions are addressed. RQ1 is about the acculturative problems faced by the MCSs in the transition to the university life in Hong Kong. RQ2 is related to what identity negotiation strategies MCSs use to address these challenges. RQ3 is whether there is a relationship between these identity negotiation strategies and their social integration outcomes in terms of academic, social and psychological aspects.

3.2. Research Design and Participant Selection

Qualitative research, with semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool is used. The target population are full-time postgraduate or undergraduate students of China's mainland working at universities in Hong Kong with at least six months residence in the city. The participants were selected through purposive sampling with the aim of diversifying gender,

degree level, disciplinary background, duration of stay in Hong Kong and previous cross-cultural experiences.

A sample of $N = 25$ was obtained by using a variety of methods, including campus bulletin boards, social media groups, and snowball sampling. Demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1. There were 14 female and 11 male; age range between 20 to 32 years. The participants came from various disciplines of study, such as engineering, business, social sciences, humanities and natural sciences. The duration of stay in Hong Kong varied from 6 months to 5 years.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Profile

Characteristic	Category	n	Percentage	Mean	Range
Gender	Female	14	56%	-	-
	Male	11	44%	-	-
Age (years)	-	25	-	25.4	20-32
Degree Level	Undergraduate	10	40%	-	-
	Master	9	36%	-	-
	Doctoral	6	24%	-	-
Residence (months)	-	25	-	22.8	6-60
Cantonese Proficiency	None/Basic	16	64%	-	-
	Intermediate/Advanced	9	36%	-	-

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

Each participant was interviewed separately for 45-90 minutes using a semi-structured interview. Three thematic domains were developed for the interview protocol in accordance with the three research questions: (a) acculturative problems and first experiences upon arrival in Hong Kong, (b) strategies to cope with the cultural identity in various social contexts, and (c) perceived outcomes of social integration in academic, interpersonal and psychological areas. Interviews were all carried out in Mandarin Chinese to facilitate participants to articulate nuances of their experiences in their native language. All of the interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Member checking was done to ensure accuracy as transcripts were sent back to the participants so that they could react and clarify their statements.

3.4. Analytical Framework

Data analysis was done using the six-stage reflexive thematic process suggested by Braun and Clarke [14][22]. The six phases are: (1) familiarization with the data, which involves repeated reading of the transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes, collating codes and generating groups of them into potential themes; (4) reviewing themes with coded extracts and with the data set as a whole; (5) defining and naming of themes; and (6) production of the final report. The reason for choosing this approach is that it is flexible in theoretical perspectives and that it can embrace the interpretive, constructivist epistemological perspective utilized in the current research.

Reflexive thematic analysis paradigm was adopted and a reflexive journal was used throughout the data collection and analysis process, to record the analytical decisions made, emerging interpretations and potential biases. Member checking, peer de-briefing and the use of thick description in reporting the findings increased the credibility. The conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 provided the direction for the analytical process that focused on the relationships among acculturative challenges, identity negotiation strategies, and social integration outcomes.

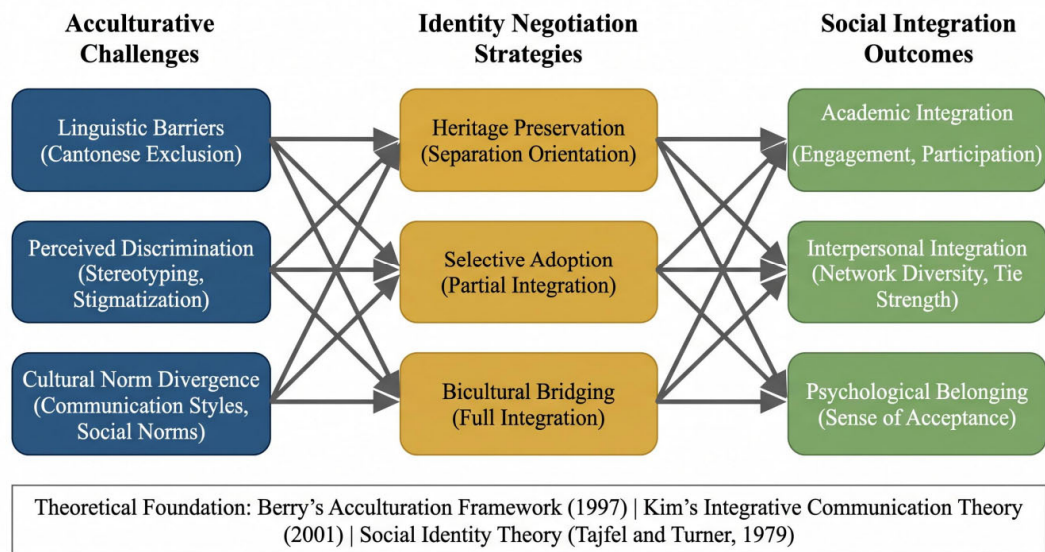


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Integrating Berry's Acculturation Model and Kim's Adaptation Theory

3.5. Coding Reliability and Analytical Rigor

To assure the rigor of the coding process, a random subsample of five of the transcripts (20% of the total) was coded independently by a second researcher. Assessment of inter-coder agreement was done using Cohen's kappa coefficient (k), which resulted in $k = 0.82$ signifying substantial agreement [23]. The conclusions were achieved using discussion to resolve discrepancies. Thematic structure was then further validated by sharing the preliminary findings with three participants for respondent validation, the feedback was then used in the final thematic framework.

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Coding Framework

Overarching Theme	Sub-theme	Number of Codes	Illustrative Code Example
Acculturative Challenges	Linguistic Barriers	18	Cantonese exclusion in class
	Perceived Discrimination	14	Stereotyping by locals
	Cultural Misunderstanding	11	Differing social norms
Identity Negotiation	Heritage Preservation	15	Maintaining mainland customs
	Selective Adoption	13	Adopting local food culture
	Bicultural Bridging	10	Code-switching across groups
Social Integration	Academic Engagement	12	Active seminar participation
	Interpersonal Networks	16	Mixed friend groups
	Psychological Belonging	9	Feeling at home over time

4. Findings

Data analysis of the 25 interview transcripts using the reflexive method of thematic analysis revealed three themes with several sub-themes. These themes relate to the three research questions, and are presented in the following order: (1) Acculturative Challenges at the Cultural Boundary, (2) Identity Negotiation Strategies in the Host Environment, and (3) Social Integration Outcomes and Trajectories. In Figure 2 (Thematic map), the thematic hierarchy of the themes and their sub-themes is displayed.

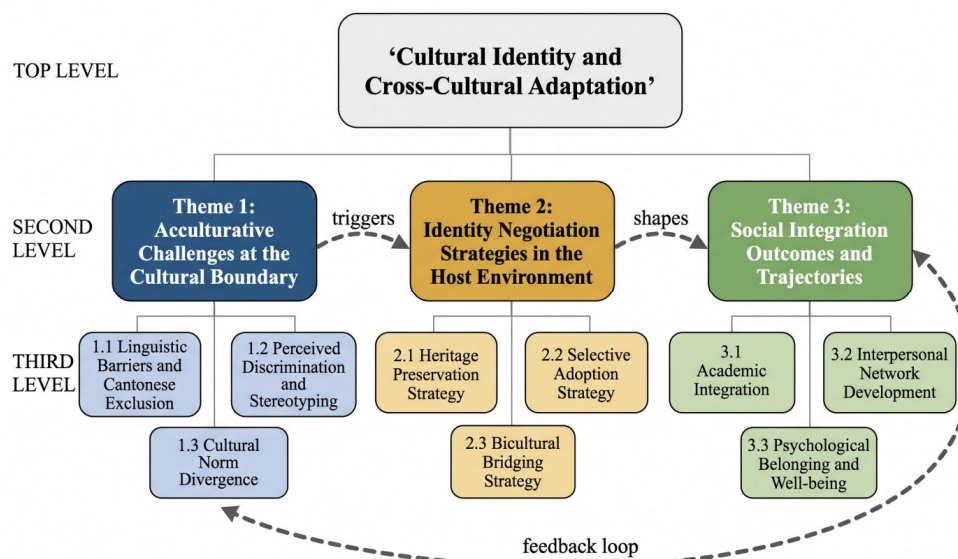


Figure 2. Thematic Map of Cultural Identity Negotiation and Social Integration

4.1. Theme 1: Acculturative Challenges at the Cultural Boundary

4.1.1. Linguistic Barriers and Cantonese Exclusion

The most commonly mentioned acculturative problems were related to language difficulties due to inadequate Cantonese language skills. While most academic courses are conducted in English, English was not used in everyday campus interactions, in informal academic discussions or in social gatherings, as these were all said to be in Cantonese. This linguistic divide led to a sense of marginalisation not just in terms of communication but also social marginalisation. Participants recalled instances when conversations switched to Cantonese when they were present, and they would not be able to join or follow the conversation. Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of the problems with language reported by the sample.

Table 3. Frequency of Linguistic Challenge Categories

Challenge Category	Participants (n)	Percentage	Representative Theme
Classroom Cantonese usage	21	84%	Exclusion from group work
Social Cantonese dominance	19	76%	Isolation at social events
Administrative Cantonese	15	60%	Navigating campus services
Media and cultural access	13	52%	Inability to follow local media
Mandarin stigmatization	11	44%	Negative attitudes toward Mandarin

4.1.2. Perceived Discrimination and Stereotyping

A significant number of participants ($n = 18$, 72%) reported having encountered some type of perceived discrimination and/or stereotyping due to their mainland identity. These

experiences included microaggressions (patronizing attitudes and assumptions about academic readiness) and more overt social exclusion (peer social interactions). Participants said some local students have their preconceived notions on mainland students, which is not reflecting their characteristics. Such perceptions of discrimination were always reported as a major obstacle to social integration and linked to raised psychological distress.

4.1.3. Cultural Norm Divergence

The participants defined several areas of difference between the cultural norms of the mainland and Hong Kong contexts: communication styles, management of interpersonal boundaries, ways of working with academic colleagues and expectations for social reciprocity. Some of the participants commented on the varying degrees of directness of communication, the dynamics of building a relationship, and the hierarchy in peer relationships. Sometimes only subtle, these cultural differences caused problems and friction that complicated what the participants tried to do in terms of making and keeping cross-group friendships.

4.2. Theme 2: Identity Negotiation Strategies in the Host Environment

4.2.1. Heritage Preservation Strategy

The heritage preserving approach was defined by conscious attempts by participants to preserve and assert their cultural identity as mainlanders living in Hong Kong. This strategy was expressed in a number of behavior patterns, such as socializing in co-national groups, reading the media from China's mainland, being active in student associations from China's mainland, and following familiar cultural patterns in daily life. Those who placed a strong emphasis on preserving their heritage tended to see their mainland identity as a psychological anchor and emotional comfort for life in a difficult context.

4.2.2. Selective Adoption Strategy

Selective adoption strategy showed that the participants selectively incorporated some elements of Hong Kong culture into their behavioral repertoire while maintaining the essence of their mainland culture. Participants exhibited the use of local food preferences, leisure activities and some social etiquette norms, as the most pronounced aspects of this strategy. Those who practiced this strategy made a clear distinction between values and beliefs that were an essential part of the mainland culture, and surface-level practices that they were willing to adopt. The participant sample distribution of identity negotiation strategies is shown in Figure 3.

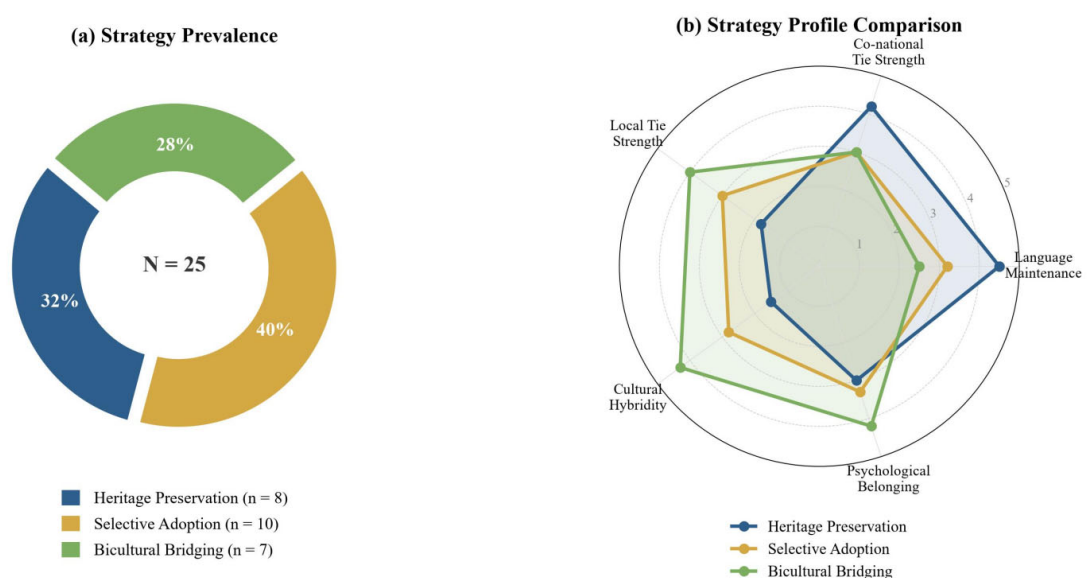


Figure 3. Distribution of Identity Negotiation Strategies (N = 25)

4.2.3. Bicultural Bridging Strategy

A bicultural bridging strategy was the most integrative way of negotiating identity found in this study. The participants using this strategy were found to actively build up a hybrid culture by using mainland culture resources and Hong Kong culture resources. This strategy was linked to intentional switching between Mandarin and Cantonese or English in various social contexts, involvement in co-national and local social activities, and the emergence of a reflexive meta-cultural awareness which facilitated participants' ability to shift across cultural boundaries with greater ease. A summary comparative of the three strategies of identity negotiation is provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparative Summary of Identity Negotiation Strategies

Dimension	Heritage Preservation	Selective Adoption	Bicultural Bridging
Language Use	Predominantly Mandarin	Mandarin with some English	Trilingual code-switching
Social Networks	Co-national dominant	Mixed with local contacts	Diverse cross-group networks
Cultural Practices	Mainland customs maintained	Surface-level local adoption	Hybrid cultural repertoire
Identity Orientation	Strong mainland identification	Pragmatic dual identification	Reflexive bicultural identity
Prevalence (n)	8 (32%)	10 (40%)	7 (28%)

4.3. Theme 3: Social Integration Outcomes and Trajectories

4.3.1. Academic Integration

Academic integration experiences were very different among the participants with respect to the identity negotiation strategies experienced. Those who used the bicultural bridging strategy had the highest scores on academic involvement, such as actively participating in seminars, research projects with other local and international students, and finding it comfortable to ask for help from faculty members. By contrast, those who used mostly heritage preservation methods said that they felt more isolated in the classroom, and that they interacted mostly with other mainland students. The selective adoption group was in the middle, with the extent to which subjects were integrated into the academic setting depending on the culture of the disciplinary and departmental culture. To visually compare the self-reported academic integration levels in the three strategy groups, see Figure 4.

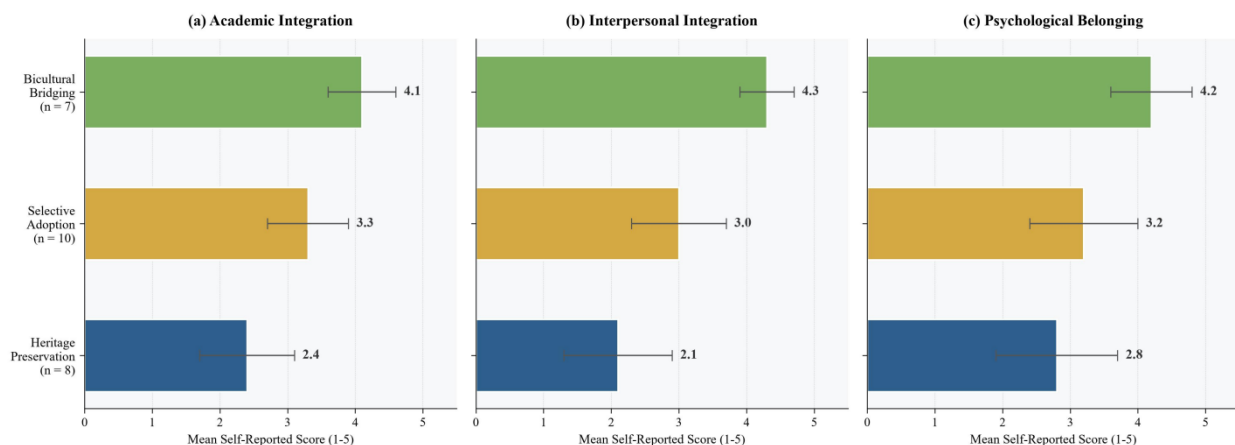


Figure 4. Academic Integration Levels across Identity Negotiation Strategy Groups

4.3.2. Interpersonal Network Development

A key aspect of social integration came to be the formation of interpersonal networks. These two attributes of the social network, network composition (the proportion of co-national vs. local vs. international ties) and tie strength (from weak acquaintanceship to strong friendship) were determined through analysis. Those who used the bicultural bridging strategy formed the most diverse networks, having many co-national and local friends. Heritage preservation participants reported having a high level of co-national networks but low level of meaningful interactions with local students. Table 5 shows the characteristics of the networks per strategy group.

Table 5. Social Network Characteristics by Identity Negotiation Strategy

Network Characteristic	Heritage Preservation	Selective Adoption	Bicultural Bridging
Co-national ties (strong)	High	Moderate	Moderate
Local ties (strong)	Low	Moderate	High
International ties	Low	Low to Moderate	Moderate to High
Network diversity	Low	Moderate	High
Perceived social support	Moderate (co-national)	Moderate (mixed)	High (diversified)

4.3.3. Psychological Belonging and Well-being

Psychological belonging (subjective sense of feeling accepted and valued in the host environment) was identified as a key integration outcome that differed significantly between the identity negotiation strategies. The individuals with the bicultural bridging strategy had the highest level of psychological belonging, explaining a gradual feeling of becoming comfortable in both cultural worlds of China's mainland and Hong Kong. The psychological well-being of heritage preservation participants was reported as moderate, and largely related to co-national support networks, although some reported ongoing feelings of being an outsider. The selective adoption participants reported a dynamic sense of 'belonging' which would wax and wane depending on certain social interactions and contextual factors.

5. Discussion

5.1. Acculturative Challenges in a Quasi-Foreign Context

The results validate and build on previous studies on MCSs' adaptation challenges in Hong Kong. The present study contributes to this literature in two ways: firstly, by demonstrating that linguistic barriers are not just pragmatic but symbolic of cultural group boundaries, and secondly, that language barriers facilitate social categorisation processes in line with social identity theory [20].

The present study builds on these findings by demonstrating that perceived discrimination is not monolithic in nature, but, rather, there is a systematic relationship between identity negotiation strategy and perceived discrimination. Participants who had a high identity salience on the maintenance of the identity on the heritage preservation strategy reported higher experiences of discrimination, suggesting a reciprocity between identity salience and intergroup perception.

5.2. Identity Negotiation as a Dynamic Adaptive Mechanism

All three of the identity negotiation strategies found in this study, heritage preservation, selective adoption and bicultural bridging can be aligned with Berry's acculturation framework [4] and can be elaborated upon in significant ways. Heritage preservation relates in general to the separation strategy, selective adoption to a partial form of integration and bicultural

bridging to the full integration strategy. In contrast, the qualitative data reveal that such strategies are not static individual attributes but are flexible and context-dependent and that participants change their strategies in response to contextual demands. This finding aligns with recent critiques of Berry's model that call for greater attention to the situational variability and temporal dynamics of acculturation processes [5][24].

Based on the Kim's integrative communication theory [6]. The persons who used this strategy had the greatest levels of host communication competence, the largest host interpersonal communication networks, and the most noticeable instances of the stress-adaptation-growth process outlined in the theory [19]. All of them had a similar experience where they had to communicate in the face of adaptation stress, which led to cultural learning and personal development. A conceptual model of this dynamic relationship is given in Figure 5.

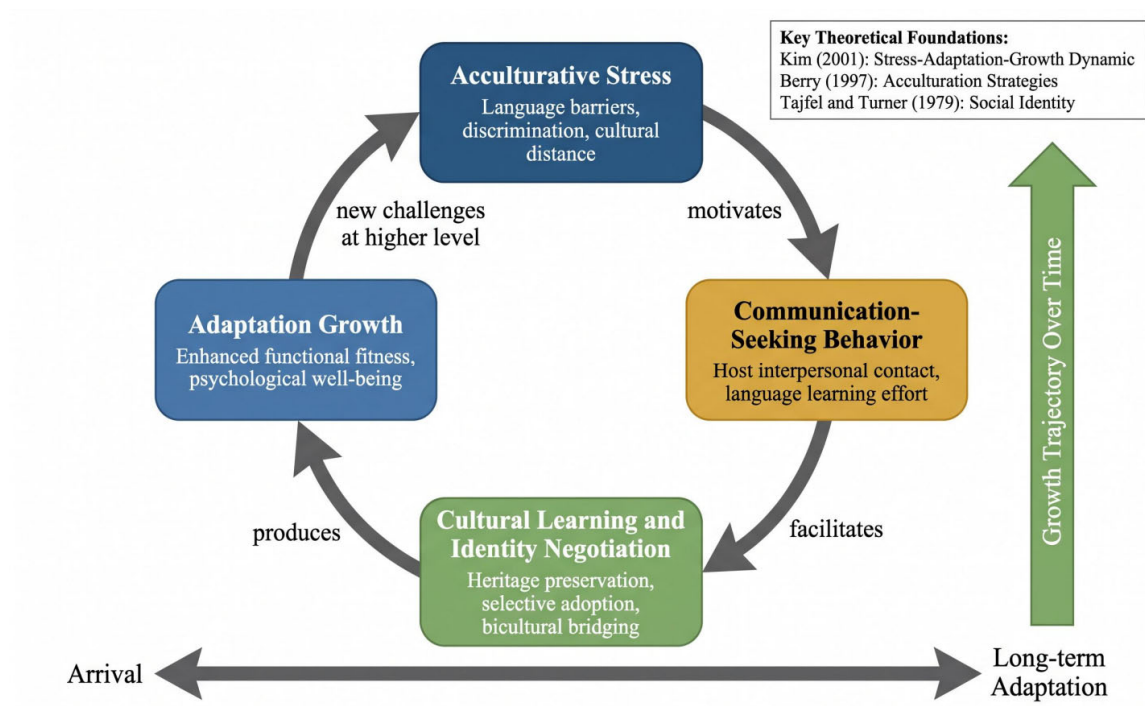


Figure 5. Dynamic Model of Identity Negotiation, Communication Competence, and Adaptation Growth

5.3. Social Integration as a Multi-dimensional Process

This is derived from the results that showed social integration is a multi-dimensional process that includes academic, interpersonal and psychological dimensions and these dimensions can happen at different times and be facilitated by different factors. That bicultural bridging is always linked to the most positive integration outcomes on all three dimensions provides support for Berry's prediction that integration is the best acculturation strategy [4]. The nuanced results of Ng et al. [9] however, are supported by the finding that heritage preservation participants had moderate levels of psychological well-being, despite their separation, through the support of co-national support networks.

The current investigation contributes to this picture by demonstrating that network characteristics are not only the result of adaptation, but also can be facilitators or hindrances to ongoing identity negotiation processes.

6. Implications and Limitations

6.1. Theoretical Implications

There are three contributions to the cross-cultural adaptation literature. Firstly, it illustrates the analytical potential of the concept of cultural identity negotiation as a key mechanism that connects acculturative issues to social integration outcomes in the MCS context. Second, it provides empirical evidence of the dynamic and context-dependent nature of acculturation strategies (as opposed to Berry's categorical model [4] which posits that individuals have fixed identity orientation), by demonstrating that identity orientation is flexibly determined by the social context. Thirdly, it provides empirical evidence of the communicative processes outlined in Kim's theory [6] of the stress-adaptation-growth process.

6.2. Practical Implications

The results have several implications for the practice of Hong Kong universities on how to improve the integration experience for MCSs. Intercultural structured mentoring programs should be considered at universities, where MCSs are mentored by local students to promote cross-group contact and decrease intergroup anxiety. There is a need for Cantonese language support programs specifically geared towards MCSs that focus on conversational skills, but not necessarily for academic use, that would reduce a significant obstacle to integration. In addition, university administrators need to raise the symbolic awareness of the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity on campus, as using Cantonese as a de facto gatekeeping language in informal settings of the academic world can cause symbolic exclusion for MCSs. The recommended interventions and outcomes are summarized in table 6.

Table 6. Recommended Institutional Interventions and Targeted Outcomes

Intervention	Target Group	Expected Outcome
Intercultural mentoring program	Incoming MCSs	Enhanced cross-group contact
Conversational Cantonese courses	All MCSs	Reduced linguistic barriers
Diversity awareness workshops	Local students and staff	Reduced stereotyping
Bilingual campus communication	University administration	Inclusive information access
Peer-led cultural exchange events	All students	Mutual cultural understanding

6.3. Limitations

There are a number of limitations which should be recognized. The cross sectional nature of the interviews represents the experience of the subjects at one moment in time only, and can only partially explain the temporal relationship of identity negotiation and adaptation in the span of the journey. Although purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research, findings can only be generalized to other MCS in other institutions in Hong Kong or other host contexts. There are retrospective distortion and social desirability bias in self-report data. The study was limited to the MCSs and did not involve the views of local Hong Kong students and university staff that would also shed light on the intergroup dynamics that influence outcomes of adaptation. Future research would benefit from a longitudinal design to follow the identity negotiation trajectory over time, a multi-perspective or dyadic approach to data collection, and an extension of the analysis to other culturally similar yet different host contexts of MCSs.

7. Research Conclusions

A qualitative research approach with semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis was used to explore the negotiation of cultural identity and social integration of mainland students at Hong Kong universities. The results indicate that the acculturative issues

faced by MCSs are a unique set of issues related to the culturally ambiguous situation of living in a familiar but also foreign context, namely Hong Kong. The language barrier (Cantonese language proficiency), discrimination based on mainland identity, and norms and culture difference were found as the three major challenges faced by MCSs.

To address these issues, participants used three of the most commonly found strategies of identity negotiation—heritage preservation, selective adoption, and bicultural bridging. Such strategies were found to be dynamic and situation-dependent, and participants were found to adjust their identity orientation as per the situation. “Bicultural bridging” identified by trilingual code switching, multiple social networks, and reflexive meta-cultural awareness was always linked to the best social integration outcomes in the academic, interpersonal and psychological domains.

The study makes a theoretical contribution by illustrating how identity negotiation is an analytical central concept in the study of cross-cultural adaptation and a mechanism that connects challenges of acculturation with outcomes of integration. It further expands Berry’s acculturation model by providing evidence of the situational variation of acculturation strategies and it complements Kim’s integrative communication theory by documenting communicative pathways in which adaptation growth takes place. It is concluded that to foster bicultural identity development at campus level, there is a need for targeted institutional interventions to overcome the linguistic challenge, dissipate intergroup prejudice and promote inclusive campus culture among the universities in Hong Kong.

Future studies should aim for more longitudinal designs, include local student and institutional perspectives as well as expand the framework of analysis to other quasi-foreign adaptation contexts where cultural proximity is accompanied by a strong sociopolitical difference. These investigations would contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic nexus of culture and cultural identity versus social inclusion in an ever mobile and interconnected world.

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