

Original article

Learning between two systems: A reflexive narrative of a China's mainland student's intercultural adaptation in Macao

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Abstract:

Macao's universities have experienced a marked increase in the enrollment of Chinese students seeking tertiary education since the 2000s. Thus, understanding the process of intercultural academic adaptation for Chinese students is becoming increasingly important. This study draws on Gill's transformative learning framework for intercultural adaptation, using a reflexive narrative approach to share the author's experiences as a China's mainland student in Macao studies. Drawn from the author's cross-border learning experience, this narrative aims to investigate the intercultural transformative learning experiences of the Chinese mainland students studying in Macao. From initial confusion and stress in academic life to gradual adaptation and ultimately achieving growth within an intercultural environment, this process aligns with Gill's transformative learning framework for intercultural adaptation. Investigating students' learning experiences from their perspectives can enhance the literature on intercultural adaptation and cross-border higher education.

1. Introduction

Macao's unique historical and geographical context shapes its operation under the principle of 'One Country, Two Systems' (Xie et al., 2023). These distinctive features influence the characteristics of Macao's higher education within China's broader initiative to develop the Greater Bay Area (GBA). The GBA aims to become a hub for innovation and international education by integrating the systems of China, Hong Kong, and Macao (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Driven by robust infrastructure and policies fostering international academic exchange and career development, Macao is positioning itself as a leading postgraduate education hub in the region (Chow et al., 2020).

Like Hong Kong, Macao has attracted the Chinese mainland students for its geographic proximity, relatively low tuition costs, and shared Confucian cultural heritage (Bodycott, 2009). The expansion of higher education enrollment in Macao has been driven primarily by students from the Chinese mainland (Ge, 2024). Between 2019 and 2023, the

number of the Chinese mainland students at publicly and privately funded universities in Macao increased significantly, from 18,904 (52.36% of total enrollment) in the 2019/2020 academic year to 39,079 (70.27%) in 2023/2024 (Education and Youth Development Bureau, 2024).

Despite this rapid growth, several studies have been conducted on the experiences of the Chinese mainland students in Macao's higher education system. Macao displays a distinctive environment for students' adaptation under historical influences. The city was under Portuguese rule for 112 years (Wei, 2014), resulting in a unique culture referred to as the "Macanese." This culture incorporates elements from both traditional Chinese and Portuguese backgrounds, reflected in its architecture, cuisine, language, and religion (Law, 2013). Consequently, Macao can be characterized as a multicultural region, allowing the Chinese mainland students to experience East-West dynamics within an intra-country context.

Besides, Macao is often neglected in the literature compared to Hong Kong, and students often have different motivations to study in Hong Kong compared with Macao (Li &

Bray, 2007). Their distinct historical paths, governance styles, and societal structures have resulted in differing educational landscapes and, consequently, unique student motivations for pursuing higher education in the two regions (Chou, 2012; Bray, 1991; Wai Lo & Kit Ng, 2015). For the Chinese mainland students, Hong Kong has been an ideal choice (Li & Bray, 2007). Research indicates that students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong, particularly for master's and postgraduate studies (Jung & Li, 2021), often show two primary motivations. As Jung & Li (2021) suggested, intrinsic motivation stems from the pursuit of knowledge, personal development, and intellectual curiosity. In other words, students were often motivated by a desire for self-improvement and skill enhancement. On the other hand, many the Chinese mainland students considered studying in Hong Kong a strategic move to improve their career prospects (Gao & Trent, 2009). Different from Hong Kong, Macao's unique identity has been shaped by the blending of Chinese and Portuguese cultural influences, and its growing role within the GBA provides specific attractions for the Chinese mainland students seeking particular academic paths or cultural experiences (Gong et al., 2023). While acculturation research often focuses on international students in new cultural environments, it also introduces more complex intercultural adaptation challenges beyond the "mainland-Hong Kong" dynamic often studied (Yu & Zhang, 2016; Lou, 2021; Wang & Nam, 2025). In short, Macao offered a rare case of "intra-country" intercultural adaptation (Yu & Zhang, 2016; Lou, 2021).

This study traces the author's cross-border and cross-system learning trajectory—from undergraduate studies in Shanghai to her master's and current PhD studies in Macao. It examines how she navigated the new educational environment, highlighting processes of intercultural learning and the impact of specific intercultural experiences on her educational journey. The study used Gill's (2007) transformative learning framework to interpret this journey as part of her intercultural adaptation. It narratively presents the author's experiences, offering a personal perspective (Guettermann, 2015). It highlights her lived experience as a cross-system learner and illustrates how her integration strategies can inform scholarly understandings of the Chinese mainland students' intercultural adaptation in Macao. Two research questions are asked: 1) What are the first author's experiences during her cross-system learning in Macao as a China's mainland student? 2) How does she adapt to the cross-system learning process within Macao higher education?

The following section provides a review of relevant literature on intercultural adaptation in the context of cross-border higher education (CBHE) to underscore the importance of this study. Using the narrative method provides new perspectives in intercultural adaptation by reflecting on the author's research notes and diaries. Additionally, findings and discussion will be provided to delve into the practical and theoretical implications of the findings. Lastly, a conclusion will be presented to summarize this article.

2. Literature review

2.1 Intra-country cross-border higher education

New education forms for international students have emerged in recent decades, such as cross-border, borderless, or transnational higher education (Liu et al., 2025; He, 2025; Mushfiq, 2024). Cross-border higher education (CBHE) is employed to contextualize the current study, defined as the movement of higher education programs, providers, and students across national boundaries (Knight & Liu, 2016; Lopes et al., 2024; Wilkins, 2018). This phenomenon has grown significantly since the 1980s, driven by economic globalization and the increasing demand for higher education worldwide (De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

The flow of students between the Chinese mainland and its Special Administrative Regions (SARs), namely Hong Kong and Macao, is referred to as cross-border mobility (Xu, 2023) or intra-country mobility (Dai et al., 2024). Within the context of "One Country, Two Systems," Macao and the Chinese mainland have separate legal, political, administrative, and academic systems. For the Chinese mainlanders to enter Macao, they must apply for a "Mainland Travel Permit" from the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China. Hence, Te (2022) argued that the nature of such in-country cross-border student mobility more closely resembles transnational mobility than domestic mobility within one country.

Hong Kong and Macao feature universities with strong academic environments and comprehensive capabilities, making them attractive options for the Chinese mainland students crossing borders (Li & Bray, 2007). In 2024, 21,091 students from the Chinese mainland attended universities in Hong Kong, achieving a more than 20% year-on-year increase (University Grants Committee, 2024). In addition, the number of the Chinese mainland students pursuing studies in Macao has been increasing annually. In 2022, there were a total of 32,931 the Chinese mainland students, and by 2023, that number had grown to 39,079 (Education and Youth Development Bureau, 2024). This is closely related to the supportive policies enacted by the Chinese government, including the Belt and Road Initiative and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area development, which have accelerated the influx of the Chinese mainland students to Macao and Hong Kong for full-time degrees (Gao, 2024). These policies have not only promoted economic and social development throughout the region but also facilitated cross-border educational mobility (Mok, 2018). In addition, factors like differences in educational systems and language of instruction between Macao and the Chinese mainland, along with the perceived quality and opportunities in Macao's higher education, contribute to this cross-regional mobility (Lee et al., 2020).

CBHE in Macao represents a dynamic and evolving landscape, characterized by significant student mobility, distinctive quality assurance mechanisms, and strategic integration within the broader GBA (Liu et al., 2025; Fearnside, 2017; Li & Bray, 2007). The term "trans-local" may be more appropriate for describing Macao's status as a SAR of the People's Republic of China. It captures student mobility that transcends provincial and administrative boundaries while

remaining within national borders (Bodycott & Lai, 2017). Macao's unique position as a SAR of China, coupled with its unique historical and economic factors, makes it a noteworthy case study of CBHE. It serves as both a destination and a transitional platform for students pursuing higher education opportunities and for students seeking higher education experiences that bridge domestic and international contexts (Li & Bray, 2007). Many scholars have shown great concern about the flow of cross-border students. For example, Liu et al. (2025) applied a revised 'push-pull' model and the concept of migration infrastructures to understand Macao students' cross-border mobility. Waters & Leung (2021) explored the phenomenon of students living on the Chinese mainland, such as in Shenzhen, who commute daily to attend schools in Hong Kong. They proposed that the motivation for this cross-border often centers around the pursuit of what is believed to be a "better education" that these institutions offer.

Macao acts as a "bridge" between entirely domestic and fully international higher education contexts for the Chinese mainland students (Li & Bray, 2007). Its status as a SAR of China provides a unique political liminality (Ou & Lin, 2024), allowing for a distinct educational environment compared to the Chinese mainland while still being intra-country for specific student populations like those from the Chinese mainland (Liu et al., 2025). This desire for international exposure and a global perspective can push students towards cross-border education. It is interesting to note that cross-border students studying within a context of seemingly equivalent culture also experience social and psychological adaptation problems (Chan & Jheng, 2021). Therefore, the intercultural adaptation of the cross-border student cannot be ignored. However, cross-border student intercultural adaptation, particularly from the Chinese mainland to Macao, has not been extensively analyzed within the literature. Hence, this study would focus on this.

2.2 Intercultural adaptation for Chinese students

Growing numbers of studies have investigated Chinese students' intercultural adaptation experience in the CBHE context. Intercultural adaptation, commonly known as cross-cultural adaptation or acculturation, is a complex process through which individuals adapt to a cultural environment that differs from their own (Kim, 2017; Berry & Sam, 1997). It involved psychological and behavioral adaptation to unfamiliar cultural contexts (Wilson, 2013; Hu, 2023). Ruben (1979) proposed three key intercultural adaptation dimensions: cultural shock, psychological adjustment, and intercultural effectiveness. Their study provided a foundational framework for subsequent theories on cross-cultural adaptation, particularly Kim's integrative cross-cultural adaptation theory, which highlighted the significance of interpersonal relationships (Hendrickson, 2018).

Intercultural adaptation is vital for Chinese students in the CBHE context as they adapt to sociocultural and educational environments that markedly differ from those in their home country (Zheng, 2024; Zhao et al., 2020). Dai et al. (2020) examined Chinese students in a China-Australia articulation

program, observed how they navigated learning across two systems, and found that disparities between educational systems compel students to adapt their learning strategies. A study by Xi (2020) examined the intercultural adaptation of Chinese undergraduate students in German higher education, focusing on their experiences in general life, social communication, academic studies, and mental health. The findings revealed key coping strategies and recommendations to address intercultural adaptation learning areas, such as enhancing foreign language proficiency and competence, fostering respect, understanding, and acceptance of cultural differences, cultivating positive and healthy psychological expectations, and strengthening diverse offline and online social support systems. In addition, Lai et al. (2023) aimed to comprehensively explore Chinese students' acculturation through analyzing the impact of acculturation strategies on sociocultural, psychological, and academic adaptation while studying in America. They found that Chinese students excelled in sociocultural adaptation but struggled the most in academic adaptation. Interestingly, those who achieved high sociocultural adaptation faced challenges in psychological adaptation; Chinese students' academic adaptation was notably influenced by their psychological adaptation rather than their sociocultural adaptation.

Identity reconstruction plays a crucial role in the process of intercultural adaptation (Darvin, 2024; Norton, 2013). Students navigating new cultures not only have to adapt to unfamiliar environments but also need to rethink their self-identities. This renegotiation often unfolds through language investment, where learners view mastering a new language as a key step toward embodying their ideal selves. For example, a study (Norton & Gao, 2008) on Chinese international students showed that English learning serves not only as a language skill but is also related to identity and values. This perspective on identity investment opens up new avenues for understanding personal development during intercultural adaptation.

The majority of relevant intercultural adaptation studies focus on the Chinese mainland students studying in an entirely new environment, such as the UK, the US, and Australia (Yu & Zhang, 2016; Lai et al., 2023; Consoli, 2024). This involved navigating significant cultural distances, including differences in language, social norms, values, and educational systems (Deffner et al., 2022; Leger & Gutchess, 2021). For instance, Chinese students in the UK experience a non-linear adaptation process involving phases of honeymoon, academic challenges, social struggles, and adjustment (Ye, 2025). In Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland students faced significant challenges in language adaptation, particularly in acquiring Cantonese and navigating differing linguistic ideologies, which also affects their identity negotiation (Sung, 2020; Sung, 2023). Shepard & Rose (2023) found that English is the medium of instruction in many Hong Kong universities, in contrast to their primary exposure to Mandarin (Putonghua) in the Chinese mainland.

Macao is another SAR of China; it possesses a distinct educational system and multilingual situation compared to the Chinese mainland (Lee et al., 2020). The context of the Chinese mainland students studying in Macao presents a unique "intra-cultural" adaptation context (He, 2025). Recent studies mainly concentrated on the Macao students' learning

experiences in the Chinese mainland (Liu et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2020). In contrast, there has been little attention given to the Chinese mainland students' intercultural learning experiences in Macao. This study aims to conduct a detailed exploration of the author's experiences to gain insights into intercultural adaptation in an intra-country context.

The reviewed literature collectively contributes to a burgeoning field of cross-border higher education, mainly focusing on the experiences and motivations of Chinese students, revealing how their perspectives illuminate diverse challenges and strategies in navigating dual educational systems. Research has addressed key aspects of adaptation, including language acquisition, identity negotiation, mental well-being, and academic integrity. In this regard, this research highlighted the complex interplay of cultural, educational, and personal factors shaping students' experiences in cross-border educational environments.

3. Theoretical framework

Several frameworks have been applied to research intercultural adaptation. Kim (2001) considered intercultural adaptation as a dynamic and continuous process of "stress-adaptation-growth" and used it as a core framework. Berry (2005) established an acculturation model that highlights how individuals navigate their connections to both their heritage culture and the new culture they encounter. This framework outlines four distinct strategies for acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization (Berry, 2005; Hui et al., 2015). Other researchers proposed a "transformative framework," viewing overseas students' intercultural adaptation as intercultural learning. Gill (2007) proposed an intercultural learning framework for Chinese students. This framework moves beyond mere adaptation to emphasize the learning and growth derived from the intercultural experience. This study is based on Gill's (2007) transformative learning framework to investigate the understanding of Chinese students' intercultural CBHE learning experiences.

Adaptation to intercultural contexts serves as a key mechanism for deep intercultural learning (Taylor, 1994). This adaptation involved modifying behavior to reduce stress and anxiety, integrating into a pre-existing educational framework, and meeting established standards and expectations (Gill, 2007). Kim (2001) proposed a widely utilized three-phase model called "stress-adaptation-growth." Building on this model, Gill (2007) developed a transformative framework to explain the recurrent progress of intercultural adaptation among Chinese students. Transformative learning involves critically assessing existing beliefs, values, or assumptions, adopting new ones, and forming a significantly altered worldview (King, 2007). Gill (2007) extended this concept to intercultural settings, suggesting that exposure to diverse cultural norms, academic methods, and social milieus initiates a disorienting dilemma essential for transformative learning to occur (Glisczinski, 2007).

Notably, this framework incorporates key elements such as intercultural adaptation, the development of intercultural competence, and the reconstruction of self-identity, all leading

to personal growth. Similar to Kim's model, it posited that students initially encounter various stressors when immersed in unfamiliar educational environments that might differ significantly from their original surroundings. The justification for implementing this theoretical framework is based on two factors. First, the framework prompted the first author to contemplate her cross-system learning through reflexive narratives. Then it stimulated the author to analyze her life and education journey on the basis of the concept of intercultural adaptation.

Overall, Gill's (2007) transformative learning framework illustrates the gradual development of intercultural adaptation. Based on Gill's framework (2007), Macao's relatively open academic and social settings allow students to reflect on their intercultural transformative learning experiences. For example, communication with diverse peers, participating in local educational events, and dealing with daily life differences provide concrete material for reflection and potential transformation of meaning perspectives.

4. Research design

This study used narrative inquiry as a research method. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative method that focuses on understanding phenomena through the stories people tell about their lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry suggested that people construct and comprehend their lives by articulating stories that interconnect events into a coherent narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end (Sarbin, 1986). Researchers needed to acknowledge how their perspectives as observers influenced their conclusions according to reflexivity principles. Goodson (2012) proposed that narrative encompasses personal writings, autobiographies, private conversations, and related forms of expression. It was an intentional creation designed to convey a specific message to a targeted audience in a particular setting. In this study, a reflexive narrative was used to analyze the author's diary and to comprehend the researcher's process of adapting to unfamiliar cultural environments during her studies in Macao.

This research data is based on the author's journals, including her intercultural learning experiences in Macao from 2020 to 2024. When personal journals were used as primary data sources, the method emphasized self-reflection and the direct engagement of the researcher's own experiences (Schnee, 2009). The innovation in using the first author's diary lay in the immediate and unfiltered access to ongoing thoughts, feelings, and events as they unfold (Zeba & Mohanty, 2022; Hyers, 2018). Moreover, unlike retrospective accounts that might be subject to memory bias or post-hoc rationalization, diary entries capture experiences in situ, offering a longitudinal perspective that was invaluable for understanding processes and transformations (Olorunfemi, 2024).

When using a personal diary as the data source, the process of "data collection" involved systematically maintaining the diary itself, often with specific prompts or a focus on particular themes (Cao & Henderson, 2020). Around 29 research notes and 131 diary entries concerning my intercultural experiences have been recorded in my notebooks and online tools

(OneNote).

Upon reviewing my notes and diaries, I observed a diverse documentation of resources pertaining to learning and daily activities. In this study, I primarily concentrate on data related to learning activities and experiences. To provide a comprehensive portrayal of my intercultural journey, I also emphasize pivotal moments by including excerpts from my daily life experiences as supplementary materials. Most of the notes and diaries were originally in Chinese. I translated them into English for this research, constituting a dialogical process that facilitated a comprehensive recollection and understanding of my experiences. To ensure translation accuracy, a bilingual expert in qualitative research reviewed selected diary entries. These methodological approaches facilitated a meticulous and introspective assessment of my experiences, all the while upholding confidentiality. The narrative framework analysis by Barkhuizen (2016) was used to perform a three-level coding (event-evaluation-reflection) on the diaries. To ensure the narrative remained grounded and to minimize any tendency for over-exaggeration, members' checks of key segments were also sought.

The examination of my individual experiences is an introspective process. One's life story can enhance life's meaning, indicating that a structured narrative framework serves as a powerful tool for integrating experiences and intentions (Rogers et al., 2023). This is to say, as noted by Beck et al. (1994), narrative-based reflexivity is a process of self-assessment and self-awareness. Narrative-based reflexivity enables individuals to gain deeper insights into their behaviors, motivations, and the underlying meanings they attribute to their experiences by constructing and analyzing their own life stories, particularly in relation to learning events (Sztukowski-Crowley & Funk, 2020; Foote, 2015). This process enabled me to extract insights from personal experiences by engaging in introspective dialogue. This inspired me to create a detailed narrative recounting a specific experience (referred to as a story or text), which pays attention to detail involving all the senses (Johns, 2010). Hence, I use this approach in this article to investigate and explain my intercultural adaptation journey.

5. Findings

The analysis revealed three primary findings. Given the personal nature of the entries, the narrative was conveyed in the first-person perspective. Therefore, the author was referred to as "I" in the following sections.

5.1 Starting a stressful journey: Self-doubt in an interdisciplinary and cross-system field

After completing my undergraduate studies in Shanghai in 2020, I noticed an apparent discrepancy between completing traditional undergraduate courses and today's job market requirements. My academic experience in China was profoundly shaped by Confucian cultural hierarchies, particularly in the relationship between educators and learners. Supervisors held significant authority, and students were expected to exhibit unwavering compliance. They often guided students' dissertations by assigning specific topics, which limited inde-

pendent inquiry. Chinese traditional exam-oriented education profoundly influenced the Chinese mainland students, particularly impacting their learning strategies, psychological well-being, and long-term academic trajectories (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). This pervasive system is deeply rooted in the Chinese educational tradition (Liu, 2023). They are centered on the teacher, making it challenging to adapt to the more interactive, student-focused teaching methods found in Western institutions (Jiang & Kosar, 2020).

This realization inspired me to pursue advanced academic pursuits and to deepen my understanding of research methodologies at the master's level. I was genuinely excited about the educational journey ahead and remained fully committed to making the most of the opportunities it offered. As graduation approached, I faced two conventional post-graduate paths: preparing for the civil service exam or enrolling in a master's program in China. After thoughtful consideration, I chose the former. However, preparing for the exam proved to be physically and mentally demanding, and success remained elusive. I gradually came to realize that this form of "competition" could not be overcome through effort alone.

As I grappled with profound sadness stemming from the unsatisfactory outcome of the examination, alumni returned to my institution to share their experiences studying at the University of Macao. They provided valuable insights into Macao's higher education system, explaining that its universities use an application system to evaluate submitted documents, with eligible candidates invited to participate in an interview assessment test (Graduate School of City University of Macao, 2024). One alumna suggested that Macao exemplifies inclusivity and boasts a multicultural environment. Upon receiving this information and conducting a thorough inquiry, I have experienced a significant epiphany that I possess a novel potential direction in my life. As reflected in my diary entry:

If I apply for my major of interest, I will face the situation of cross-major study. I am very worried that due to the lack of an undergraduate background in this field, I will not be able to keep up with the course progress. As a "perfectionist," this sense of "falling behind" may have caused me more anxiety than if I had studied a major I did not like during my undergraduate studies (10 December 2020).

During my undergraduate studies, I majored in business administration at my parents' request. However, my genuine lack of passion for the field led me to engage less deeply with the curriculum throughout those four years of study. Based on my previous learning background in management, I was nonetheless able to successfully begin my studies in a master's degree in Cultural Industries Management in Macao.

Soon after, I crossed from the Chinese mainland to Macao to further my studies. The oppressive heat and the diverse linguistic environment offered me new experiences. Although I gained a bachelor's degree majoring in management, I initially struggled with self-doubt regarding my professional abilities. Since I did not systematically study the courses of the "Cultural Management" major during my undergraduate studies, I am pretty worried that I might struggle to grasp the professional terminology used in the classes. Gill (2007) argued that stress and anxiety arise from the initial challenges

faced when confronting the unknown, which are often exacerbated by inadequate preparation. Confronting this unknown was rarely comfortable.

The differences between the educational systems of the Chinese mainland and Macao, including course content, assessment methods, and teaching approaches, posed significant learning challenges for me (Gu, 2016). These intercultural academic disparities drove me to adapt to the Macao context. During the first semester, in particular, I encountered numerous learning barriers, different from my previous learning experience. This made me feel overwhelmed and disoriented in some aspects. For instance, I found that:

The deficiency in professional expertise caused me to perceive my learning as superficial. The substantial sense of disorientation I am experiencing has been reflected in the varying expectations, structural frameworks, and instructional methodologies. This is very different from the model I experienced during my undergraduate studies on the Chinese mainland. Even towards the end of the first semester, I am persistently grappling with this dissonance, resulting in elevated stress levels and a conspicuous lack of significant progress in individual research (1 October 2021).

The higher education systems in Hong Kong and Macao showed distinct internal and external governance mechanisms compared to those in China, a divergence attributed to the “one country, two systems” principle (Lo, 2024). Gill (2007) argued that the initial encounter with this dissonance, disorientation, or challenge was the primary source of stress and anxiety within the transformative process; the intensity of this distress largely hinges on the learner’s readiness, be it psychological, contextual, or skill-based, to confront these challenges.

The supervisor plays a significant role in shaping my academic trajectory. In the second year of my postgraduate study, each student was assigned to supervise his/her graduation thesis. During our initial meeting with our thesis supervisor, we were greeted warmly, almost like long-standing friends. This congenial atmosphere was significant to me, given my prior academic experiences in China, where the hierarchical distinction between supervisors and students was notably rigid. Initially, I anticipated receiving detailed and specific guidance on research topics and writing structure, similar to the tutoring support I had encountered during my undergraduate studies in China. However, the situation in Macao diverges significantly:

When I consulted my supervisor regarding the title of my thesis, I was met with a perplexed look. The supervisor informed me that I should have my ideas based on my own research interests and research direction. The supervisor seemed more focused on offering opinions on the feasibility of the research, catching me a bit off guard. Because in my undergraduate program on the Chinese mainland, my thesis topic was even decided by my supervisor (1 November 2022).

At this stage, the challenges that I faced were primarily because my prior educational experiences and skillset did not align directly with the learning needs and expectations in Macao.

Gill’s framework has made me realize the importance of being a pragmatic individual with independent thinking, rather than passive learning. Transformative learning, as described

by Gill (2007), cannot occur through passivity. It requires the active and independent development of a new, more effective perspective. This process is essential for growing into a pragmatic, independent researcher. This indicates that contextual shifts significantly influence identity formation (Berry & Sam, 2014), and students may redefine their identities during intercultural adaptation (Gill, 2007).

5.2 Seeking an adaptation journey: Adopt strategies to fit into the context

Some strategies emerged from my proactive efforts to integrate into new learning contexts. Kim (1988) suggests that intercultural encounters necessitate individuals to adapt to their surroundings proactively, including developing new context communication competence, engaging in new context social communication, and increasing participation in the new social environment. Therefore, I identified several strategies to adapt to new academic and socio-cultural environments. These included maintaining a positive and open attitude, fostering intrinsic motivation for personal growth, embracing diverse cultural and academic practices, and engaging in continuous comparison and reflection.

When I completed the first draft of the paper, my supervisor made very detailed annotations on it. Meanwhile, she still emphasized her ability to be independent and think critically. We also repeatedly communicated offline about the situation with the paper. Under the guidance of the supervisor, I gradually got rid of the “academic giant baby” thinking and was able to conduct my research with a scholar’s thinking (12 January 2023).

When students take the initiative to design their research projects in English, they are effectively transforming their language skills into academic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) and investing in the aspirational identity of a “cross-border researcher.” The record in the diary stating that one is confident in handling affairs independently confirms that language ability serves as an identity “gate pass”. In the context of the ‘one country, two systems’ in Macao, the multilingual identity has become a strategic capital connecting the Chinese mainland and international academic communities.

In the Macao learning context, I had the opportunity to reflect on and compare my previous educational experiences in the Chinese mainland. This reflection enabled me to critically consider the contrasts and differences between the two education systems. Through continuous comparison and reflection, I gained personal insights into my own learning experience in Macao:

The Chinese mainland tends to use rote memorization and standardized testing, focusing on measurable outcomes rather than creativity or independent thought, and traditional hierarchical relationships between teachers and students. However, Macao’s system more emphasizes critical thinking, discussion-based learning, and project-based assessments, and increased focus on the holistic development of students. At the beginning of my stay in Macao, it was difficult for me to change my dependency mindset. However, as time goes by, I gradually adapted here, and I slowly developed independent and critical

thinking skills (10 March 2023).

Beyond the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of intercultural learning, the contextual factors within the intercultural environment played a crucial role in shaping participants' experiences. The academic setting, alongside students' social networks and the broader socio-cultural context, collectively broadened the participants' viewpoints. The essence of network relationships is rooted in their ability to enhance participants' adaptation through interaction, friendship, cultural modeling, and dialogue (Gill, 2007). As my diary showed:

Living and engaging with "strangers" gave me valuable chances to enhance my skills and confidence in intercultural interactions, even with limited social connections outside of my home network (18 April 2023).

The concept of the "stranger" in intercultural communication was the initial unfamiliarity that often reflects on the subsequent process of communication (Orašnin, 2017). These experiences, although they frequently push individuals outside their comfort zones, prompt the development of intercultural social skills and communication strategies (Eginli, 2016). Trynyak (2023) argued that regular engagement with diverse individuals enhances one's ability to navigate unfamiliar situations, ultimately boosting overall intercultural communication effectiveness. In addition, while relying on one's home network is reassuring, limited social networks in a new culture can facilitate acculturation (Belford, 2017). In summary, seeking out and initiating conversations with "strangers" was helpful in broadening individuals' exposure to the new culture and promoting greater independence (Alamri, 2018).

5.3 Constructing a meaningful journey: Enhanced and transcended learning experiences

In contemporary China, the term "involution" has gained popularity to describe the intensified competition within various sectors, where individuals feel pressured to constantly escalate their efforts to maintain their competitive edge. After completing my two-year master's program, I still faced a challenging employment landscape. Fortunately, with the steadfast support of my family and academic supervisors, I successfully passed the interview process and was admitted as a doctoral candidate. My academic identity continues to develop, reflecting the understanding that identity formation is an ongoing and evolving process (Bal, 2014).

As educational and research training in Hong Kong and Macao meet international standards, the Chinese government and universities view graduate students from these regions as nearly equivalent to academic returnees in recruitment processes (Chao, 2014). In addition, doctoral programs in Hong Kong and Macao differ significantly from those in China. Universities in these regions primarily conduct teaching and academic writing in English and offer a normative study period of three to four years, depending on whether the candidate holds a scientific master's degree. This contrasts with the corresponding education system in China, which typically has a four to five-year duration. Consequently, graduates from Hong Kong and Macao are often favored over their counterparts who

are educated in the Chinese system. It is worth noting that academic employers in China highly value overseas learning experiences, serving as a key motivation for students in China to pursue doctoral studies in Hong Kong or Macao (Li & Bray, 2007).

Becoming independent was recognized as an essential factor contributing to participants' personal growth. The conservative nature of traditional Chinese cultural practices and upbringing often hinders young people from fully developing self-reliance. As a result, these individuals encountered severe stress when forced to leave their familiar environments, confront real-world obstacles, and solve problems independently without external support. Intercultural learning provided opportunities for relocation, reorientation, and rerouting, enabling participants to cultivate autonomy and independence (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003). By making an effort to adapt to the intercultural environment, I experienced personal growth. An extract from my diary clearly captured and emphasized this feeling:

The realization that autonomy and independence are pivotal to personal growth resonated profoundly with me. For instance, managing daily life independently for the first time taught me essential life skills such as meal preparation, laundry, and procurement of necessities. My family is pleased that I am taking good care of myself. In the realm of academic research, having the liberty to select the topic of my essay and dissertation not only bolstered my sense of independence but also instilled a profound sense of achievement and self-worth. When facing an unfamiliar field, I no longer hesitate as I used to. Instead, I choose to step out of my comfort zone bravely (18 March 2024).

Becoming independent plays a key role in the personal growth of intercultural students, closely tied to their ability to adapt to different cultures (Polishchuk, 2021). This journey involves not just navigating cultural differences but also building self-reliance and actively engaging with diverse environments. While this reliance can provide a safety net, it can also hinder the personal growth that comes from solving problems independently and developing self-sufficiency (Hosseini-Nezhad et al., 2019).

6. Discussion

This study has illustrated my journey of intercultural transformative learning. My reflective narrative might serve as an example for the lesser-explored area of students' educational experiences in the context of CBHE (Liu et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2020). The experience ranges from academic shocks (e.g., supervisors not directly assigning research topics), active strategy adaptations (e.g., contrasting and reflecting on the educational differences between the Chinese mainland and Macau), and identity growth (e.g., getting recognition for English paper writing).

Intercultural contexts make the "unknown" inescapable. Confronting unknowns, according to Gill (2007), should thorough preparation, thoughtful reflection, and a support system to help manage stress. This manner not only benefits in coping with stress but also encourages ongoing personal growth and

development. This study aligns well with Gill's framework of transformative learning across cultures. In addition, the unique value of this study lies in the fact that it examines cross-border students in Macao's multilingual context.

Transitioning to independence is a key objective of doctoral education, particularly for students from various cultural backgrounds. For example, Hu & van Veen (2020) found Chinese postgraduate students studying at Dutch universities often face subtle challenges in developing their independence, reflecting the complexities that arise from differing educational approaches across cultures. Similarly, Iranian international students in Hungary may wish for independence but frequently remain reliant on family support (Hosseini-Nezhad et al., 2019).

The transition from a teacher-centered and exam-oriented educational system (the Chinese Mainland) to a Western-influenced, student-centered, critical-thinking-focused system (Macao) induced significant academic dissonance and identity conflict. This manifested as profound self-doubt, anxiety, and disorientation due to mismatched expectations regarding pedagogical roles (e.g., supervisor authority vs. student autonomy), assessment methods, and research independence (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011; Liu, 2023; Jiang & Kosar, 2020; Gu, 2016). The study illustrates how contextual shifts within the 'one country, two systems' framework necessitate active adaptation towards becoming an "independent researcher" and "cross-border scholar" (Gill, 2007).

Besides, the author actively compared and contrasted pedagogical practices (rote learning vs. critical thinking), facilitating crucial understanding of both systems. Independence and critical thinking were necessary for this intercultural transformative learning, moving away from dependent mindsets. Moreover, initiating interactions beyond the comfort zone of the home network, engaging with "strangers" (Orašnin, 2017), enhanced intercultural communication competence, social skills, exposure, and independence, facilitating acculturation (Alamri, 2018; Eginli, 2016; Trynyak, 2023; Belford, 2017).

The last finding was transitioning from supervisor-directed research to selecting one's topics and investigating research independently. This experience embodied the ideal of the pragmatic, independent researcher as articulated by Gill (2007). As the author adapted to an unfamiliar environment, she developed essential life skills such as daily management and problem-solving on her own, which led to a boost in her confidence and a maturity recognized by her family. She found the courage to engage actively with new fields and challenges, overcoming her initial hesitations. This growing sense of autonomy is seen as a vital outcome of transformative intercultural learning (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003), deeply connected to successful adaptation and personal growth (Polishchuk, 2021).

As a narrative inquiry researcher, it is crucial to remain aware of the tendency to embellish identity narratives, such as highlighting the journey of becoming an 'independent researcher' while downplaying the more challenging experiences. To counteract this bias, the strategy adopted is to invite peers to review and examine the diary entries. This helps to curb the inclination to overemphasize achievements,

thereby allowing for a more objective assessment of the 'cross-system researcher' identity. Although these efforts may not completely remove subjectivity, they could significantly enhance the overall trustworthiness of this research to some degree.

This study is based on Gill's (2007) transformative framework, revealing that cross-border learning is not merely a transformation of the education system but also a strategic reinvestment in academic identity. In the unique multilingual environment of Macao, the Chinese mainland students use English academic abilities as a spear (to break through research autonomy) and the cultural foundation of Mandarin as a shield (to maintain ontological security). This process leads to the formation of a composite identity termed 'cross-system researcher.' The insights gained from this research not only add depth to the language dimension of intercultural adaptation but also offer new perspectives for the integration of higher education within the GBA. Here, the strength of cross-border students lies not in 'cultural assimilation,' but in the innovative expansion of their identity capital. This is the core educational value that the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle provides to Macao.

7. Conclusion

The influx of cross-border students seeking higher education in Macao is expected to continue growing steadily in the coming decades. Macao's higher education system is well integrated into the global higher education framework and consistently upholds principles of continuity and progressive development.

This study illustrates the author's intercultural learning and experiences as a border crosser. Reflecting on her academic journey has clarified her understanding of the expectations of higher education in Macao, enriching her experiences with deeper meaning. It demonstrated that each step contributes to more profound and meaningful progress. The key to her journey lay in the ongoing process of adaptation and growth. Her experiences clearly showed that the learning and research paths as a doctoral candidate are multifaceted and complex rather than linear or straightforward. From this perspective, intercultural learning is a mutually transformative experience that enables Macao's academic practitioners and institutions to continually improve and offer richer cross-border learning opportunities to incoming student cohorts.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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