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*An exploration of Chinese international
students' perceptions of how their identities
change under the impact of Covid-19*

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Abstract

After the outbreak of Covid-19, there is evidence to suggest that there had been an increase in discrimination against Chinese international students globally. During the pandemic, students were required to follow control measures such as social distancing and attending online classes, which could lead to negative emotions and alienation from the host society. In addition, studying and living in a society with unfamiliar norms, traditions and education systems may lead to changes in identities. Combined with common challenges facing international students in their adaptation to the host society, the problems caused by the pandemic may further impose negative influences on students' lives in the host society. Moreover, sandwiched between the different attitudes and policies of the Chinese/Irish governments towards Covid-19, Chinese international students' national identities may change during their stay in Ireland. This research aims to explore how Covid-19 influences Chinese international students' acculturation process and how they make meanings of their identities.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Cross-cultural contact has become more prominent in modern times as technology continues to develop, and countries become more closely connected. Contacts between people from culturally diverse backgrounds may produce different results, such as conflict or cultural integration. For individuals, it may lead to psychological and behavioural changes. International students tend to face different stressors in a new environment, including language barriers, perceived discrimination, differences in cultures, differences in education systems and financial problems. When living in a new environment, international students go through an acculturation process that leads to changes in their values, behaviours and psychology. Difficulties in acculturating into host societies often lead to mental problems such as distress and anxiety. Such problems became more worrisome during the Covid-19 pandemic, as it is generally agreed that the pandemic has threatened the physical and psychological well-being of nearly everyone.

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most severe global crises in the twenty-first century. By July 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO 2022) recorded over fifty-six million cases worldwide with a cumulative death toll of more than six million. Covid-19 not only has an adverse impact on the physical well-being of the infected, but research has also pointed out that the pandemic has caused psychological problems among individuals, and those who have not been infected with the virus are not immune to its psychological impact (Chu and Hang 2021, 1). The fear of contracting the disease or having sequelae can result in stress and anxiety. Although non-pharmaceutical interventions help to slow the spread of the virus and lower the infection rate, they can also lead to psychological distress (Zhang et al. 2020, 49) and functional problems. For instance, social distancing and quarantine increase loneliness. A study showed that patients with Alzheimer's disease and amnesic mild cognitive impairment, when placed under home

confinement, displayed more severe neuropsychiatric symptoms (Lara et al. 2020, 1746).

Another worrying issue caused by the pandemic is increased hostility directed at out-groups. Specifically, Chinese immigrants have been on the receiving end of an increase in xenophobia and hate crime, as China was the place where the first case of Covid-19 was reported. At the beginning of the outbreak, students suffered from stigmatisation as politicians and media in countries such as the US and UK began to refer to the virus with terms like 'Chinese Virus' or 'Wuhan virus'. Many students have been the targets of discrimination or live in fear of being discriminated against. A study shows that mask-wearing has become a catalyst for prejudice toward Chinese students and brought increased pressure on students (Lai et al. 2021, 6). Aside from stigmatisation and discrimination, non-pharmaceutical measures such as lockdowns and social distancing may force students to distance themselves from other people, which may result in increased loneliness. Therefore, it is important to identify what factors are at play in the acculturation of Chinese international students in such a critical period and how they make sense of their experiences in host societies.

The Covid-19 pandemic also challenges the national identities of Chinese students. After the first few months of chaos in Wuhan, China managed to get the spread of the virus under control. Later, many foreign countries were hit hard by the virus, resulting in a huge death toll. China, one of the first countries to introduce its homemade vaccine, sent medical teams and medical supplies and offered cheap or free vaccines to many countries, which won it a good reputation and built a responsible image for itself among its people. Although China has been calling for global cooperation to fight the pandemic, there is evidence to suggest that the government and mass media have been promoting nationalism (Chen and Yang 2021, 90). In addition to boosting China's efficiency in curbing the pandemic,

Chinese media and government have on multiple occasions criticized foreign countries, especially the United States, for failing to control the spread of the virus and for denigrating China. The stark comparison between the death toll and confirmed case count in China and other countries convinced many people of China's system's superiority and the virtues of the Chinese people, such as the readiness and willingness to sacrifice individuals for the greater good of society and to execute the orders of the government. 'Copy China's homework', a phrase that urges other governments to learn from China, quickly became a popular trend on social media and was later used by official media and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (Chen and Yang 2021, 90; Zhang et al. 2020, 49). Such sentiment not only boosts the pride and confidence of many Chinese citizens but also promotes the dichotomization between China and the West. Nationalism has therefore become more influential among Chinese people.

If China was efficient and effective in combating the pandemic in the first two years, measured by the death toll and confirmed cases, and was therefore entitled to boast of its zero-Covid policy, more recently, its strict control measures have faced backlash domestically and internationally (McDonnell 2022). The highly infectious Omicron variant caught the country off-guard, and this forced cities such as Xi'an and Shanghai to enter weeks or even months of lockdown. Incidents such as officials breaking into people's houses to force them to go to quarantine centres and cases of people who were seriously ill but unable to receive treatment aroused anger and frustration on social media.

At the same time, most countries were easing or cancelling their restrictions and reopening to the world. Although incidents and strict controls in China were countries away for Chinese international students, they may influence students' feelings towards their homeland when they were living under few or no restrictions. If measures such as lockdown, mass testing and health code aren't applied to international students, many of them do face the prospect of being stranded in host

countries due to the lack of flights to China under the zero-Covid policy. International students were forced to purchase tickets at outrageous prices and go through a regimen of several PCR tests to go home. Being exposed to different attitudes and control measures in China and their host societies, Chinese students may have to renegotiate their national identities.

1.2 Research Objective

This research aims to look at the acculturation process of Chinese international students in Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic. It will examine how students have navigated their academic and social lives and what stressors became more influential during the pandemic. Furthermore, this research explores whether their perceptions of the pandemic, the host society and the home country have changed after having personally experienced two cultures with different attitudes and responses to the pandemic.

1.3 Significance of This Study

Ireland has seen a growing body of international students in recent years. Although Ireland was not the main destination for Chinese students, from 2013 to 2017, China was the main country of origin for non-EEA students who pursued full-time education in Irish schools (Groarke, Sarah and Durs 2019, 3). Research on Chinese immigrants in Ireland, and especially on international students, is limited in scope. To the best knowledge of the researcher, this is the first study focusing on the acculturation process of Chinese international students in Ireland. In addition, although a large and growing body of literature has been carried out on the acculturation of Chinese international students studying in other parts of the world, there has been little discussion about how they acculturate into foreign societies during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research of Chu and Lu suggests that Chinese nationals staying in the US experienced an increased level of mental distress caused by the pandemic (2021, 1). A study that focused on Hong Kong students studying in the UK supports the observation that the pandemic has become a source of anxiety

and pressure for students (Lai et al. 2021, 6). As a part of acculturation, national identity is an important moderator for students. There is a relatively small body of literature concerned with Chinese international students' renegotiation and reconstruction of national identity.

After overcoming the first wave of the pandemic in Wuhan in 2020, China adopted the 'zero-Covid' policy and managed to keep new cases at a low level. However, after two years, restrictions are even stricter than before, though other countries are gradually reopening once again. The vast differences in attitudes and policies concerning the pandemic may send confusing signals to students and influence how they respond to it. Since there are significant differences between the Covid-19 policy of China and that of Ireland, this presents a unique opportunity to observe how students' identification with home/host societies may change in social crises. It is worth examining the acculturation process of international students to find out how the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced this process and to determine how organizations and governments can determine policies that better assist students to make the transition smoothly. Although the world was caught unprepared by the pandemic, research on its impacts can provide guidance for future studies.

1.4 Definition of Chinese Students

Throughout the study, 'Chinese students' refers to students from mainland China with students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao excluded from the study. As Fong pointed out, students from those three regions 'are historically, socially, economically, politically, demographically, and geopolitical quite different from mainland China' (Fong 2011, 35). Additionally, plans and restrictions to combat the pandemic in China and the other three regions are varied. Hence, this study would focus on students from mainland China.

2. Literature Review

In this section, Berry's acculturation theory, research on the acculturation of Chinese international students and research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Chinese international students' national identities will be reviewed.

Literature on Chinese immigrants, and particularly Chinese international students, in Ireland, is scarce. The literature this research draws on therefore is mainly concerned with Chinese students or immigrants in other Western societies, especially in the UK and the US. Although neither 'Western countries' nor 'Western societies' are monolithic entities and there are many differences in cultures and social realities among these countries, they are often presented as 'developed' in China. As Fong refers to Australia, New Zealand, North America and the countries of Europe as Western countries when discussing the 'cultural, geographic, and linguistic similarities and alliances between those countries' (2011, 17), a review of literature based on other Western countries offers referential value.

In the past few decades, the world has witnessed a significant increase in Chinese students pursuing education in foreign countries, with the US, Canada, and the UK as some of the most popular destinations. Students derive many benefits from pursuing education in foreign countries, including enhancing their independence (Lillyman and Bennett 2014, 65), improving their cross-cultural understanding by communicating with people of different nationalities (Brown and Holloway 2008, 33-35), and improving their career prospects in China or abroad (Fong 2011, 69). At the same time, they encounter changes that may shake their foundational values. It is important to look at the main stressors that hinder international students in adjusting to new circumstances.

2.1. Acculturation Theory

Research on acculturation has gained prominence in the past few decades as advanced transportation and increased global cooperation have fuelled a wave of

migrant activities around the world. The definition provided by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits is one of the most cited definitions of acculturation: 'those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups... under this definition, acculturation is to be distinguished from culture change, of which it is but one aspect, and assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation' (1936, 149-152). It should be noted that acculturation in this sense may exert influence on both groups, making it a bidirectional process. This view concerns the question of directionality, one of two fundamental questions in acculturation studies (Sam 2006, 17). Scholars who argue that acculturation is a unidirectional process tend to assume there is a dominant society and a non-dominant society involved in the exchange, and groups from a non-dominant society would want to adopt the values of the dominant society (Sam 2006, 17). This position has been criticized as reflecting ethnocentric thinking, which posits a hierarchy between the two cultures (Alba and Nee 1997, 827).

Another critical issue in acculturation studies is the issue of dimensionality. Earlier research argued that two cultures in contact are incompatible with each other, and therefore individuals of the non-dominant culture gradually lose their identification with the heritage culture in exchange for the values and norms of the new society in which they take up residence (LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton 1993, 395-401). Increasing evidence suggests that acculturation is to some extent a conscious choice that individuals can choose to reject; they can also choose to resist certain elements of the new society while retaining elements of their heritage culture (Berry 1994, 239). For instance, research on Chinese elderly persons migrating to the US has demonstrated that there is a tendency for them to stick to their native language and food habits as well as mingle primarily with other Chinese people in Chinese neighbourhoods (Cheung 1989, 458).

Berry and his associates have made huge contributions to the development of acculturation theory. Based on the idea that cultural groups' participation in the new society and maintenance of the heritage culture can take place independently, Berry proposed four acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization (Berry 1997, 8-12). In Berry's fourfold model, the strategy adopted is mainly based on individuals' behaviours and attitudes on two factors, the first of which is the degree to which the cultural identity of the heritage culture is preserved, while the second one is whether positive relationships with the host society are desired (Berry 1997, 8-12). Assimilation occurs when migrant people who are open to the adoption of the mainstream culture choose to discard the values of their heritage culture, while integration occurs when the adoption of mainstream culture and the maintenance of the original culture go hand in hand (Berry 1997, 8-12). Separation occurs when an individual clings to the heritage culture while refusing the values of mainstream culture, and marginalization refers to withdrawal from both the original culture and the mainstream society (Berry 1997, 8-12). These strategies are based on the premise that the dominant society allows individuals to employ the option they desire; otherwise, they may be forced or pressured to adopt other strategies (Berry 1997, 10).

According to Berry's framework, acculturative changes may take place at the group and individual levels; the former includes changes in social structure, economic conditions and political organization, while the latter includes changes in identity, values and behaviour (Berry 1992, 69). Acculturation begins with 'culture shedding' (Berry 1992, 69), which refers to the process of discarding one's behavioural repertoire that does not fit the new environment and then taking up new behaviours favoured by the mainstream culture. Cultural conflicts are common during this transition, but when the change of behavioural repertoire becomes too challenging, 'acculturative stress' arises, and this can lead to mental problems for the individual (Berry 1994, 244).

The acculturation process is unique to each individual. Even for individuals from the same cultural group, not all experience changes in the same manner and changes may not take place simultaneously. Language, age, education, financial status and social support all have the potential to influence the acculturation process. Notably, cultural distance is an important moderating factor. The role of cultural distance in acculturation has been studied extensively, with evidence suggesting that the greater the cultural distance between the original society and host society, the more difficulties and higher level of stress immigrants encounter (Hansen et al, 2018, 226). Miller, Babiker and Cox identified ten parameters to measure the cultural distance between two societies: climate, clothes, language, educational level, food, religion, material comfort, leisure, family structure and courtship/marriage (1980, 110). In their project focusing on the relationship between cultural distance and the health of international students at Edinburgh University, they first recruited 134 subjects soon after they arrived on campus to obtain basic information. Another interview was conducted with 120 interviewees six months later, and they were asked to fill in the Livingston symptom scales and questionnaire. Finally, ninety-eight interviewees consented to provide their medical records at the end of the academic year. The project found that cultural dissimilarities correlated negatively with their performance and adaptation, with anxiety being the most common symptom among the interviewees (Babiker, Cox and Miller 1980, 114).

2.2 Common Acculturative Stressors and Their Impacts on Chinese International Students

2.2.1 Academic Anxiety

Research indicates that acculturative stress is closely linked to academic difficulties among Chinese international students (Yan and Berliner 2009, 950-960). Chinese international students often suffer from distress and anxiety regarding their academic pursuits. Traditional Chinese values attach great importance to education and academic success (Aldwin and Greenberger 1987, 792-793; Yan and Berliner 2011, 179-180). Studying takes up most of the time of

Chinese students and they often have little time to spend on leisure activities or to develop hobbies outside of the classroom. Academic achievements are often associated with family honour and failing to perform well in school is even considered damaging to the image of the Chinese people (Yan and Berliner 2011, 180). Study can therefore be very stressful and living in a foreign society exceptionally challenging for international students from China. Many studies have shown that Chinese international students tend to confront more challenges in Western countries whose educational styles and systems are vastly different from those in China (Yan and Berliner 2011, 180; Holmes 2005, 298-308) and experience higher levels of stress compared with international students from other Western societies (Chataway and Berry 1989, 306; Hansen et al, 2018, 226). Holmes observed that Chinese education is 'test-oriented' and 'authority-centred', so students usually learn through memorization and rote learning, which contrasts with the inquiry-based learning methods of students in Western countries (Holmes 2005, 291-292). Chinese students are often uncomfortable with raising questions or showing disagreement in the classroom, which may be seen as challenging the authority of teachers or disrupting the harmony of the classroom. When having difficulty understanding lectures or questions, students are inclined to ask their Chinese peers for help instead of seeking help from professors to avoid showing weakness.

Cultural norms also create misunderstandings of Chinese international students' classroom behaviours among others in the classroom and result in several stereotypes of Chinese students. Although Chinese students are often considered polite and hard-working, they are also viewed as silent, distant and lacking in critical and independent thinking (Wu 2015, 757-764; Ruble and Zhang 2013, 206; Jenkins 2000, 488-498). They are sometimes criticized for remaining silent and passive in the classroom. This may be attributed to Chinese classroom etiquette that discourages students from being too active in class, as it may be seen as immodest and individualistic (Wang and Mallinckrodt 2006, 422). But such a

tradition contrasts with that of the Western classroom, so Chinese students in Western classrooms may find themselves doing the opposite of what they think is proper and therefore become stressed and confused due to cultural unfamiliarity. In addition, in China, most students have had experience living in boarding schools where they follow the daily schedule of the school. For many of them, their time in international schools is the first time they are tasked with managing their schedule independently. Furthermore, Chinese students used to waiting for instructions and following the orders of teachers in China may have difficulties in Western schools in which they need to take initiative to study and to communicate with teachers and the school.

When students pursue education in foreign countries, they usually bring with them high expectations for academic achievement. But at the same time, they face many new challenges that they have not faced in their own culture. A survey of 189 Chinese international students in the US demonstrated that high levels of acculturative stress and strong maladaptive perfectionism predicted depression among these students, and students with low maladaptive perfectionism are not immune to depression if they suffer from higher acculturative stress. (Wei et al 2007, 391). With the added pressure and challenges of an unfamiliar educational culture, anxiety and distress are common among Chinese international students.

2.2.2 Linguistic Challenges

Language barriers are one of the biggest challenges for Asian immigrants. Language barriers have been found to contribute to various problems, such as the low desire for Chinese students to communicate with teachers, and difficulties in academic writing (Yan and Berliner 2009, 950-960). In addition, students may be reluctant to seek social support due to their language problems. Besides perceptions that arise from the different learning styles mentioned above, language inefficiency is a strong issue in the negative image of Chinese international students (Ruble and Zhang 2013, 209; Jenkins 2000, 497). In Ruble and Zhang's survey of the

stereotypes of Chinese students in the eyes of American students, the five top stereotypes reported by participants were: smart/hardworking, nice/friendly, bad at speaking English/only befriending other Chinese, shy/unsocial, oblivious/annoying (Ruble and Zhang 2013, 208-209). This project consisted of two parts: in the first part 100 American students were asked to list typical impressions they have related to Chinese students, and in the second part, another 146 American participants were asked to evaluate the frequency of these traits demonstrated by Chinese students and whether they think of each trait positively or negatively; therefore the participants tended to recall their experiences encountering their Chinese schoolmates, which made their impressions of Chinese students more realistic than those images promoted by media. The last three stereotypes are all related to Chinese students' language proficiency and the difficulty of speaking English. Similarly, Jenkins' research on the mutual perceptions between Chinese international students and local faculty members shows that school faculty were generally unsatisfied with Chinese students' lack of willingness and motivation to improve their English and engage with host nationals (Jenkins 2000, 497).

The inadequacy in English is a strong factor hindering Chinese students from communicating with locals. Research focusing on Chinese students has identified a close link between learning English and anxiety (Zhao 2007, 28; He 2013, 339). As an exam-oriented subject, English education in China places more emphasis on reading and writing. Students receive less training in speaking, and as a result, many students have learned what some have called 'mute English'. Besides from the fear of not performing well on examinations, Chinese students are afraid of 'losing face' if they fail to express themselves in proper English and make mistakes (Zhao 2007, 28). Students suffering from high anxiety are reluctant to engage in conversation and doubt their abilities (Zhao 2007, 30; He 2013, 339). Language barriers not only discourage students from participating in class discussions but also hinder them from developing contacts and friendships with non-Chinese individuals. Chinese students may find themselves more comfortable making friends with other Chinese

people, therefore earning themselves the reputation of being unwilling to assimilate into the host society. Both studies opined that the linguistic challenges of Chinese students have the potential to discourage them from adapting to new environments and enhance anxiety. Studies have shown a high negative correlation between English proficiency and Chinese international students' acculturative stress (Wang and Mallinckrodt 2006, 431). The negative influence of the lack of English proficiency is not limited to the classroom and extends to their social life. Interviewing thirteen Korean immigrants in the US, H. Kim and J. Kim found that language barriers not only hinder immigrants from properly expressing themselves but also instigate discrimination from other people (2013, 5).

2.3 The Re-negotiation of the National Identity of Chinese Students

National identity is an important factor in the acculturation of international students. Research has suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to a change in the national identities of Chinese students (Ye and Deng 2020, 48; Gao 2022, 481). From a constructionist perspective, national identity is not fixed, and it refers to the sense of belonging and commitment to the values and lifestyles that constitute a nation (Zhao 2019, 3). As Dolby argues, pursuing education in a foreign country 'provides not only the possibility of encountering the world but of encountering oneself — particularly one's national identity — in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formation of that self' (Dolby 2004, 150). During acculturation, immigrants may become hyper-aware of their surroundings and what place they occupy in the new environment. In the host society, prior values and norms are challenged, initial impressions of the host society are refreshed, and students' perceptions of their heritage culture may be changed when they considered it from another angle.

Zhang's study focusing on the national identity of Chinese students in New Zealand found three main types of national identity: Honour-Based, Criticism-Based and Recluse-Based (Zhang 2017, 2678). The honour-based identity refers to

participants who expressed pride and enthusiasm for being Chinese, while the criticism-based identity characterizes participants who became more critical about the history of China and Chinese society, with one participant saying that 'China is a country that made me afraid' (Zhang 2017, 2678-2680). Participants with the recluse-based identity took a more neutral stance regarding China and were reluctant to talk about China with people from New Zealand, but this was partly because they felt hopeless about changing society or that their efforts were meaningless (Zhang 2017, 2683). In her study, each type of identity included participants who expressed that studying in New Zealand had made an impact on their identity, either consolidating or changing it. One participant said: 'You have no right to judge something if you [have] never experienced it' (Zhang 2017, 2683). Having personally experienced life in China and the host society, students were able to make comparisons and learn about how people of the host society viewed China. As they were exposed to the norms and values of another culture, they were able to tell what suited them better. A similar conclusion was arrived at by Gao, who used transnationalism to analyse the change in political identities of Chinese international students. Gao's project not only demonstrated that students' political identities were heterogeneous but also showed that the identities of students, whether they leaned towards China or host societies more, had the potential to change after living abroad (Gao 2022, 481).

The national identity of Chinese international students is a controversial topic. Earlier discussion focused on China's brain drain, the phenomenon of overseas talents not returning to China. Pull factors such as higher salaries, better living environments and political freedom encourage Chinese students to stay in host countries after graduation (Fong 2011, 99-100). Meanwhile, some students see studying overseas as an opportunity to escape from issues like corruption, traditional values such as familial and social obligations, and pollution (Fong 2011, 166-178). Nationalists sometimes accuse Chinese international students of wasting the resources of the motherland or tarnishing the image of China when students talk

about China negatively. In her commencement ceremony, Shuping Yang, a Chinese student studying at the University of Maryland, delivered a speech saying she appreciated the fresh air in the US, and freedom of speech and democracy. Her speech fuelled debates in China and attracted accusations from nationalists who called her a 'traitor' (Denyer and Zhang 2017).

In contrast, some studies have demonstrated that the national identity of Chinese international students was strengthened during their stay in host countries (Zhao 2019, 6-10; Ye and Deng 2020, 50-51). As China continues to develop economically and gain global influence, more and more students take pride in being Chinese. Interviewing twenty-three undergraduate students at an American university, Zhao found that his participants perceived a strengthening of national identity and learned to view both China and America from a more critical perspective. Participants learned to 'rediscover China' as they gained a more realistic view of America, which was not as 'full of high buildings and large mansions' as they had seen in movies (Zhao 2019, 7). Phinney et al. argued that immigrants' national identities were to a degree the product of the attitudes and characteristics of immigrants and the attitudes of the host societies (2001, 494). Being in a foreign society may consolidate immigrants' cultural identities as they are encouraged to turn to their in-group for support and assistance. Jenkins' research focusing on the acculturation of international teaching assistants from China found various degrees of 'cultural isolation' among his participants, including the preference for sharing apartments with Chinese roommates and socializing almost solely with Chinese people outside of school (2000, 496). The research of Yan and Berliner provided supporting evidence that students tended to stay in the comfort of their community to satisfy social and emotional needs, which further complicated their adaptation to the host society (Yan and Berliner 2011, 181). With their social network mainly built around Chinese communities, students may gain a stronger sense of solidarity. At the same time, the lack of interaction with people of the host societies helped students develop a keener sense of in-group and out-group thinking.

Research has suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to strengthen the national identities of Chinese students. At the beginning of the outbreak, China faced criticism from many countries for covering up the outbreak and later for failing to contain the virus. Fear, anger and frustration were sometimes translated into avoidance, harassment or even attacks towards overseas Chinese. Several studies showed that stigmatisation and discrimination helped to enhance the solidarity and strengthen the national identity of international students (Kinging 2011, 150-157; Ye and Deng 2020, 50-51).

Kinging's study focusing on four American students who were studying in France in 2003, a time of rising tension between Europe and the United States over conflicting attitudes towards the invasion of Iraq, found that students tended to take a defensive stance and took criticism of their home country personally. Due to the tension at the time, these students were exposed to anti-France sentiment in their home country and at the same time faced criticism of the United States during their stay in France (Kinging 2011, 156-157). All four students became more aware of their nationality and renegotiated their national identities: three students reaffirmed their national identities by invoking the collective memory of the superiority of the United States over France and distanced themselves from French people; one student, in contrast, went through a painful process of developing intercultural awareness by deliberately befriending and interacting with local people (Kinging 2011, 163-164).

In research that investigated how studying in Russia impacted Chinese students' national identity after the outbreak of the pandemic, the majority of participants believed that China was the best at handling the pandemic and had set a great example for the world, with one participant commenting that other countries should learn from China, otherwise it would 'lead to self-destruction' (Ye and Deng 2020, 48). The study of Ye and Deng supported the observation that China's

strategy of fighting the pandemic and relevant propaganda had strengthened Chinese students' national identities. However, as the study was conducted in the first few months after the outbreak in Wuhan, it does not provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how people perceive China's management of the pandemic as the pandemic continues to develop and countries change their policies.

Although the above literature supported the hypothesis that the Covid-19 pandemic may present opportunities for the strengthening of Chinese international students' national identities, a study of Chinese social media and nationalism discussed briefly how international students faced stigmatisation from their home country, including not allowing them to return to China if their host countries were deemed epicentres of infection and accusations from netizens about bringing the virus home (Yan 2020, 641-642). Hence, Chinese international students may continue to reflect upon their national identities after living abroad during the pandemic and arrive at a variety of conclusions.

3. Methodology

This chapter describes how the study is conducted. The design, sample selection, and data analysis procedures will be introduced.

3.1 Research Design

As Berry noted, the characteristics of individuals exert different influences on their acculturation (Berry 1994, 222-241). Factors such as personality, financial status, and language proficiency all influence how an individual reacts to changes and crises. Although a quantitative method could reveal patterns in the acculturation process and identity changes, it fails to take into account the characteristics of individuals and their experiences. It also cannot show the internal struggles students undergo in handling changes. As Fraenkel and Wallen argued, qualitative methods

are more suitable for research concerning 'the quality of relationships, activities, situations or materials' (2003, 380). Hence, this study adopts a qualitative method that allows the participants to reflect upon their experience living in Ireland and share their opinions. According to Carl and Ravitch, qualitative methods consider 'the ways that people see, view, approach, and experience the world and make meaning of their experiences as well as specific phenomena within it' (2019, 40).

Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire, with the latter serving as a supplement. The questionnaire was sent out two weeks before the interview. Information obtained from the questionnaire informed some questions of the interview. In addition, since the stories and opinions shared by participants in the interviews are unique, a questionnaire helps to gather information from a larger group of students and helps readers to understand the attitudes of students from a broader perspective.

3.1.1 The Questionnaire

A questionnaire was sent out to obtain a general understanding of students' attitudes towards China's and Ireland's ways of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and whether they considered the pandemic to have had a negative impact on their life in Ireland. The questionnaire was electronic in format and was distributed by Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised twenty-five questions (closed-ended and optional open-ended); first, participants provided their basic information including their age, gender and the university they attended. The second part of the questionnaire was designed to determine whether participants thought the pandemic had hindered them from adapting to life in Ireland. Since Ireland lifted all its Covid-19 restrictions in March 2022, the questionnaire specifically asked participants how safe they felt about the pandemic before and after the end of Covid-19 controls. Following these were questions on their attitudes towards the Covid-19 policies in Ireland and China. They were asked to comment on their

satisfaction with Ireland's response to the pandemic as well as China's zero-Covid policy.

3.1.2 Semi-structured Interviews

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of questions (see Appendix 3). The list of questions came from the relevant literature, preliminary information obtained from the questionnaire and the experience of the researcher. The list served as a guide and new questions were asked as the conversation became more personal. The main questions covered major difficulties they encountered after arriving in Ireland, how they handled or coped with challenges, how they understood the different attitudes and policies on the pandemic in China and Ireland and the degree to which their perceptions of China and Ireland had changed during their stay in Ireland.

The interviews were carried out via the online conferencing tool Zoom and were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, as it was the mother tongue of all three participants. It was hoped that by communicating in Mandarin Chinese, participants could better express their ideas, feel more comfortable with being interviewed and nuances could better be captured. Participants in the interviews were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Some participants raised concerns about discussing China and the government, but they felt reassured after knowing their identities would not be revealed in this study. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and they were transcribed by the researcher.

3.1.3 Participants in the Survey

The sample of the survey comprised thirty-six Chinese international students who were studying in Ireland and who voluntarily chose to participate. They constituted a 'sample of convenience' as they answered the questionnaire link sent to several WeChat groups whose members were all Chinese international students.

Twenty-three participants were female, twelve participants were male, and one participant chose not to disclose gender information. Of the thirty-six participants, 75% were aged between 18-25, 19% were aged between 26-30, and 6% were over 30 years old. 89% had been staying in Ireland for less than one year. The figures for the time spent in Ireland for 2-3 years and 3-5 years were 8% and 3% respectively. Nineteen participants were studying at Trinity College Dublin, three participants were studying at Dublin City University and fourteen participants were at University College Dublin. 92% of the participants were postgraduate students, 5% were undergraduates, and 2% were doctoral students.

3.1.4 Participants of the Interview

To select participants for the interview process, an announcement with information about the project was sent out to two WeChat groups made up of Chinese international students in Ireland. Three participants volunteered to participate in the interview. All three were Chinese and from mainland China. Two were female and one male; their ages ranged from twenty-four to twenty-eight (see Appendix 2). They were all postgraduate students who had been in Ireland for less than one year, which meant that they had all personally experienced the Covid-19 pandemic in both China and Ireland and had good knowledge of both countries' policies and controls related to the pandemic. In addition, as they had been in Ireland for less than a year, it was possible that they were at the initial stage of experiencing cultural shock and were more sensitive to the differences between the cultures and the challenges they had encountered. In addition, the similarity of time spent in Ireland allow easier comparison.

3.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis of this study is informed by phenomenology. Phenomenology aims to discern the 'meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience' of a certain phenomenon experienced by an individual or a group (Christensen, Johnson and Turner 2015, 370). Such a phenomenon is not limited to an event or an

experience that lasts for a certain period, but also refers to emotions felt by an individual. Throughout the interview, participants were asked to recall their experiences whose meanings and influences might be overlooked by them. By reflecting upon their experiences, participants were able to connect them to their acculturation process. By employing phenomenology, this study explores how participants make sense of their stay in Ireland and how their stay may change their perceptions of themselves or their home and host cultures.

In some cases, speech of the participants are quoted at length. This aims to avoid over-generalization by the researcher and let the extracts speak for them. It also helps readers to better understand the unique situations and internal struggles of the participants, as well as how their understandings of their experiences were developed.

3.3 Ethic Clearance and Limitation

Ethic clearance was obtained from Trinity College Dublin. Consent information were presented to all participants in the survey and interview. Participants of the interview were asked to sign consent forms and they were aware that they could refuse to answer any questions they found uncomfortable to answer, withdraw their answers or end the interview.

While three interviewees had provided valuable information, the sample size might not be sufficient to discover the patterns of students' acculturation in Ireland. Therefore future research could consider expanding the sample size. In addition, the researcher's position as a Chinese students may create bias or assumptions. Therefore future research on this area could consider having multiple researchers to cross-check the transcripts and findings.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Questionnaire

The survey focused on the possible problems students may encounter during

the pandemic and their attitudes to control measures in Ireland and in China. The findings of the questionnaire were used as a guide to the interview.

Negative Impact on Living Experience

When being asked whether the pandemic had negatively influenced their experiences in Ireland, nine participants (25%) strongly agreed and fourteen participants (39%) agreed with the statement. Six participants (17%) were neutral. Six participants (17%) disagreed and one participant (2%) strongly disagreed with the statement. The responses supported that the hypothesis that the Covid-19 pandemic had presented troubles to students' life in Ireland.

On the multiple choice question of what were the main reasons for the negative influence of Covid-19 on their experiences in Ireland, the option 'fewer opportunities to travel or engage in activities' ranked the first with twenty-eight votes (78%). Fewer opportunities to socialize outside the school and inside school came second and fourth with sixteen votes (44%) and thirteen votes (36%) respectively. During the pandemic, many activities were cancelled and people were encouraged to maintain social distancing. The response suggested students linked the opportunities to socialize close to their experiences in Ireland and the impacts of pandemic restrictions were acknowledged by students. It was worth noticing that the option 'psychological pressure caused by the pandemic' ranked the third with fourteen votes (39%). It is important to look into how the pandemic has brought psychological pressure to students and how institutions could respond accordingly.

Neutral Attitude on Perceived Discrimination

When being asked whether Chinese citizens were treated differently by non-Chinese citizens because of the pandemic, sixteen participants (45%) remained neutral to the statement. Eleven participants (33%) disagreed while seven participants (20%) and one participant (2%) chose the 'Agree' option and 'Strongly agree' option respectively. Compared with previous studies conducted at the initial

stage of the pandemic which suggested Covid-19 had aggravated the perceived discrimination against Chinese students, the responses suggested that participants tended not to view the pandemic as a major reason of unfriendly treatment/discrimination. This may be because of the relatively friendly and open atmosphere of the Irish society or because anti-Chinese sentiment had eased as people were out of the shock of the outbreak. However, eighteen participants (50%) reported that they and/or other Chinese citizens had received unfriendly treatment/discrimination in Ireland. Seventeen participants (47%) reported that they were not aware of the such situations and one participants (3%) preferred not to say. Perceived discrimination had found to hinder immigrants from acculturating to host societies and led to stress and anxiety. With nearly half of the participants confirming unfriendly attitude and discrimination directed at Chinese in Ireland, attention should be paid to curbing discriminating behaviours inside campuses and providing consulting service to students.

Decreased Willingness of Mask-Wearing

On the usefulness of face mask-wearing in avoiding contracting Covid-19, a majority of participants agreed that it was a useful preventive measures, with sixteen participants (44%) strongly agreed and fifteen participants (42%) agreed with the statement. Four participants (11%) remained neutral and only one participants (3%) strongly disagreed. Meanwhile, over half of the participants considered wearing masks uncomfortable, with sixteen students (44%) considered it uncomfortable and six students (17%) deemed it very uncomfortable. Thirteen students (36%) felt comfortable wearing masks and 1 students (3%) felt very comfortable when doing so.

When being asked the frequency of face mask-wearing before the mandatory face mask requirement was lifted, twenty participants (58%) responded that they always wore a mask. But this figure dropped to six (17%) four months after the face mask requirement was lifted. The figure for 'I often wear a mask' before and after the

requirement was lifted saw no change, recording eight participants (19%) respectively. No participant chose 'rarely wear a mask' before the requirement was lifted, but thirteen participants (36%) chose this option after the requirement was lifted. Before the requirement was lifted, eight participants (22%) only wore a mask when it was required. Nine participants (25%) responded that they did not wear a mask anymore after mask-wearing became voluntary. Although over 80% participants considered face mask-wearing a useful preventive measure against Covid-19, the frequency of face mask wearing had witnessed a significant decline after the requirement was lifted. This suggested that for many participants the cons of wearing masks had outweighed the pros. It also indicated that the fear for contracting Covid-19 had relatively relieved as time passed by so participants were more incline to opt out wearing masks.

Attitudes Toward Epidemic Control Measures

On their satisfaction level on Ireland's response to the pandemic, a majority of participants showed approval, with three participants (8%) responding 'very satisfied' and twenty participants (75%) somewhat satisfied. Five participants (14%) were unsatisfied and one participant (3%) very unsatisfied with the government's handling of the pandemic. In comparison, twenty participants (56%) did not support the zero-Covid policy of the Chinese government. Fourteen participants (39%) somewhat supported the policy while two participants (5%) fully supported the policy. On whether they prefer the Covid-19 policy in Ireland over that of China, twelve participants (33%) agreed and two participants (6%) disagreed. Nineteen participants (53%) remained neutral and three participants (8%) disagreed with neither Ireland's nor China's Covid-19 policy. Although the responses did not show a clear preference for Ireland's pandemic management among participants, the majority of participants were satisfied with how Ireland handled the pandemic. Additionally, twenty-nine participants (80%) responded that the zero-Covid policy had strongly impact their desire to return to China. Another four participants (11%) considered the policy had some impact on their desire to return to China. Only three

(9%) participants responded that their willingness to return had not been influenced by the policy. As how a country handled the pandemic had influenced many aspects of people's quality of life, dissatisfaction on pandemic management may lead to negative opinions or attitudes among people. Dissatisfaction towards the zero-Covid policy may become push factor for Chinese students to stay in foreign countries.

Summary

From the survey, several patterns emerged during the analysis of the data. Firstly, it is generally agreed that the pandemic had a negative influence on Chinese students' experience in Ireland. The lack of opportunities to travel and socialize contributed to the negative experiences while some students responded that they suffered from psychological pressure caused by the pandemic. Secondly, students generally supported Ireland's policy against the pandemic. In contrast, approximately half of the participants did not agree with the zero-Covid policy of the Chinese government. The discrepancy in attitudes may lead to change of perceptions on home society and host society.

4.2 Semi-structure Interview

In the interview section, the personal narratives of the participants are presented to show how they made meaning of their experiences in Ireland under the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. Major themes emerged during the analysis process were changes of perceptions on their identities as a sojourner, linguistic challenges, social-cultural challenges, and academic challenges. Although presenting their narratives based on themes allows side by side comparison, this section is organized by participants to let their narratives remain consistent and enable readers to know how their stories unfold and develop.

4.2.1 Jane

Jane was a 24 years old female. She arrived at Ireland in September 2021.

She had been sharing an apartment with other Chinese students and she recently moved out and lived with an Irish. On her first week arriving in Dublin, she tested positive for Covid-19. About half a year later she contracted Covid-19 for the second time. Jane plans to look for a job in Ireland and considers applying for a PhD degree in the future.

Identity Development

Jane perhaps had one of the most unique start comparing with other Chinese students of her year in Ireland. On her first week in Ireland, she contracted Covid-19 and was forced to quarantine at home for one week, which made her felt confused and anxious:

The only information I knew at the time was that I might develop serious symptoms. But I did not know what I could do if that happened. So I could only contact people or hot-lines that I knew and it was the only thing I could do...For patients with mild symptoms, the school may ask you to just follow the official recommendations. You stay at home, and then you may take some medicine or drink a lot of water. But I did not know what were considered mild or severe symptoms. If that happened to me, which number should I call, should I go to my GP or contact the ambulance? I was quite confused by the policies (Appendix 4).

As a newcomer, Jane knew little about the guidance for Covid-19 patients and she struggled at seeking help on her own. Unlike patients in China who would be taken to hospital and received treatments, Jane had to rely on her own, which made her felt anxious and lost. Asides from having to care for herself, another reason behind her anxiety was the attitudes towards Covid-19 prevailed in China, which had influenced her understanding of being contracting the virus when she first came to Ireland. According to Jane, she was scared about the possibilities of getting

Covid-19 before coming to Ireland, because Chinese people treated Covid-19 'like a monster' and 'propaganda makes people feel that if they are infected, they will be affected for the rest of their lives' (Appendix 4).

While contracting Covid-19 caused anxiety, it offered one advantage in that Jane quickly lost her fear for the disease. Having contracted it twice and getting herself vaccinated, she believed she had developed antibody. Besides, as she herself and her friends had contracted Covid-19, she found that symptoms shown on people in her age group were similar to a cold. Now she is not afraid of getting Covid-19 and does not wear a mask anymore.

Her experience of getting Covid-19 helped her to reflect upon the pandemic and relevant restrictions in China. She considered some restrictions, especially city-wide lockdown and mass PCR testing, unacceptable and unbelievable:

I have a friend whose mother was sick during the lockdown. There was no way for her to go to the hospital for treatment. So at that time, since the illness made her very uncomfortable, and she was afraid that her condition would get worse, she could only take some strange medicine. My friend was not in the same city as her, and under the lockdown, my friend could not go back to his mother to take care of her. So my friend felt very anxious and distressed. I think in that situation, if you got sick and if you live alone, things could get very dangerous (Appendix 4).

In addition, she mentioned that people contracting Covid-19 faced cyberbully and information leak in China. In her opinion, the strict restrictions instigated hostility and discrimination against people contracting Covid-19, for 'everyone worried that new cases will cause a lot of trouble and inconvenience to themselves' (Appendix 4). She thought the government was responsible for people's fear and frustration,

because it 'has only exaggerated the harm of the virus and China's reports on our fight against the pandemic focus on positive things' (Appendix 4). Whereas people in China mainly gain information from Chinese media, Jane believed international students could make their own judgement because they received information from Ireland and China.

Jane concluded that the view on zero-Covid policy of her and her friend whose mother was sick during lockdown had changed drastically:

At first, everyone felt that short-term sacrifices were needed to fight the pandemic. Some problems caused by restrictions seemed very far away because they did not happen to us. But when the restrictions are getting tighter and tighter, when you become the person being sacrificed, you can fully understand how unreasonable such a strict policy is (Appendix 4).

Jane expressed that she would not consider traveling to China until the zero-Covid policy was lifted. Having experiences and knowledge of the pandemic in Ireland and China, Jane felt 'more comfortable and less stressed because of the policy in Ireland and the attitude of people not over-reacting to the virus' (Appendix 4).

On whether she saw her identity as a Chinese in a different light after coming to Ireland, Jane said that 'I realize that the Chinese are particularly good at enduring discomfort' and 'the Chinese subconsciously feel that we should sacrifice the interests of a small number of people for the benefit of the collective' (Appendix 4).

Such views echoed the criticism-based national identity proposed by Zhang in her study, which referred to students who became more critical on the issues in China when they went abroad and were exposed to democratic cultures (2017,

2680-2683). For Jane, the inconvenience bought by pandemic restrictions was tolerable until she came to Ireland and experienced another way of living in the pandemic. She also saw the discrepancy between the superiority of the government boosted in propaganda and the troubles and problems people encounter in daily life. Such realizations motivate Jane to settle in Ireland.

Linguistic Challenges

To stay in Ireland, Jane was well aware of the challenges she needed to tackle. One big problem was language. Although Jane had no problem communicating in English in her daily life, she sometimes felt frustrated when she could not find the right words in serious discussions. In times like these, the other person had to guess what she meant. One main reason for her decision to study in Ireland was that she could communicate with foreigners and improve her English. However, the pandemic had made it difficult for most of her classes in the first semester had shifted online. As a result, she mostly texted her classmates and did not get much exposure to English speaking environment. Jane considered herself lucky as everyone was generally friendly and willing to speak slowly to her, but one of her friend were treated unfairly because he was not good at English:

Jane: I have a friend whose teammate refused to talk to him when doing teamwork because he is Chinese.

Researcher: What do you think was the reason for this?

Jane: I think it was because the teammate did not trust my friend's ability. My friend was not good at expressing himself in English, and he was not able to show his skills. So his teammate might question his ability. He may worry that my friend would be a burden so he just excluded my friend from the project (Appendix 4).

Studies shown that Chinese immigrants with insufficient English faced the possibility of being discriminated against (H. Kim and J. Kim 2013,5) and suffered

from prejudice and bullying (Qin, Way and Rena 2008, 29-30), which led to distress or anxiety. The problem of language barrier of international students had been acknowledge by Jane's university. The university she studied in had offered oral English lessons to international students. Jane enrolled in the class but dropped out later, for most students in her class were Chinese students at different proficiency levels. To her practicing in that class was not so different from learning English in China. Besides, as the time for each lesson was limited, the teacher usually talked to students with good English so he could talk more in one lesson.

For Jane, sometimes the problem of communication between Chinese and Westerners was not English proficiency, but habits and cultural differences:

Many times other people discuss things that people know or experience in Western society. As a Chinese, I do not understand them, so there is no way to join the conversations...In daily communication, Westerners like small talk, but we Chinese do not do so. As a result, I often do not know how to react, and sometimes I worry about whether I look rude. Although I explained myself and people understood, I could not explain every time that I am not used to small talk (Appendix 4).

Jane is now able to hang out more with locals and participate in activities as all Covid-19 restrictions are ended. Although she is not particularly stressed about her English proficiency, she would like to improve her English for 'Language determines whether you can experience authentic culture or not'(Appendix 4).

Socio-Cultural Challenges

Jane mentioned that she did not get to fully experience the culture of Ireland because of the pandemic. Cancellation of activities, closed shops and social distancing took away opportunities to interact with locals and expose in local culture.

But even if she had the opportunity to talk to foreigners, cultural difference became a problem:

One cultural difference that frequently occurs is people here like to talk about politics, which is an area that I do not know at all. It is the same when they talk about books, movies, and music that I haven't heard of (Appendix 4).

Although Jane was keen to talk to foreigners and people she met were considerate, she recalled that she preferred to hang out with Chinese at least in the first few months. Cultural differences and language barrier are two factors behind the stereotypes 'Chinese are quiet' and 'Chinese like to stay in their in-group'. These problems are not easily resolved especially for first-generation immigrants. The pandemic and relevant restrictions had worsen the situation. Now as people in Ireland are resuming normalcy of life, Jane hopes she could to interact more with local people and participant in activities.

Academic Challenge

Similar to participants in Holmes' study, Jane had difficulties adjusting to classroom norms of Western countries (Holmes 2005, 298-308). At first she was surprised at the classroom atmosphere in her program and she took time to adjust herself:

In China, you are not encouraged to raise a lot of questions and you are expected to give answers. Teachers in Ireland encourage you to answer, ask questions, put forward ideas, speak out, and then express your ideas in different ways (Appendix 4).

In addition, she found that she usually approach questions from angles different from her classmates, which were interesting but sometimes embarrassing

experiences to her. She also ran into a commonly seen problem among Chinese students, that is, she had to spend extra time and effort to read a large number of English materials. Although sometimes her education made her feel stressful, she considered it manageable and normal.

Summary

Apart from the initial obstacle of contracting Covid-19, Jane had a relatively smooth acculturation process in Ireland. She rarely felt homesick and lonely or feel pressured to integrate into circles of foreigners. She mentioned several times that everyone she met was friendly and patient. Hence, her easy going personality and the friendly environment she found herself in worked as moderators for her acculturation. Even though she ran into challenges in her education and communication with foreigners, she managed to overcome the stress and challenges. Although she was comfortable being a foreigner in Ireland, she showed the desire to learn more about the local culture and make more foreign friends.

While Jane did not feel over stressed in her education and daily life, she experienced a big change in her perceptions of China and the Chinese people when she viewed them from afar. Being exposed to a democratic culture allowed her to reflect upon China's way of dealing with the pandemic and the issues that surfaced. Her previous opinions on China's control measures and people's acceptance had been destabilized. She felt more comfortable and relaxed in Ireland and decided to stay in Ireland in the near future.

4.2.2 John

John was a 24-year-old boy and he came to Ireland in August 2021. He had been living with several Chinese students. He plans to return to China after graduation.

Identity Development

Similar to Jane, John caught Covid-19 early on and his attitude on it changed from fear to nonchalance. He also complaint about such restrictions as lockdown and mass testing. But it seem that what concerned him most was the discrimination of some Chinese people against the people who contracted Covid-19. When being asked whether he faced any discrimination in Ireland, what came to his mind first was that his roommate was treated unfairly by other Chinese roommates because he had Covid-19:

When one of my roommates got Covid-19, another roommate took all his things in the kitchen back to his room, such as rice cookers and pots. The roommate who got Covid-19 usually used my rice cooker because he did not have his own rice cooker. If everyone left him be, he would have to starve. So I sent him rice and he ordered other food. I think Chinese people avoid people who get Covid-19 like a plague. But sometimes you have to show sympathy to other people. You can not just say those people who get Covid-19 are asking for it. You can not ban those people from coming out of the room and touching anything. The person who gets Covid-19 must be quite lost and upset. You can not be too harsh on them. We are all Chinese and we should help each other (Appendix 5).

Besides this incident, John recalled a similar incident he encountered when he was in China. John was disappointed that people bullied the infected and he attributed the reason of people's fear and anger to the government's lack of reports on the update of the virus and pandemic. However, he attitude on China's restrictions and issues arose in the pandemic contradicted with his words that 'pandemic prevention measures are definitely regulated in accordance with the development of the pandemic'(Appendix 5). The contradictory might stemmed from his reluctance to talk about political issues of China. When being asked whether his perceptions on China or his identity as a Chinese had changed, he misunderstood

the question and thought he was asked to criticize the government. Hence he blurted out 'Are we allowed to talk about it'(Appendix 5). Instead, he was more open to talk about Ireland:

I originally thought that Ireland was much more developed than China and it had better infrastructure. But when I came here, I found that Ireland was not as developed as China in terms of material conditions. For example, there is no e-commerce, high-speed railways, or infrastructure. And you can not rent power banks in large shopping malls. Maybe people here do not really need them (Appendix 5).

His change of perceptions on the host society after going abroad is shared by many Chinese students, who used to think that foreign countries (usually developed countries) were much more advanced than China in most aspects (Zhang 2017, 2678-2680). Since John was born in Guangzhou, a first-tier city in China, he was no stranger to advanced technology and modern buildings. Therefore he was surprised to know Ireland was not as advanced as he originally thought and it took some time for him to get used to life in Ireland. At the same time, he derived national pride from the social progress of China in recent years. Going abroad rendered John a more realistic understanding of Ireland and new insight of China's development in recent years.

Linguistic Challenges

According to John, language barrier was a main source of anxiety and challenges. At the beginning, he could only understand 20% or 30% of his lessons because his English was poor. He relied on recordings and transcription and had to consult his classmates when he could not understand what the teacher was talking about. He explained that he later became less stressed when he found out the contents he missed out wouldn't affect his studies significantly. However, he also

considered the pandemic had hindered him from improving his English, for he had little opportunities to talk to people in person. According to him, he hadn't met his mentor once in the first two semesters.

Compared with Jane, he was less keen on improving his English, perhaps because he planned to return to China or because he could get by with his English. His low need for socializing may also contributed to his lack of interests in improving English. As an international student who has no plan to stay in Ireland or other foreign countries, enhancing language skills might not be a priority.

Social-cultural Challenges

John was not keen on expanding his network for he did not plan to work in Ireland after graduation. He said that his focus in Ireland was his education and making friends costed money and time. So having two or three friends whom he could talk to was enough. The biggest obstacle he encountered in Ireland was learn to be independent and navigate his way in the new environment. He never live outside of his hometown, let alone in a foreign country. He needed to learn to cook, managed his schedule and learn how things were done in Ireland. Combined with pressure from his study, the first couple of months had been very difficult to him:

I lost more than ten pounds after coming to Ireland, while many people around me gained weight. Because after spending hours on study, I need to cook for myself. It is not until eight or nine o'clock that I finish my work and eat dinner. I am probably not taking good care of myself and I have been sick several times after coming to Ireland. I went to the GP twice, one for a fungal infection in my legs, and one for my hand with my 9 fingers having eczema (Appendix 5).

Learning to live independently in a new environment had led to high pressure, which influenced his health. John revealed that one time he was so stressed that he

called a hot-line and lied to the staff that he had a Japanese girlfriend who wanted to break up with him because his poor English. Besides calling the hot-line, he did not know where to seek help. He mostly relied on himself to get through the first few months. For newcomers like John, they may run into all kinds of problems when they reside in a foreign county with different norms and traditions. They might not be able to seek help because of problems such as not knowing where to seek help and language barrier.

Academic Challenge

While John was able to deal with challenges in language and managing his daily life, he showed strong frustration when discussing his education in Ireland. He was not satisfied with the course design of his programme and considered it not as useful for his career as he originally thought:

When most people think of Human-computer Interaction, they think of coding or design. But I only knew that design-oriented courses account for 20% after reading the handbook. Coursework was mostly writing theses, on topics such as the history of human-computer interaction and media. I refused to write this kind of theses. The school tried to fit many contents into our programme. They should allow students to choose courses according to their career plans or preferences. But many of the courses I could choose did not suit my career plan. For example, I was a student studying science in China, but here I was required to write about history. It was a waste of time. I think this is rather unreasonable (Appendix 5).

John's frustration stemmed from his misunderstanding of the course design of his programme. This may be due to the different understanding of his programme in China and in Ireland. John was required to write theses and learn theoretical knowledge so his learning experience and expectations were different from those

when he was studying in China. As a result, he commented that 'there was not much to learn anyway' when he discussed whether online classes influenced his study (Appendix 5). The main goal for John to pursue education in Ireland was to further his career. But he was disappointed with the course design of his programme and considered his degree not very competitive when he came back to China. It was possible that his disappointment had contributed to his lack of desire to explore Ireland and broaden his network.

Summary

John had difficulties in adapting to life in Ireland when he first arrived. Learning to live independently in a new environment and getting used to the Irish teaching style caused great anxiety. Gradually he learned to manage his schedule and gotten used to life in Ireland.

For John, language barrier proved to be a big problem in study and daily life. He had great trouble understanding lessons and his lack of understanding of popular topics in conversation prevented him from communicating well with some foreigners. After his English witnessed improvement and he understood that he did not need to understand everything people said, he became less anxious. However, he was unsatisfied with his programme after he found out the discrepancy between his expectations and the reality. He responded by adjusting his expectations and pay more attention to the job market in China.

John harbored the goal to enhance his competitiveness in job market when he pursued education in Ireland. He understood that he would eventually leave Ireland so he did not pay too much attention to make foreign friends or learn about Ireland. Knowing that he was a sojourner who only stayed in Ireland temporary, he was less inclined to integrate into the host society. Meanwhile, he gained a more realistic understanding of Ireland and became more aware of the positive side of China. Generally, although his experience in Ireland caused high anxiety and

influenced his health, his cultural and national identities saw little change.

4.2.3 Annie

Annie is a 28-year-old female. She came to Ireland in August 2021. She used to live in a student dormitory with three non-Chinese students. Annie plans to apply for a second postgraduate degree in Ireland. Compared with other participants, Annie was most willing to share her experiences and opinions.

Identity Development

Among the three participants, Annie was the only one who had not contracted Covid-19. She said that at the beginning she was very anxious about the prospect of contracting Covid-19, so whenever she returned from crowded places, she would change her clothes and take a shower as soon as she came home. During the first few weeks of arriving in Ireland, due to stress, jet lag, and unfamiliarity with the climate, Annie suffered from insomnia, nausea, loss of appetite, and diarrhea. Although she had been in Ireland for one year, her fear for Covid-19 only subsided a little bit. She still took considerable precautions to avoid getting Covid-19:

I think Ireland's policies on Covid-19 were quite lax. I was worried when the government first lifted all the controls. Now I would still avoid going to crowded places, such as a bar or a restaurant. I only go to places like these once in a while. On St Patrick's Day, I wore two layers of masks. When I returned home I took some medicine recommended by the Chinese government just in case. I used to live with other students and each of us lived in a en-suite. One of my roommates contracted Covid-19 at Christmas because he went to bars and parties. I was so nervous when I found out. So I sprayed disinfectant in the common room (Appendix 6).

Annie said that she mostly worried about the sequelae of Covid-19 and that

some people she knew who had contracted Covid-19 still felt the effects after they tested negative. She believed the Irish government should continue its mandatory mask requirement for she thought Irish people had overlooked the severity of Covid-19 on people especially Children. Out of her concern for the pandemic, Annie believed that Ireland should learn from China in its way of fighting against the pandemic and she was quick to defend the zero-Covid policy:

In China, we paid a huge price at the beginning. At that time, we did not know much about the virus and we did not know how to treat it. It was much later that we had our own vaccine. We learn from the past and know that if we allow the virus to spread, it would be a disaster for the people. So we think and act differently from foreign countries. Foreign countries just 'lie flat'. China is now adopting the zero-Covid policy. Before I left China, there were almost no cases in China. But we always wore masks when we went out. No one questioned the mask requirement or health code. People would not think their privacy is being violated. I think nothing is more important than people's lives. I think Chinese people understand the value of people's live than people in foreign countries do (Appendix 6).

Annie used the phrase 'lie flat' to describe the Covid-19 plan in Ireland. 'Lie flat' was a popular phrase in China referring to the inaction of governments and the nonchalant attitude of people in countries that do not adopt strict restrictions (People's Daily Online 2022). This phrase was popular on Chinese social media and had been used by government officials to criticize foreign countries. Her reasoning that Chinese government place people's lives on very high regard is also a reason frequently used by the government to defend its own policy and promote its image. Annie was aware of the issues caused by the zero-Covid policy, but she considered the pros of the zero-Covid policy outweighed the cons. When being asked whether the Irish people would be willing to learn from China's measures against the

pandemic, she flatly disagreed:

Annie: Absolutely not. No way they will accept it. First of all they do not take it seriously. Secondly, for them, freedom may be more important than life. They are not willing to give up freedom to save people's lives. If they are asked to isolate at home for a week or two or even a month, they will probably have a breakdown.

Researcher: Do you agree with their appreciation for freedom?

Annie: I do not think it is practical. Because I think nothing is more valuable than lives. If they have freedom but lose their lives, what is the use of freedom? Some people are exercising freedom but in doing so they spread the virus to others. Their behavior is very selfish. If the country needs a group of people to make a sacrifice, the group should think about the big picture. You can not care only about your own interests, you still have to think about the collective. I do not understand why foreigners are so opposed to wearing masks. It's just wearing masks. It does not kill them. I agree that wearing masks is really uncomfortable. But if wearing masks can relieve the pressure on the health care system of the whole country, why can not you make such a small sacrifice? If someone has families work in the hospital, I think they may be able to understand the Chinese. Many health care workers in Ireland resigned because of too much work pressure and heavy workload. And I know foreigners do not like to work overtime. Chinese medical staff are willing to work overtime. They are used to it. But Irish medical staff are not used to working overtime. So they just resigned or went on strike. I think these are irresponsible things to do. Because medical workers have the responsibility of treating and saving ill people. They can not quit just because they are too tired or can not take vacations as usual. What about those patients? And their work will be passed on to other

colleagues if they resign. So I do think that individualism is too strong in Western countries. They are not willing to sacrifice their own interests and time for the majority of the society. I may be biased, but based on my experience in Ireland, I think most Westerners are self-centered. They are nice and friendly as long as you do not have conflict of interests. But when it comes to something related to their interests, they could be very difficult (Appendix 6).

Annie considered foreign people selfish and she criticized the individualism in Western countries. Her opinions were the opposite to those of Jane who considered the Chinese too resigned. Before coming to Ireland, Annie revealed that she never read or encountered comments or actions that attack China even though she was aware of China being criticized by some foreign people and countries. But such impressions became real after she came to Ireland:

The day I arrived at Dublin, I met a driver who looked like a Chinese and could speak mandarin. So I asked him 'Are you from China?' He stammered and said he was from Hong Kong. When I tried to talk to him in mandarin, he just told me his mandarin was poor. All the people from Hong Kong and Taiwan people I met in Ireland are like that. They did not argue that they were not Chinese. They just said they came from Taiwan or Hong Kong (Appendix 6).

In addition, she was angry at a Chinese student who criticized China and she referred to him a member of the 'anti-China party':

He was from Shanghai. In Ireland, he said that people in China had no freedom and that Chinese education destroyed the creativity of children. He said that China is a nation without room for creativity. I was very shocked to hear his speech. He had lived in the most open

and prosperous city in China. What did China do to him? I wonder if he is crazy (Appendix 6).

Annie had never used VPN to access foreign websites that were banned by China before coming to Ireland. Coming to Ireland allowed her to go over the firewall and confront the criticism on China in foreign countries. She was indignant to know about such criticism and defended her country without hesitation:

I firmly oppose to the statement that China has no human rights. Those people have never been to Xinjiang or Tibet. I do not know where they get the idea and evidence that we have harmed our compatriots. I admit that China is not as free as some countries do. For example, China restricts freedom of speech and built the firewall. I did a questionnaire survey not long ago. Many people were afraid of disclosing their personal information or causing negative impact on China's image, so they dared not tell the truth. I think you can say the freedom of speech is restricted to some extent. However, it is absurd that foreigners or Taiwan and Hong Kong pro-independence groups claim that China has no freedom. Recently cases of corruption were exposed on the Internet. can not you see that netizen scold the government and request the government to punish those corrupted officials? We also have the right to criticize the government, and no one is punished for doing so. So I do not know why foreigners can shamelessly say that we are oppressed by the government. The student I mentioned just now is gay. He may be unhappy with China not approving gay marriage so he opposes the government. But I think China and the Chinese people do not discriminate against homosexuals. There is no policy in mainland Chinese that discriminates against homosexuality. As for gay marriage, there are so many countries that do not approve gay marriage. If that is your

reason for blaming China, you should also blame other countries in the world. Why do you only blame China? This is unfair. Even in the United States, not every state allows gay marriage. Moreover, in European and American countries, because of religious belief, there may exist stronger discrimination against homosexuality. But no one in China will beat you or kill you because you are gay. I think foreign countries have exaggerated the concept of freedom. China may not allow limitless freedom like some countries do, but that does not mean China is a totalitarian state (Appendix 6).

In addition, Annie thought overseas Chinese and the Chinese government should do more to defend the country and let foreigners know about the real situations in China. Recently she witnessed the demonstrations and parades organized by Ukrainian people and Russian people, which gave her the idea that overseas Chinese should also hold demonstrations to protect its interests:

We should also speak up to let the world know what China really looks like and the historical facts. But no Chinese makes such efforts. I think we need more brave people to organize demonstrations, especially the teachers in the Chinese office. They have been in Ireland for so long. They know much more about the policies of Ireland than us students who have just come here for a year or a few months. They know the laws and regulations on how to organize demonstrations. They have the ability to organize them. I believe that as long as they organize such an event many students would follow them without hesitation. Why nobody organize such activities? Why should we let others to defame the Chinese people and China? I am really not happy about it. There are also people who often promote Falungong on Henry Street. I think we hadn't done enough to stand up for China (Appendix 6).

Annie said that her mother told her repeatedly not to post any comments on political affairs in her WeChat moment out of concern for her safety. So she took the initiative to argue with people who support Taiwan independence on Twitter, by posting ‘documents of the UN and the English version of China-US joint communique’ (Appendix 6). In cyberspace where no one knew her identities, she was performing and affirming her identity as a Chinese in defending China. She believed that it was high time for Chinese to let people know about the history or overseas Chinese would be criticized by foreigners:

If we let things go on like this, the situation of Chinese students abroad may eventually become the same as that of Russian students. Now Russian international students, especially those in European and American countries, are facing criticism from everyone. Everyone blames them and Russia for the invasion. What can these Russian students do? Our safety is at stake if we let the misunderstanding of the Chinese people run deeper in foreign countries (Appendix 6).

At the end of the interview, Annie said that she had become more patriot after coming to Ireland. As Fong opined, many Chinese students developed a strong sense of filial nationalism similar to their love for their parents and this kind of love ‘was a matter of subjective loyalty that could not be nullified by what they believed was an objective understanding of China’s status as a developing country’ (Fong 2011, 52). While Annie recognized the benefits Western countries provided (e.g. more job opportunities, more relaxing lifestyles, freedom to organize demonstrations), she felt a burning desire to defend her country. For Annie, the status of China in the world was closely linked to the status of overseas Chinese. In China, the word ‘country’ in Han characters is made up of two characters ‘country’ and ‘family’. China is a big family comprised of numerous small families. This idea

was reflected in Annie's opinions that smaller groups should sacrifice for the collective and that Chinese should stick together to defend the motherland. Coming to Ireland allowed Annie to encounter different opinions on her country and the Chinese people, which she had seldom encountered in China. During this process, she national identity was strengthened and she gained a clearer understanding of what it meant to be a Chinese by comparing the Chinese people with foreigners.

Linguistic Challenges

Annie admitted that language barrier had been a huge challenge to her and her English did not seem to improve much. Although Annie tried to improve her English, she lacked such opportunities. Firstly, she mentioned that of the nine students in her class, seven students were Chinese, so she had less opportunities to talk to foreigners comparing to students whose classes were made up of students from different countries. Secondly, the pandemic had hindered students from having enough opportunities to gather together:

We have fewer opportunities to practice oral English with less face-to-face classes. In terms of social activities, there were no activities to help us learn more about the local culture and customs. My friends in England told me that their universities offered many social activities. For example, teachers would take students to a formal dinners. They also have many events and balls. I think such activities are helpful in enhancing the communication between students. I did not have such opportunities in Ireland and I did not get to improve relationships with my classmates (Appendix 6).

Annie considered language barrier had caused problems in her interaction with foreigners. As she termed it, she often struggled for the right words to say when she talked about something serious. For Annie, language was a prerequisite for the cultivation of friendships, for if two person could only talk about trivial things, they

can not really cultivate a meaningful social relationship. Most of the friends she made in Ireland were Chinese, which made her felt disappointed in herself sometimes.

Socio-cultural Challenges

Unlike John who did not want to spend too much time and energy on making friends and Jane who preferred to let nature take its course in broadening her network, Annie made many attempts to interact with foreigners and blend into the Irish society. In the first two weeks when she came to Ireland, she joined a hiking group and went hiking with them. However, she was disappointed with the members of the group:

I remember being at the train station and not knowing how to top up and buy which ticket and which platform to go to. But no one in the group chat offered help. No one said they would wait for me. I was three minutes late and they just left. They did not tell me in the group chat that they were leaving without me! I bought a ticket and arrived at the platform only to find that none of them were there. When I called the leader, he said they were gone. Then I met another Indian student on the platform. She was in the same situation as me. Later the Indian student and I talked about this and we agreed that such things would not happen in Asian cultures. If ten people go to a place together and one of them does not show up, others would all contact the person out of concern to see if the person needs help. No one here does this. That day it felt like we were being left behind. So I quit the group (Appendix 6).

The incident left a bad impression on her and she attributed it to cultural differences between Chinese and Westerners. Later, she encountered similar problems in interacting with her roommates:

I used to live with one Indian and two Irish. We seldom talked to each other. Sometimes I would have my dinner in the living room. My roommates would take their dinner to their rooms or sit on the sofa and watch TV. Most of the time, I was the one who tried to start a conversation, but they did not reply more than a few words. When there were holidays or festivals, for example Christmas, I would give them presents, not something expensive but they were my way to show my appreciation of their culture. But they did not ask me if I wanted to know more about local traditions or interesting places in Ireland. They did not invite me to their house. I think this is very different from how we treat foreign students in China. Universities in China often organize activities for foreign students to experience Chinese culture. Universities also assign local students to help foreign students. If there are foreign students in our class, we will take the initiative to invite them to our homes in festivals (Appendix 6).

Annie had troubles making friends with foreigners for they had different habits and from different cultural background. She recalled that it was easier for her to communicate with people from Asia for they were more familiar with each other's countries and were able to find enough in common. This supported the argument that the greater the cultural distance, the more challenges students encountered in communication (Hansen et al, 2018, 226). Annie also tried to meet more people by joining online events organized by the Chinese society in her school and an event for international students in local church. However, those events also hadn't provided opportunities for her to make friends. Gradually, Annie stopped trying to make new friends. Although she still hope to meet more people, she admitted that she did not know what else to do.

The pandemic had presented many challenges to Annie in her attempts to

make friends. Besides the fact that there were less face-to-face opportunities to interact with people, the fear for contracting Covid-19 got in her way of socialize with other people. Annie recalled that she was afraid to go out with foreigners and turned down many invitations:

Irish people are very fond of going to bars and drinking. But I'm afraid of going to bars because bars are full of people. I've only been to the bar once or twice in the past year. My classmates invited me to have a drink but I turned them down. The Chinese I know are cautious too. In the bar, we wear masks all the time. To avoid infection, we do not order drinks or food. We just listen to the foreign students, but we do not take off our masks, and we dare not eat out. So we feel there is a big gap between us and foreigners. We are so different from them. Foreigners may respect our choices, but they might not want to have us in their group. Most activities have been cancelled due to pandemic. I think the pandemic has been a very big problem for international students who want to blend in the Irish society (Appendix 6).

Annie felt self-conscious when she wore a mask to activities although she knew that people around her won't judge her. She had internal struggle almost every time people invited her to events. She admitted that putting a mask on may create distance between her and other people:

When I went to see Riverdance last month, there were hundreds of people in the theater but only me and another three friends of mine wore face masks. If you were in that situation, would you not feel self-conscious? People may not say anything, but they may look at you differently when they saw you. You get the feeling that they're wondering why this person is still wearing a mask. It's not that they

are discriminating against you. But they may feel confused (Appendix 6).

Although Annie considered wearing masks would put a distance between her and foreigners, she decided to keep her masks in the future. It was obvious that Annie harbored higher level of fear for Covid-19 than the other two participants. In consequence, she gave away some opportunities to make friends in exchange for lower chances to contract Covid-19. Nevertheless, she expressed that she would still try to interact with more people in the future.

Academic Challenge

For Annie, her education was the least of problems during her stay in Ireland. Although she admitted that she only understood 50% of what the teachers saying whereas she could understand 70% when classes were delivered face to face. Besides, she had less opportunities to visit the campus and meet her classmates because of online classes and social distancing:

There were times that other teachers got Covid-19 and we had to take online classes. I was lucky to avoid getting Covid-19 or I would be too ill to study. In addition, I do not know whether it was because of the pandemic or because of the design of our programme, we had few face-to-face seminars. In addition, although our teacher divided us into discussion groups of two people, he did not say whether you had to do it face-to-face or online, so we pretty much did it online. Oh and we haven't had a class dinner for the past year (Appendix 6).

Annie had a easier adaptation to teaching styles in Ireland because she already did her research and mentally prepared herself for possible challenges. In fact, she looked forward to study in Ireland for she never studied in small classes which offered her more opportunities to discuss with classmates. But she also

encountered difficulties in reading materials in English. Her English proficiency became an obstacle in reading materials, so she had to spend much time on reading and writing. But since many students in her class were Chinese, they could communicate relatively easier and help each other.

Summary

At the beginning Annie was keen to mix with foreigners and participated in activities despite there were less opportunities to do so because of the pandemic. However the cultural differences and setbacks she faced made her feel resigned. For Annie, language barrier and cultural differences were two primary barriers for cross-cultural relationships. Annie proposed that sometimes Chinese students were not shy and hoped to talk to foreign students, but foreigners were simply not interested in topics that she liked to discuss or topics related to China. Annie found that she and Asian students had more in common. It was clear that Annie were disappointed in many of her interactions with foreign students. If she had the plan and ambitions to establish social relationships with foreigners, she gradually realized the difficulties and gave up on that hope. Although she wished to social more in the next year, she did not feel such a strong impulse to integrate into the Irish society than before.

Among the three participants, Annie displayed a strongest change of her perceptions on her identity as a Chinese. Although Annie had been hoping to embrace Irish culture, she refused to abandon her heritage culture. Instead, she gained a newly found sense of patriotism and a sense of belonging to Chinese community in her interactions with foreigners and exposure to unfriendly remarks on China. This supported Berry's argument that acculturation was bidimensional as Annie chose to embrace both the heritage culture and the host culture (Berry 1994, 239).

5. Conclusion and Implication

5.1 Conclusion

Chinese students faced various challenges in their acculturation in Ireland. This research supported the argument that linguistic challenges, academic challenges and social-cultural challenges were major sources of stress and anxiety of Chinese students. Language barrier had resulted in difficulties in communicating with non-Chinese and difficulties in academic life. Participants all encountered challenges in establishing friendships with foreigners and encountered cultural differences that they considered hard to resolve. Although they are not opposed to making friends with non-Chinese, they feel more comfortable socializing with other Chinese and do not feel it necessary to mix with non-Chinese. In terms of academic challenges, different education norms and language barrier had held back participants' performance.

Participants shared that they felt stressed at different stages of their stays in Ireland. Two participants described that the anxiety and stress they felt had affected their health. The three challenges they encountered were often overlapped and it was shown in the interview that language barrier was one of the most important factors resulting in the negative experiences of students in their interactions with foreigners and study. Although the participants all faced these challenges, the situation varied from person to person. In addition, their unique backgrounds and their experiences in Ireland contributed to their different responses to acculturation. All participants experienced stress and anxiety when they first arrive at Ireland. With time, they reported that they had basically gotten used to life in Ireland and were able to handle the challenges they faced for the time being. Nevertheless, they gained a more holistic and realistic understanding of Ireland and life of living abroad, comparing with their original understandings which were second-hand knowledge.

Going abroad offered participants the opportunity to experience different lifestyles and another culture. During this process, foundational values were destabilised and reconstructed. Participants on various degree changed their

perceptions on their home culture. One participant came to view her home culture more critically and found herself identified more with the values of the host society. One participant developed a more realistic view on Ireland. One participant became more patriotic and strengthened her national identity. This supported the argument that national identities are not fixed and everlasting entities.

Both the interview and survey showed that the Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students' acculturation. Under the pandemic, students had less opportunities to socialize and the fear of Covid-19 had resulted in stress and uncertainty. However, contrasted with previous research conducted at the first two years of the pandemic, the findings of this research suggested that the impact of the pandemic had declined and it ceased to be a key factor for the negative experiences of students. This may be because the world had gained more insights of Covid-19 and the world gradually eased restrictions. The pandemic and restrictions made the challenges students encountered more prominent. While its effects would linger in the near future, they are expected to mitigate.

5.2 Recommendations for Education Institutions

Higher education institutions should continue to offer support to international students including language support, social activities support and counselling service. It is important for institutions to be aware of diverse challenges faced by different communities and provide assistance accordingly. But more importantly, institutions should enhance the accessibility of these services as participants all revealed that they were not known of some activities and services. Due to the different settings of departments and staffs in countries, international students may not know from where they could access assistance. Therefore, programmes such as mentorship where experienced students offered help to freshmen should be taken into consideration. In addition, the social needs of students should be recognized and activities to help students know more about the society they are living in should be offered. In times of social crises, it is important to recognize the challenges faced

by students and build a reliable environment where they could feel protected and being cared.

5.3 Recommendation for Future Research

This research is limited in sample size and research scope. All the participants of the interview and survey were studying in Dublin, therefore the differences between cities in Ireland were overlooked. Future research may expand the sample size and adopt quantitative methods to explore the patterns of students and whether the places they reside have an impact on their experiences.

All participants of the interview and a majority of participants of the survey had stayed in Ireland for less than one year. It would be worthwhile to conduct follow-up interview or conducted several interviews on participants during different stages of their stays in Ireland to see what changes may arise in different stages.

It would also be interesting to explore the backgrounds of students before they come to Ireland to see what preexisting factors play important roles that lead to different acculturation processes and outcomes.

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7. Appendix

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

<<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1x3Zvqf0-8iwzwAekOeAHhvoi2LpBRXtfgnqPb88V0s4/edit>>

An exploration of Chinese international students' perceptions of how their identities change under the impact of Covid-19

This survey is part of a postgraduate dissertation in Identities and Cultures of Europe at Trinity College Dublin. International students tend to face different challenges in a new environment that may impact their well-being and educational experience. This survey aims to explore how COVID-19 influences Chinese international students' acculturation process and how they make meanings of their identities. Your answers will be confidential and anonymously. You are free to withdraw the survey at any moment you wish. By completing this survey online, you voluntarily agree to participate in the study. For any information about this study, please feel free to contact us at liuw6@tcd.ie.

 liuw6@tcd.ie (not shared) [Switch accounts](#) 

*Required

What is your gender? *

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

What age category do you fall under? *

- Under 18
- 18-25
- 26-30
- 30+

Which Irish university are you studying in? *

Your answer _____

What is the highest educational qualification you have attained? *

- Undergraduate
- Postgraduate
- Doctoral

How long have you been staying in Ireland? *

- Less than 1 year
- 2-3 years
- 3-5 years
- More than 6 years

Covid-19 has negatively influenced my experience in Ireland. *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Have you and/or any Chinese citizens you know received any unfriendly treatment/discrimination in Ireland? *

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

If so, what do you think the reason for this was?

- Differences in ideology
- Stereotypes about Chinese immigrants
- Covid-19
- Racism
- Other: _____

How often did you wear a face mask before the government lifted the mandatory face mask requirement? *

- I always wore a mask
- I often wore a mask
- I rarely wore a mask
- I only wore a mask when it was required

How often do you wear a face mask now? *

- I always wear a mask
- I often wear a mask
- I rarely wear a mask
- I don't wear a mask anymore

If Covid-19 has negatively influenced your experience in Ireland, then this is because there are: *

- Fewer opportunities to socialize in school
- Fewer opportunities to socialize outside of school
- Fewer opportunities to travel or engage in activities
- Unfriendly treatment from other people
- Psychological pressure caused by the pandemic
- Other: _____

Chinese citizens were treated differently by non-Chinese citizens because of the COVID-19 situation. *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Putting on face masks was a useful preventive measure during the peak of the Pandemic. *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

How comfortable did you feel wearing a face mask when you went out in public? *

- Very comfortable
- Comfortable
- Uncomfortable
- Very uncomfortable

"I have spent less time socializing in order to avoid getting Covid-19." *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

How safe did you feel regarding the pandemic before Ireland lifted its COVID-19 restrictions? *

- I always felt safe.
- I felt safe some of the time.
- I didn't feel safe.

How safe do you feel regarding the pandemic in Ireland now? *

- I always feel safe
- I feel safe some of the time.
- I don't feel safe.

To what extent do you agree with China's Zero-Covid policy? *

- I fully support the Zero-Covid policy.
- I somewhat support the Zero-Covid policy.
- I don't support the Zero-Covid policy.

How satisfied are you with Ireland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic? *

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Unsatisfied
- Very unsatisfied

"Some of the measures used by the Chinese government against Covid-19 could be improved." *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

"I am well informed of the details of China's Zero-Covid policy (lockdown, mass testing, restrictions, etc.)" *

- A.Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Which country's COVID-19 policy do you prefer? *

- I prefer the COVID-19 policy in Ireland.
- I prefer the COVID-19 policy in China.
- There are aspects of both country's policies which I agree with.
- I agree with neither Ireland's nor China's COVID-19 policy.

Please provide reasons for your choice if you wish to

Your answer

To what extent do the Chinese government's current policies on Covid-19 have an impact on your desire to return to China? *

- Strong impact
- Some impact
- No impact

Please provide further comments if you wish to

Your answer

Appendix 2: Participants' Background Information

Pseudonym	Gender	University	Major
Jane	Female	Trinity College Dublin	Smart and Sustainable Cities
John	Male	University College Dublin	Human-Computer Interaction
Annie	Female	Trinity College Dublin	English Language Teaching

Appendix 3: Interview Questions Guide

1. How has the pandemic affected your life or study in Ireland?
2. Before restrictions were lifted, people were required to perform social distancing or reduce social activities. Did such requirements affect your language learning or study?
3. Do you think language plays an important role in your study or life in Ireland?
Do you think online classes have a great impact on your study?
4. Have you or someone you know received discrimination or unfriendly treatment from foreigners?
5. Is there a big difference between China and Ireland in terms of education styles?
6. Have you encountered any cultural difference that left a deep impression on you?
7. Were you worry about contracting Covid-19 before coming to Ireland? Have you become less worry with time?
8. Does wearing a mask in Ireland make you uncomfortable or self-conscious?
9. What is the mainstream attitude towards Covid-19 in China?
10. Will the zero-Covid policy influence your willingness to return to China?
11. In general, would you prefer to live in China or Ireland, given the differences in Covid policy?
12. Before coming to Ireland, what was your impression of it? Has your impression changed?
13. After living in Ireland for a while, do you see China or yourself as Chinese in different lights?

Appendix 4: Transcript of Jane

Researcher: How has the pandemic affected your life or study in Ireland?

Jane: In terms of education, the biggest problem is that we shifted to online classes. I think online classes are not suitable for teachers to teach. I felt that I needed to pay

extra effort and learned less. But one advantage of the online classes was that we could listen to the recording repeatedly. A big reason why I wanted to study in Ireland was that it offered face-to-face teaching. If it was online teaching, I could not experience the local culture and communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, or have further discussions with teachers. So the pandemic and everything restrictions that came with it influenced my education. As for my daily life, in the first semester, although Ireland was not in lockdown, many activities were canceled and many shops were closed. I was not sure if it was because it closed down, or because it was not allowed to open. I think we are still under impact. I still do not get to fully experience the culture of Ireland. But now I see more people in the streets and parks. Now it is easier for us to communicate with other people. I did not get as many opportunities to do so before. And before [Ireland lifted its restrictions] our class did not get to gather much.

Researcher: Before restrictions were lifted, people were required to perform social distancing or reduce social activities. Did such requirements affect your language learning or study?

Jane: I think they had. At that time I mostly communicated with others online so I just texted them. But it was not particularly helpful in improving my language skills. Now I go out to play with my local friends and my native English-speaking friends more often. In that way, I gain more exposure to English speaking environment.

Researcher: Do you think language plays an important role in your study or life in Ireland?

Jane: Language plays a very important role. Many times other people discuss things that people know or experience in Western society. As a Chinese, I do not understand them, so there is no way to join the conversations. I sometimes get angry with myself because I can not express what I mean properly in oral English. The other person may have to guess what I want to say. Generally speaking, I can communicate with everyone, but I can feel the differences in our habits of

communication. In daily communication, Westerners like small talk, but we Chinese do not do so. As a result, I often do not know how to react, and sometimes I worry about whether I look rude. Although I explained myself and people understood, I could not explain every time that I am not used to small talk.

Researcher: As you just mentioned, when you communicate with locals or foreign students, you usually encounter cultural differences. Can you give some examples?

Jane: One cultural difference that frequently occurs is people here like to talk about politics, which is an area that I do not know at all. It is the same when they talk about books, movies, and music that I haven't heard of. Sometimes they talk about things that I know, but I do not know how to discuss them in English. But I do not feel anxious. Because I think it is normal to encounter cultural differences.

Researcher: Do you prefer to talk and socialize with Chinese people or foreigners?

Jane: I tended to hang out with Chinese at first. Because our habits were similar and my English was not good. This applies to many Chinese. It's easier for us to communicate with Chinese people. But as I've been here for so long, I'm now living with an Irish, and I might hang out with the locals, I think it depends on how long you stay here, but I still think English is very important. Language determines whether you can experience authentic culture or not.

Researcher: So you do not feel forced to integrate into the circles of local people?

Jane: But I would like to improve my English. Everyone is generally friendly. When they chat with me, everyone is willing to speak slowly. I can fully understand them and can communicate with them. But when native English speakers communicate with each other, they speak very fast, and they also involve many topics relevant to their cultural background. In times like this, I would hope my English is better.

Researcher: Have you or someone you know received discrimination or unfriendly treatment from foreigners?

Jane: I have a friend whose teammate refused to talk to him when doing teamwork because he is Chinese.

Researcher: What do you think is the reason for this?

Jane: I think it was because the teammate did not trust my friend's ability. My friend was not good at expressing himself in English, and he was not able to show his skills. So his teammate might question his ability. He may worry that my friend would be a burden so he just excluded my friend from the project.

Researcher: Did you worry about being discriminated against by foreigners before coming to Ireland?

Jane: I sometimes worry a little bit about walking down the street and being attacked by racists.

Researcher: What do you think are the main reasons for discrimination against the Chinese?

Jane: Because some foreigners hold stereotypes about Chinese students and Chinese people. Maybe they feel that Asians are taking resources away from themselves. Although in China sometimes there is this "China v.s. the West" mentality, when I came to Ireland, I found that foreigners around me did not care about Asians very much. They may only see Asians on the news occasionally, and they do not interact with them a lot.

Researcher: Do you think the Irish government, schools or communities have provided sufficient aid in the pandemic?

Jane: What I've learned is that the school would help you if you run into problems caused by Covid. For example, when you are quarantined at home, if no one can send you the necessities or medicine you need, the school may send someone to help you.

Researcher: Have you encountered many difficulties in your studies?

Jane: The language barrier is a big problem. Because compared to native English speakers, I need more time to read and understand a large number of English materials. In addition, I enrolled in a program that was different from my undergraduate programme, so I needed to spend extra effort learning. So you could say I was quite stressed.

Researcher: Is there a big difference between China and Ireland in terms of education styles?

Jane: Yes. Here people like to ask questions and speak in class. In China, you are not encouraged to raise a lot of questions and you are expected to give answers. Teachers in Ireland encourage you to answer, ask questions, put forward ideas, speak out, and then express your ideas in different ways. This is very refreshing and is completely unfamiliar territory for me. In addition, when doing group projects, sometimes it was quite interesting to find that how I approach the problem was different from others. But I felt embarrassed when others did not quite understand my approaches or proposals. But my classmates were quite friendly, and they gave me enough space and time to explain my thoughts.

Researcher: Do you think the school provides enough help for international students who are not native speakers?

Jane: The school did offer language courses. I took these courses but gave up halfway through. The big reason was that students' English levels were very different, so it was hard to practice properly. The teacher was more inclined to ask students with good English questions because those students could communicate with him more smoothly. As you know, time was limited for each class so he could teach more by talking with students with good English. Therefore, it could be difficult for other students with poor English to improve their English by attending such courses.

Researcher: How do you feel about the pandemic in Dublin or Ireland in general?

Jane: On the whole, people do not care about it now. After all, there are a lot of

foreigners in this city, and many tourists and these tourists are less likely to wear masks after landing. People are not social distancing now, so it feels like we are back before the pandemic and life is normal.

Researcher: Do people with Covid-19 required to self-quarantine?

Jane: I do not know about the exact requirement is, but among our Chinese students, I still heard that someone has recently tested positive and Chinese usually self-isolate themselves. Then his/her Chinese roommates will move out. If someone is positive, he/her will take some measures, and ask the people he saw to take some measures, and then he will still self-isolate.

Researcher: What about foreigners??

Jane: Half and half I think. Most women I know will isolate themselves at home, while men may just go out to socialize and drink as usual.

Researcher: How would you feel if your friends had been infected but did not self-isolate?

Jane: I will not be in contact with the infected person for at least that week, and I feel he should inform the people around him that he is positive. If he doesn't tell anyone at all, and then goes out by himself, it is irresponsible of him.

Researcher: Do you think the Irish and Chinese view Covid-19 differently?

Jane: The Chinese will be more concerned about whether people infected perform. They will be more afraid of getting Covid. But for foreigners, I think white middle-aged and elderly people still take action to avoid getting it. My landlord still wears masks from time to time. Many elderly people still wear masks, but for them, they may be more vulnerable to the virus, so they will still pay attention.

Researcher: If you go out now, how often do you wear a mask?

Jane: I do not wear it at all.

Researcher: Now that you are sharing an apartment with others, do you pay more attention to preventive methods? Are you afraid of infecting your roommate?

Jane: If I am positive, I will definitely tell my landlord, and because my landlord is very nice, he is middle-aged and doesn't take the virus very seriously. At the same time, he is also very fond of partying and playing with friends.

Researcher: Suppose you lived with your landlord and got infected by him; or if your friend got infected and did not tell you, and you got infected, imagine how you would feel?

Jane: First of all, I will definitely be angry, and then blame my friends for not telling me. I will ask him/her to inform other people next time the same situation occurs. But here even if you are infected with Covid there is little you can do. So I will focus on taking care of myself.

Researcher: You just said that there is little people can do if they contract the virus in Ireland, can you elaborate on what you mean?

Jane: Because you do not know how sick you are before the hospital will treat you. I myself had the experience of contracting the virus twice, one without symptoms and the other with mild symptoms. For patients with mild symptoms, the school may ask you to just follow the official recommendations here. You stay at home, and then you may take some medicine or drink a lot of water. But I do not know what is considered moderate or severe symptoms. If that happens to me, which number should I call, should I go to my GP or contact the ambulance? I am quite confused by the policies.

Researcher: Does this unclear guidance make you feel more confused or less secure?

Jane: I was very insecure before I came to Ireland and afraid of getting Covid. But when you live here for a period of time, influenced by the people around you with

many people already having been infected, and found that the symptoms are similar to cold for people of my age, gradually you are not afraid of infection.

Researcher: Do you think more guidance or assistance from the government or society is necessary?

Jane: First, Ireland opened up too early and the pandemic was still at its peak. I think Ireland opened up to boost the declining economy and to attract more tourists. The Irish government did not impose any restrictions on tourists at all. Mask and social distancing are not mandatory for locals. In the case of tourists, tourists may not necessarily follow or are unaware of local guidelines.

Researcher: Do you want the government to extend the mask mandates? Does it make you feel unsafe to have someone nearby who is not wearing a mask?

Jane: I personally do not mind people not wearing masks, I have been infected and vaccinated, and I think I have antibodies.

Researcher: You just said that before you came to Ireland, you were very worried about getting infected. When did you feel like you could be less concerned over Covid?

Jane: As I mentioned, you became less worried when people around you treated Covid as if it was not a deadly disease. For example, when I was born in China, everyone was always wearing masks and using sanitisers. I agreed that you need to wear masks on buses or in some crowded places, but I myself do not like China's restrictions very much. So after coming to Ireland, I felt more comfortable and less stressed because of the policy in Ireland and the attitude of people not over-reacting to the virus.

Researcher: What factors in China make it stressful for you?

Jane: Certain restrictions seem unacceptable and unbelievable. The first restriction that I do not like is mandatory mask wearing. My lung capacity is very poor.

Sometimes wearing masks made it hard to breathe. When I was in China, we were asked to wear masks all the time when we were outside. Even if my city did not have any new confirmed cases, we were still required to wear masks. For over a year I had to wear masks to work and it was very uncomfortable.

Researcher: What is the general impression on Covid-19 in China?

I: Like a monster. Many people are very worried about sequelae, which the government talked about a lot. But recently I think more people are worried about more practical things after being infected. For example, how the government will treat you, whether people around you will look at you strangely, or whether you will be treated unfairly in daily life. The Chinese are very afraid of infection. Because in China, propaganda makes people feel that if they are infected, they will be affected for the rest of their lives. A friend of mine was so scared that he wore three masks, two ordinary masks and one n95 mask when he was on the high-speed train. I personally feel uncomfortable wearing the n95 for an hour or two, but he endured the discomfort the whole time. At the same time, he also used sanitisers to disinfect many times. After getting off the train, he changed all his clothes and disinfected them. At first, people were afraid of getting Covid-19. Later, everyone was also afraid that the government would force them to quarantine. According to police, a single case could result in the lockdown of a building or even a community. Everyone worried that new cases will cause a lot of trouble and inconvenience to themselves.

I have a friend whose mother was sick during the lockdown. There was no way for her to go to the hospital for treatment. So at that time, since the illness made her very uncomfortable, and she was afraid that her condition would get worse, she could only take some strange medicine. My friend was not in the same city as her, and under the lockdown, my friend could not go back to his mother to take care of her. So my friend felt very anxious and distressed. I think in that situation, if you got sick and if you live alone, things could get very dangerous

Researcher: Could you please share how Covid-19 is framed by mainstream media in China according to your observation?

Jane: What the media mainly reports is how effective our zero-Covid policy is. They also talk about what measures did the government take when there were new cases. However, how to treat the patients and the follow-up of the patients will not be reported. I think the media likes to use the death toll to show how scary the virus is. The media only mentions a statistical figure. But the actual situation of the infected people has not been reported. In the beginning, people did not know much about the virus. Indeed the death toll is very high. But the virus has been changing, and China's policy has not changed much. But China's reports on our fight against the pandemic focus on positive things. It also attacks foreign countries' measures in dealing with the pandemic. People keep saying foreign countries should copy our homework. But apart from the failure of foreign countries to control the pandemic, the situations in other countries are not reported much. At the same time, I think the government has only exaggerated the harm of the virus. Many people get flu every year, and the death rate from flu is also high. But there are few reports of the flu. I think the government has taken advantage of people's lack of knowledge and information on relevant issues.

Researcher: On Chinese social media, what do you think is the mainstream opinion of netizens towards the pandemic in foreign countries?

Jane: Their attitudes are quite negative. Some people envy the people in foreign countries as there are fewer restrictions. But more people would say that life abroad is very dangerous and the government is irresponsible for letting so many people be exposed to Covid-19.

Researcher: After living in Ireland for a while, do you think China's coverage of the pandemic in foreign countries is comprehensive?

Jane: Everyone receives different news, and when you are in China, your choice of sources of information is relatively limited. However, since international students

receive information from Ireland and China, we can make our judgments. When you are in China, if you only gain information from one source, it is normal to have a one-sided view. However, some people will accuse overseas Chinese or students returning to China of "bringing virus from thousands of miles". I think it is very mean and extreme. For overseas Chinese, many friends of mine have paid very high prices to return to China. Because people who had infected Covid have to go through a lot of procedures to return to China. So my friends have to give up participating in many social activities to return to China. Then they need to pay a very high price to buy a flight ticket and spend two weeks in quarantine. As far as I know, it may cost about 5,000-6,000 euros in total. Then because you are in China, you need to pay for quarantine. And as far as I know, if international students get Covid in China, they need to pay for treatment, so the overall cost is very high. After you return to China, some of the staff are not particularly friendly to you. They may be worried that they will be infected, or that their work will be affected, so they are unkind to you. But when international students return to China after such a long time, after they put up with quarantine, maybe their colleagues and relatives would avoid seeing them, which I think is a very cruel thing.

Researcher: Why do you think people considered overseas Chinese returning home would "bring the virus from thousands of miles"?

Jane: I think the government or the media is to be blamed for the popularity of the phrase "bring the virus from thousands of miles". They fail to inform and educate people about the current status of the pandemic. People may think that people from abroad are carrying the virus or that they are pathogens. This view is very wrong. In addition, due to the lack of empathy among people towards those who return from overseas, some people in China strongly oppose people returning to China. They may think that they can be safe just by keeping people out.

Researcher: In China, there is a popular view that lockdown and restrictions are to prevent people from getting Covid and dying. Do you agree with this view?

Jane: I agreed in the beginning and later stages of the pandemic. But I think now the government is too lazy to improve the policy or introduce new measures. They think the zero-Covid policy works will continue to work. According to the news reports I have seen, the Omicron variant is already very mild, and the government should not continue to take such intense control.

Researcher: What measures do you think the government should improve?

Jane: The first is that the private and personal information of patients should not be exposed. Second, the government should provide corresponding subsidies. Because of lockdown, many people are laid-off. Although they are unemployed, they still have to pay rent and pay taxes to the government. Although people avoid getting Covid, they cannot survive losing their jobs and not having an income. I think the government should correct people's understanding of the virus. In China, the sources of information are usually controlled by the government, so the government should take responsibility to provide scientific and objective information about the virus and pandemic.

Researcher: Have you, or someone you know, change their view on the zero-Covid policy drastically?

Jane: Both my friend and I changed our view. At first, everyone felt that short-term sacrifices were needed to fight the pandemic. Some problems caused by restrictions seemed very far away because they did not happen to us. But when the restrictions are getting tighter and tighter, when you become the person being sacrificed, you can fully understand how unreasonable such a strict policy is. Many Chinese university students have been forced to stay in school for several months because of the pandemic. They were forced to stay in dorms, which may be less than 10 square meters, for long periods. Their lives are very difficult.

Researcher: Will the zero-Covid policy influence your willingness to return to China?

Jane: I will not return to China until the lockdown and quarantine policies are lifted.

Because I am not willing to pay a high price for this unscientific and unreasonable policy.

Researcher: In general, would you prefer to live in China or Ireland, given the differences in Covid policy?

Jane: I prefer Ireland because I can not accept the lockdown and the loss of income. At the same time, there are almost no welfare subsidies in China for such incidents. I haven't experienced a lockdown, but doing PCR testing every day is unacceptable to me. Even if I am abroad and have a higher chance of getting Covid, I still prefer to stay in Ireland. As a young person, I think the effect of the virus on me is mild. But at home, I can not afford to be fired or have no income because of the lockdown. The city may be closed for several months, or it may be closed from time to time. I feel very insecure. At the same time, I have noticed that there is discrimination or cyberbullying against people who get Covid in China. The privacy of some patients is exposed. For example, there have been some cases in China where people went out or travelled without knowing they had Covid. They were accused of spreading the virus. I think this accusation is unacceptable. Because they may not know they were infected. They also did not spread the virus on purpose. There are reports of infected people being physically harmed, which I do not think is acceptable.

Researcher: After living in Ireland for a while, do you see China or yourself as Chinese in different lights?

Jane: I think in terms of me being Chinese, it seems that Chinese are not treated differently. In real life, everyone is very friendly. But when I think about the differences in attitudes and control towards the pandemic, I realize that the Chinese are particularly good at enduring discomfort. Under such a high-pressure policy, the Chinese subconsciously feel that we should sacrifice the interests of a small number of people for the benefit of the collective. I think this characteristic is highlighted by the pandemic. But, we do not really pay much attention to the suffering of the people being sacrificed. I think this is something we should think about and do better.

Appendix 5: Transcript of John

Researcher: Have you gotten used to life in Ireland?

John: I think I've gotten used to it. 70% to 80%.

Researcher: When you first arrived in Ireland, did you have any anxiety or faced big challenges?

John: I felt very anxious at the beginning. Firstly I felt anxious because of the pandemic. For example, I had to wear a mask every day. I had to worry about whether someone downstairs got Covid-19, or whether someone in my building got it. These made me anxious. More anxiety came from my daily life. Because I had never lived outside of my hometown or in a foreign country independently. I hadn't had to manage my studies myself and make plans. I did not have those skills. Now I have to coordinate and manage multiple tasks every day and study several courses. I also have to deal with many issues, such as figuring out how to get my IRP. Such form the second source of my anxiety. The greatest anxiety comes from studying. At first, I could only understand 20% or 30% of the English course. I had to use a recorder and learn from transcription, and I needed to listen to the recording many times. That was the biggest source of my anxiety. But later it was resolved. Because on the one hand, when I asked my classmates about those recordings, they could not understand them too, and those recordings were that important. I could not understand the teachers because of things like accent, conjunctions, the underscore or jokes they made. I took the course Media Theory and Media Society for two semesters, and I still can not understand why this course appeared in my Human-Computer Interaction programme. This course means little to my career and it doesn't enhance my understanding of Western culture. On the other hand, the reason I could not understand the content of Media Theory and Media Society was that this course involved themes such as western TV series, political affairs, and LGBT topics. But I could not understand what people were talking about! Later, I

realized that I need to make a clear plan of what I needed to learn. Indeed, I do not understand those topics things. But I do not need to feel overwhelmed.

Researcher: Is anxiety causing problems with your health or bringing you any discomfort?

John: Yes. The last three or five months have been really difficult as I need to meet deadlines for assignments. I lost more than ten pounds after coming to Ireland, while many people around me gained weight. Because after spending hours on study, I need to cook for myself. It isn't until eight or nine o'clock that I finish my work and eat dinner. I am probably not taking good care of myself and I have been sick several times after coming to Ireland. I went to the GP twice, one for a fungal infection in my legs, and one for my hand with my 9 fingers having eczema. Those illnesses really take a toll on my body.

Researcher: How long did it take you to feel less anxious?

John: It took about three to five months for things to get better. It took at least a month to familiarize myself with how to cook and how buy vegetables. I also had to figure out the locations of supermarkets. Then it took a month or two to get familiar with modules. Then I spend a month getting used to studying. All of these things happened at the same time.

Researcher: Did you seek help?

John: Yes. When I did not understand how things worked in Ireland, I kept calling the hotline. I lied to the people who picked up the call that I had a Japanese girlfriend, and she broke up with me because I could not speak English well. I asked the staff what should I do. But he refused to give me advice, he just listened. I was annoyed. But I did not know other channels to get help. I listened to music and watch TV series by myself, studied alone, and then got through it. I did not get much help from my classmates either. I just made it by myself.

Researcher: Do you think language is the biggest obstacle you encounter in social life or academic life?

John: Yes, at first language was the biggest problem. Gradually it becomes less important. Now I communicate with people just fine. But socializing is a problem for me. I need to pay a lot of money and spend a lot of time. If we want to develop closer relationships with other people, we have to spend time and money.

Researcher: Do you think the pandemic make it harder for you to improve your English?

John: Very much. Without the pandemic, I would be able to attend face-to-face classes and I can discuss things with my classmates in person. Because of the pandemic, each week 3 classes out of 4 were online classes, and the face-to-face ones were open to many students. But I am not sure as I have never experienced small class teaching. For two semesters, I did not get to meet my mentor personally nor know many classmates.

Researcher: Do you think online classes have a great impact on your study?

John: I do not think online classes have much impact on what I could learn. I do not think we'll learn very much anyway. I prefer face-to-face classes because they allow me to interact and work with foreigners. People are less willing to have discussions in online classes. When we did group projects in online classes, people usually choose to work with other Chinese. I think fact-to-face classes are necessary and important. There are benefits to having online classes. But for international students, it is still necessary to provide face-to-face classes for core modules.

Researcher: What aspect of the Irish education model is most challenging?

John: I do not like the design of my programme. When most people think of Human-computer Interaction, they think of coding or design. But I only knew that design-oriented courses account for 20% after reading the handbook. Coursework was mostly writing theses, on topics such as the history of human-computer

interaction and media. I refused to write this kind of theses. The school tried to fit many contents into our programme. They should allow students to choose courses according to their career plans or preferences. But many of the courses I could choose did not suit my career plan. For example, I was a student studying science in China, but here I was required to write about history. It was a waste of time. I think this is rather unreasonable.

Researcher: Who do you hang out with more, Chinese or foreigners?

John: Mainly Chinese people. I only have two or three foreign friends, some of whom have returned to the United States.

Researcher: Do you think you need to hang out with more foreigners or become part of their circles?

John: Actually, I have thought about this too. But our class have not held many face-to-face meetings. So we are not closed. If I make friends with foreigners, I prefer them to be my classmates, so I haven't joined many societies activities. If I plan to work in Ireland for a period of time, I have to broaden my network with people from foreign countries. For someone like me who is going to return to China, this kind of relationship may not matter much. It is enough to have a certain amount of friends or know how to help when you are abroad. In the end, I am too lazy to make friends with foreigners.

Researcher: Many people say that international students should communicate and make friends with foreigners when they are abroad. Do you agree with this statement?

John: I agree with this statement to a certain extent. I do not think you have to associate with foreigners when you come to a foreign country. In fact, in many places, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, more than half of a class is Chinese, and they may think they are taking classes in China. So they do not have so many foreign friends or opportunities to hang out with foreigners. There are relatively

few Chinese in Ireland, accounting for only one or two per cent of the population if my memory serves me right. Now that we have such opportunities to meet foreigners, we must seize the opportunity to learn about different cultures and to socialize with foreigners.

Researcher: There are some stereotypes about Chinese people that Chinese students are not talkative, or that Chinese people always live in their own little circles. Do you agree with this statement?

John: I think the reason behind these stereotypes is that we're not confident enough to venture out. This really can not be changed. Even in the United States some people still play together in groups. But it does not mean that the Chinese set up a small circle and keep foreigners out. I think Chinese people are free to hang out with other Chinese, but they also have to have the courage to communicate with foreign classmates or to make more foreign friends from different backgrounds. People can not just hide in their own circle. I have not experienced scenarios of these stereotypes. If people do hold such stereotypes, we need to reflect on our behaviours. Whether it is true that others try to speak to you but you ignore them? Even if you do not understand what they mean, you can say "Sorry, I do not know what you mean". You can say that you do not understand, but if you appear unwilling to communicate with others, and limit yourself to the Chinese social circle, then you should make some changes. If we are confident in our culture and that we are willing to interact with others but foreigners still look at us with these stereotypes, then we must speak up.

Researcher: What do you think of the current pandemic situation in Ireland?

John: I think things have gone back to normal. If you wear a mask, get vaccinated, and wash your hands from time to time, then there's nothing to worry about. Although everyone around me had got Covid-19.

Researcher: Are you worried about getting Covid-19?

John: I already got it.

Researcher: Were you worried before you came to Ireland?

John: Very worried. At first, we were told people would die if they got Covid-19. And it would cause irreversible damage to people. Then gradually research pointed out that the virus was not as terrible as we thought. But the virus is very dangerous for middle-aged and elderly people.

Researcher: When did you start feeling less afraid of infection?

John: When seven or eight out of ten people around you have been infected, and then some of them have been infected several times, you do not feel so scared. It is impossible to wear a mask 24 hours a day. Sometimes I need to take off my mask to sneeze. You could get infected when you go out to eat, no matter how cautious you are. As long as we know what to do after infection, we would be fine. We can not just dwell on the idea that once get infected people would die. Rather, more research needs to be done on the virus.

Researcher: Are your families worried about you contracting Covid-19-in Ireland?

John: They were very worried. I shared with my mother the knowledge of Covid-19 from time to time. After being infected, I tested negative on the fourth or fifth day. I did not cough much, and I did not have any headaches. I had a fever and a sore throat for a day. While being sick is always uncomfortable, Covid-19 is not a deadly disease. We should let people know that this disease is not as terrible as the media said.

Researcher: Did your families always remind you to take precautions?

John: Yes and I understand why they were worried. But I also explained to them that it works differently for young people and elderly people.

Researcher: What is the mainstream attitude towards the pandemic in China?

John: There are those who support the zero-case policy and those who support lifting them. For example, if ordinary people are locked in their homes and not able to go to work for one month or two months, they are left with no income. If young people do not have income or lose their jobs due to the zero-case policy, it would be a disaster for them. It is true that the elderly are protected. But young people and low-income families are suffering from a lack of jobs or no income. Low-income families are not like rich people. For example, my former classmate is in Shanghai and he may still be able to buy supplies using his connections during the lockdown. But not all people in China are rich. If you barely make ends meet, you would starve you lose your job. The policy should try to protect the elderly, but also pay attention to the interests of the lower class.

Researcher: Do you think China's policy on Covid-19-19 needs to be improved? Or should it learn from foreign countries?

John: The pandemic is constantly changing. Our pandemic prevention measures are also being adjusted. Pandemic prevention measures will definitely be regulated in accordance with the development of the pandemic. People who should wear masks should still be encouraged to wear masks. I think it's scientifically sound in Ireland not to require people to wear masks. Elderly people in Ireland who know the severity of Covid-19 still wear masks when they go to the mall and take the bus. In fact, young people also need to realize that wearing masks can prevent the elderly from being infected. Wearing a mask isn't just to protect yourself. People need to think about others and have empathy. I hope everyone can be empathetic. No one should be sacrificed.

Researcher: Do you think Ireland lifted the masks mandate too soon?

John: In a way yes

Researcher: Will it make you feel more secure if it were extended?

John: I wouldn't say it makes me feel more secure. But I think asking people to wear masks is necessary. Because Covid-19 will damage the immune system of

middle-aged and elderly people. We should wear masks even if just to protect them. But I do not think the mask order has an impact on me personally.

Researcher: Does wearing a mask in Ireland make you uncomfortable or self-conscious?

John: Wearing a mask for too long can be a little uncomfortable, but that's okay, it's a useful preventive measure.

Researcher: Would you feel uncomfortable if someone without a mask come near you?

John: Not really.

Researcher: Have you or someone you know received discrimination or unfriendly treatment from foreigners?

John: I think it is Chinese people who discriminated against other Chinese people.

Researcher: Could you elaborate on that?

John: When one of my roommates got Covid-19, another roommate took all his things in the kitchen back to his room, such as rice cookers and pots. The roommate who got Covid-19 usually used my rice cooker because he did not have his own rice cooker. If everyone left him be, he would have to starve. So I sent him rice and he ordered other food. I think Chinese people avoid people who get Covid-19 like a plague. But sometimes you have to show sympathy to other people. You can not just say those people who get Covid-19 are asking for it. You can not ban those people from coming out of the room and touching anything. The person who gets Covid-19 must be quite lost and upset. You can not be too harsh on them. We are all Chinese and we should help each other

Researcher: Do you think people who get Covid-19 are being discriminated against in China?

John: Of course they are. Those people are being discriminated against in the job market. In 2020, I was working in Guangzhou and Liwan District had reported several

cases. There are only a few new cases a day, but when a boss I know moved from Liwan District to Haizhu District, some people in Haizhu District said that he carried the virus because he was from Liwan District. How was that possible? There were only a few cases out of tens of millions of people. When a city reports new cases, people from other cities would blame people in that city. For example, when Shanghai reported new cases a few months ago, people from other cities said on social media that people who left Shanghai at that time were trying to spread the virus.

Researcher: What do you think is the main reason behind such an attitude?

John: I'm not too sure. Maybe they are so used to the zero-case policy, and not having new cases, that they think having new cases is unacceptable. Once there are new cases, people can not go out. People must stay at home and wait until those infected people are under the management of the government. I do not agree with the discrimination some people held. People can not bully their fellow citizens who have Covid-19 for going out. Those people do not realize they are infected.

Researcher: Do you think the government should help its people look at Covid-19 more scientifically?

John: Yes, for sure. For example, the government should let us know how infectious Covid-19 is for young people. What happens to them after they have Covid-19? How many people die and how many people have sequelae? The government should provide statistics and keep people informed. do not focus entirely on the negative side and make people scared. do not just boast about our zero-case policy and controls. The country should employ scientific measures and respect people's wishes.

Researcher: After living in Ireland for a while, do you see China or yourself as Chinese in different lights?

John: Are we allowed to talk about it?

Researcher: If you wish to.

John: Nothing much has changed. But I know that foreign countries allow a higher degree of freedom. I think China should be open to different opinions and accept criticism from people. Show respect to science and acknowledge its own weakness.

Researcher: Are these feelings generated after you learned about some foreign concepts?

John: Of course, foreign countries are not perfect. In fact, China and foreign countries should learn from each other's strengths. The Chinese prefer collectivism. Because there are so many people in China, the interests of most people must be protected, hence we have the zero-case policy. Whereas foreign countries promote individualism. Policies should be made according to the condition of a country. No system is perfect. And not everything from foreign countries is good.

Researcher: Before coming to Ireland, what was your impression of it? Has your impression changed?

John: I originally thought that Ireland was much more developed than China and it had better infrastructure. But when I came here, I found that Ireland was not as developed as China in terms of material conditions. For example, there is no e-commerce, high-speed railways, or infrastructure. And you can not rent power banks in large shopping malls. Maybe people here do not really need them.

Researcher: Do you agree that you are integrated into Irish society?

John: I think because I am not working in Ireland, I can not say I have integrated into Ireland. I think you have to work here for a certain period of time. Right now what I mostly do is study, and I do not feel being a part of society.

Researcher: Do you like the Irish culture or environment?

John: I mostly pay attention to the job market and stuff like that. To a certain extent, foreign countries promote life and work balance. People do not have to work

overtime here, and they enjoy many benefits and holidays. China falls short in such areas. But China is more advanced in terms of material conditions and infrastructure. Should China sacrifice its advanced material culture for things like work and life balance? Not really, in my opinion.

Researcher: Would you prefer to work and live in China or Ireland?

John: I want to stay here for a while, but because my families want me to go back, I will still return to China. In terms of personal development, I think that ordinary people should have the courage to try to stay in Ireland now that they are abroad. Having working experience abroad is good for their career. The competition in China is very intense. There are more than 11.8 million fresh graduates this year. I think you need to be really competitive if you want to find a good job in China. My degree here is not that useful in China.

Researcher: Will the zero-Covid policy influence your willingness to return to China?

John: I am devastated. People get depressed when their flights are canceled and the government is imposing stricter restrictions to stop them from going home. It got too much and I stopped thinking about it for a while. Tickets must be bought at least a few months in advance. Those with more money may be able to buy several plane tickets. Ordinary people can only afford one. And you are lucky if you manage to buy a ticket for 3,000 or 4000 euros. The government is not helping. So everything just feels so frustrated.

Researcher: As an international student, how do you feel when you find out it is so difficult for Chinese people to return to China?

John: I feel upset, of course. First of all, as a student, I want to focus on my studies. It is so hard to squeeze several hours a day trying to buy a ticket and search for information. And in the end, you may not be able to buy a ticket. Overseas Chinese have always called for more help from consulates. Hopefully, they would do something to help us.

Appendix 6: Transcript of Annie

Researcher: Have you gotten used to life in Ireland?

Annie: I used to feel very stressed. But I am doing much better now. There were a lot of restrictions when I arrived at Ireland. If we wanted to go to the restaurant, we needed to show our vaccination certificates. I got a booster shot a few months ago and HSE issued a certificate to me. In Ireland, since there are no more Covid restriction, we do not use the certificate anymore. Now I always wear a face mask when I go to the mall or take the bus. So I do not worry about the pandemic too much.

Researcher: Did you feel unsafe about the pandemic in Ireland?

Annie: I think Ireland's policies on Covid-19 were quite lax. I was worried when the government first lifted all the controls. Now I would still avoid going to crowded places, such as a bar or a restaurant. I only go to places like these once in a while. On St Patrick's Day, I wore two layers of masks. When I returned home I took some medicine recommended by the Chinese government just in case. I used to live with other students and each of us lived in a en-suite. One of my roommates contracted Covid-19 at Christmas because he went to bars and parties. I was so nervous when I found out. So I sprayed disinfectant in the common room

Researcher: Were you worried about the discomfort caused by Covid-19 or sequela?

Annie: I mostly worried about the sequelae. First of all, the patient feels very uncomfortable. I know some Chinese students who had infected with Covid-19. They not only feel really bad but also under great pressure psychologically and financially. Because Ireland is not like China. In China the government pay for people's treatment. In China, if you get Covid-19, the government will take you to the hospital. The medical staffs take good care of you until you recover. But if you get

Covid-19 in Ireland, the government basically just tells you to stay at home and self-isolate. No one is going to make sure you stay at home though. Some people who have Covid-19 just go out and no one can do anything about it. The Chinese students I know are more well-behaved. They isolated themselves and ordered their own food or had it delivered by friends. Ordering take out cost a lot of money. Since they were not admitted by hospitals, they worried whether their symptoms would get worse. Being in a foreign country without families is no doubt stressful. Although they used self-testing kits, they did not know whether they turned negative or not, since they did not take a PCR test or a CT scan. Some of my classmates still have sequelae after recovering from Covid-19. Some people say they cough all the time and some feel tired easily. So I have to try to protect myself from getting Covid-19.

Researcher: What is the attitude of some foreigners you know towards Covid-19?

Annie: I can tell you the experience of my roommate who got Covid19. He is Irish and he went home when he found out he got COVID-19. I asked him how he was feeling and he said he was not showing any symptoms. But I heard him coughing in the next room a few days before he found out he had COVID-19. He was very strong and he liked to do sports very much. But COVID-19 took a toll on him and he might have sequela. I do not think people here take COVID-19 seriously. They probably think it's just a little more serious than a cold. I think this why so many people in Ireland have been infected. My professor and his whole family got COVID-19 last month, including his baby who was only a few months old. They really should not let their guard down and let the virus spread everywhere. Adults can stand the discomfort, but kids are vulnerable.

Researcher: In your opinion, what is the main reason behind the different attitudes of Chinese and Irish towards COVID-19?

Annie: I think it depends on what the government tell people. People in foreign countries believe if they have a good immune system they do not get COVID-19. And they would recover soon if they have a strong body. So they do not care if they get

COVID-19 or not. In China, we paid a huge price at the beginning. At that time, we did not know much about the virus and we did not know how to treat it. It was much later that we had our own vaccine. We learn from the past and know that if we allow the virus to spread, it would be a disaster for the people. So we think and act differently from foreign countries. Foreign countries just “lie flat”. China is now adopting the zero-Covid policy. Before I left China, there were almost no cases in China. But we always wore masks when we went out. No one questioned the mask requirement or health code. People would not think their privacy is being violated. I think nothing is more important than people’s lives. I think Chinese people understand the value of people’s lives than people in foreign countries do.

Researcher: Has anyone in Ireland ask why you're still wearing a face mask?

Annie: They do not ask why I wear a mask or why I continue to be cautious. They respect my decision and opinion. Teachers, for example, wear masks in class. Even if some teachers do not wear masks in class, they ask the class whether they can take their masks off. They also let us choose whether or not we want to wear masks when we have discussion in class. When I traveled to England last month, two girls wanted to help me with my suitcase. I was wearing a mask, and before they helped me, they asked if they should wear one too. I think everyone respects my wishes.

Researcher: Do you feel uncomfortable or self-conscious wearing a face mask?

Annie: What makes me uncomfortable is that only me or my friend wear a mask now. I'm a little worried if I seem weird. But I wouldn't ask anyone else to wear a mask. I just hope people do not look at me strangely.

Researcher: Do you think the masks mandate should be extended? Do you think Ireland should learn from China?

Annie: I think the government should order people to wear face masks. A few days ago I saw it on the news that hospitals were under great pressure, and the number of cases was rising. Now there's monkeypox in addition to COVID-19. So I hope the

government encourage people to wear masks in crowded places and continue to use hand sanitizers. Now neither the university nor shopping malls offer hand sanitizer anymore. I think there are problems in their way dealing with Covid-19 and they should fix them.

Researcher: What is the mainstream attitude towards Covid-19 in China?

Annie: People are less frightened now. People really have trust in our government. We know that even if we get COVID-19, the government would take care of us. Then as long as we are admitted in hospitals, we are sure to be able to enjoy the advanced equipment and medicine. The hospital will make sure that we are cured before they release us. But I understand why some people feel frustrated about long-term containment and rounds of PCR testing. Since people are under so much pressure at work and have families to feed so they might consider such measures a waste of money and time. I think China could improve some restrictions.

Researcher: In terms of control restrictions, which country do you prefer to stay in?

Annie: China and Ireland are different in many aspects and they make their policies based on national conditions. Ireland is so large and sparsely populated that even if the virus were to spread, it would not infect many people. But there are 1.4 billion people in China. If we do not implement the zero-case policy, hundreds of thousands of people could be infected. Hospitals would not be able to handle it. Our medical system would collapse. So we should continue the zero-case policy. So I think the policies of the two countries are reasonable.

Researcher: Were you afraid of getting COVID-19 when you first came to Ireland?

Annie: I was quite scared and worried. Before I came to Ireland, Ireland lifted some of the travel restrictions and as a result there were thousands of new cases each day. There were almost no new cases in China. So I felt scared about the prospect of going to Ireland which saw a spike in new cases.

Researcher: How do you cope with the stress?

Annie: First of all, I always wore a face mask. Secondly, people gradually cared less about the pandemic. We gradually stopped talking about it like it was something horrible. And I avoid going to crowded places. If I went to a crowded place, such as the cinema, I took a shower and changed my clothes after I arrived at home.

Researcher: Did the worry you feel affect your health?

Annie: I was very anxious when I first came to Ireland. Because of jet lag and the climate and food in Ireland, I could not sleep at night and felt nausea. I did not feel like eating and I had diarrhea. Then I went to the pharmacy to buy some medicine. My body gradually adapted to the climate and the pace of life in Ireland and I felt less anxious. The first week or two was really rough for me.

Researcher: Because of the pandemic, many activities had been canceled. Do you think it has had any negative impact on your integration into Ireland?

Annie: The pandemic have had caused great troubles to my life in Ireland. Irish people are very fond of going to bars and drinking. But I'm afraid of going to bars because bars are full of people. I've only been to the bar once or twice in the past year. My classmates invited me to have a drink but I turned them down. The Chinese I know are cautious too. In the bar, we wear masks all the time. To avoid infection, we do not order drinks or food. We just listen to the foreign students, but we do not take off our masks, and we dare not eat out. So we feel there is a big gap between us and foreigners. We are so different from them. Foreigners may respect our choices, but they might not want to have us in their group. Most activities have been canceled due to pandemic. I think the pandemic has been a very big problem for international students who want to blend in the Irish society.

Researcher: Do you face the dilemma of continuing to be cautious or joining more activities like other foreigners?

Annie: I have this internal struggle all the time. Now when we go to some events, no

one wear face mask except me and my friend. It's times like this when I'm torn between fitting in or remaining careful. I have this struggle every time when I think about joining an activity. I turned down some events, like parties. Sometimes I wanted to go to an event but there were too many people. I always weighed the pros and cons to decide whether I should go.

Researcher: Did you take off your mask when you participated in those activities?

Annie: No. I tried to keep my face mask on.

Researcher: Are you planning to return to China?

Annie: I am planning to pursue a second master degree in Ireland.

Researcher: If Covid-19 continues to spread in Ireland, will you continue to be vigilant and agonizing over whether or not to participate in activities?

Annie: I will definitely continue to wear a face mask for the next year. But I plan to socialize with more people. Even if people think I'm weird, I want to interact with more people. People won't judge you just because you wear a face mask to an event. Although it may put distance between you and others. But they would respect your choice. So I think it's time to relax and get involved in more activities.

Researcher: As you said that no one look at you differently before. Why do you continue to worry whether you look strange wearing a mask?

Annie: Let me give you an example. When I went to see Riverdance last month, there were hundreds of people in the theater but only me and another three friends of mine wore face masks. If you were in that situation, would you not feel self-conscious? People may not say anything, but they may look at you differently when they saw you. You get the feeling that they're wondering why this person is still wearing a mask. It's not that they are discriminating against you. But they may feel confused.

Researcher: Has the pandemic affected your studies?

Annie: It presented many challenges to my studies. In the first semester, we had our classes outside of the campus so we had less opportunities to go to the campus. There were times that other teachers got Covid-19 and we had to take online classes. I was lucky to avoid getting Covid-19 or I would be too ill to study. In addition, I do not know whether it was because of the pandemic or because of the design of our programme, we had few face-to-face seminars. In addition, although our teacher divided us into discussion groups of two people, he did not say whether you had to do it face-to-face or online, so we pretty much did it online. Oh and we haven't had a class dinner for the past year.

Researcher: Do you think there is a big difference between online classes and and face-to-face one?

Annie: Yes I think they are very different. I probably only understood 50% of the online classes, but I might be able to understand 70% if they were delivered face-to-face.

Researcher: Does having less face-to-face classes affect your study or social life?

Annie: I think it had. Because we all want to improve our oral English when we study abroad. We have fewer opportunities to practice oral English with less face-to-face classes. In terms of social activities, there were no activities to help us learn more about the local culture and customs. My friends in England told me that their universities offered many social activities. For example, teachers would take students to formal dinners. They also have many events and balls. I think such activities are helpful in enhancing the communication between students. I did not have such opportunities in Ireland and I did not get to improve relationships with my classmates.

Researcher: Did you encounter any obstacles in communicating with foreign students?

Annie: Well, there are only nine students in my class, and only two of them are

foreign students. The others are all Chinese students. There were less activities due to the pandemic so I did not get to meet a lot of people outside my class. I do not know how to meet more people, especially foreigners.

Researcher: Do you wish to meet more foreigners?

Annie: I do. No matter foreigners or Chinese, I want to make more friends.

Researcher: Do you think the university can do better in organizing activities for students?

Annie: I hope the university should organize more activities. In fact, there are many activities organized by the school, but most of them are academic events. Or maybe I just do not know about other activities. I hope the department can organize more activities, either with other departments or within the department, just like universities in China.

Researcher: Have you taken the initiative to find out about activities you can participate in?

Annie: I have participated in activities organized by the Chinese society.. But the majority of these activities were Chinese. And it's hard to meet people at an event like this, especially an online event. I attended an event for international students at local church. Many of the students are Chinese or Asian, with several students from Europe or the United States. I soon got bored because the host talked a lot about Bible. It felt like I was there doing English reading test instead of having fun. So I haven't participated in similar activities since.

Researcher: After staying in Ireland for one year, do you think there is a big cultural difference between Chinese and foreigners?

Annie: From my opinion, the cultural differences between us and Westerners are very big. When I first arrived in Ireland, I joined a hiking group. Every week the group organized an event. From my experience in joining the group, I think there is big

cultural difference between China and Western countries. The first and only time I participated in the group hiking, I had just been to Ireland one or two weeks. I remember being at the train station and not knowing how to top up and buy which ticket and which platform to go to. But no one in the group chat offered help. No one said they would wait for me. I was three minutes late and they just left. They did not tell me in the group chat that they were leaving without me! I bought a ticket and arrived at the platform only to find that none of them were there. When I called the leader, he said they were gone. Then I met another Indian student on the platform. She was in the same situation as me. Later the Indian student and I talked about this and we agreed that such things would not happen in Asian cultures. If ten people go to a place together and one of them does not show up, others would all contact the person out of concern to see if the person needs help. No one here does this. That day it felt like we were being left behind. So I quit the group

Another example is the difference between me and my roommates. I used to live with one Indian and two Irish. We seldom talked to each other. Sometimes I would have my dinner in the living room. My roommates would take their dinner to their rooms or sit on the sofa and watch TV. Most of the time, I was the one who tried to start a conversation, but they did not reply more than a few words. When there were holidays or festivals, for example Christmas, I would give them presents, not something expensive but they were my way to show my appreciation of their culture. But they did not ask me if I wanted to know more about local traditions or interesting places in Ireland. They did not invite me to their house. I think this is very different from how we treat foreign students in China. Universities in China often organize activities for foreign students to experience Chinese culture. Universities also assign local students to help foreign students. If there are foreign students in our class, we will take the initiative to invite them to our homes in festivals.

Researcher: Do you feel anxious or lonely?

Annie: When I first arrived, I felt lonely because I did not know anyone. But it got

better with time. Chinese students in my programme went out to eat once or twice and made me feel less lonely. You can manage as long as you can find someone to talk to or go shopping with. I often feel anxious and I do not want to do anything.

Researcher: Are you stressed by the different teaching styles in Ireland and in China?

Annie: I do not feel stressful in terms of the differences in teaching styles. One reason why I wanted to study abroad was to experience different teaching styles. I've never studied in a class with so few people. So we had a lot of opportunities to have discussions. But every week our teacher assigned us a lot of papers to read, which would be discussed the next week. I think it was a bit stressful because the papers were all in English, and then they are ten to thirty pages long. We needed to read four or five papers each week. Sometimes I felt frustrated because I could not understand them. Besides, we were asked to write down our thoughts after reading them and handed it to the teacher.

Researcher: Does language have a big impact on your studies or your social life?

Annie: Yes. I think English proficiency is very important and I do not my English has improved much. I did not get to talk to foreign students as I liked, and I did not travel much, nor did I participate in many activities. And most of the people I know in Ireland are Chinese. To be honest, I am disappointed in myself.

Researcher: There are some stereotypes about Chinese people that Chinese students are not talkative, or that Chinese people always live in their own little circles. Do you agree with this statement?

Annie: I do not agree with the first opinion that Chinese do not like to talk, because most of my Chinese classmates and I are very talkative. Instead, we are willing or hope to have more opportunities to communicate with foreign students. It's just that we lack such opportunities. It is true that Chinese people usually hang out with other Chinese. This is because Chinese people have to stick together, especially for the newcomers. Otherwise, how can you navigate everything in a foreign place? Another

reason is that it is hard to join the circle of foreign students. When I chatted with my roommates, I always tried to find a topic. But I did not know the artists they were talking about and vice versa. So it's difficult to find a common topic. If you can not find a common topic, how can you understand each other better? How can you invite people to go to dinner and travel together? In addition, maybe it is because my English is not good enough, it is difficult for me to have deep conversations with other people. My English level hinders me from expressing my ideas clearly. When we talked about the differences between the education systems of China and Ireland, I struggled with the right words to say. Well, it is also possible that foreigners are not interested in China at all, so there is nothing to talk about. We talked about trivial things such as food and giant pandas and beautiful places in China. But that's all. There is no way have deeper conversations. Out of reasons I mentioned, Chinese people tend to communicate with other Chinese. After all, we share the same cultural background and we have more common topics to talk about. Similarly, I find it easier to talk to other Asian students, for example, students from India, Korea and Japan. I know an Indian girl who loves to watch Chinese TV series. So she is familiar with Chinese culture and actors. And as a Chinese I am familiar with some issues in India, for example the caste system. So we can talk about the things we both familiar with. The same applies to students from South Korea and Japan. Our cultures are similar. It's hard to talk to European and American students because they do not know much about China and they are not interested in China.

Researcher: Do you think you need to change yourself to fit into their circles?

Annie: I do not know how to change myself though. Besides improving my English, I do not think what else I need to change. I'm not a shy person. The key is that if you want to make foreign friends, you have to be able to talk about something personal. If you just satisfy with having small talks, everyone can be your friend.

Researcher: Before coming to Ireland, what was your impression of it? Has your impression changed?

Annie: I think the biggest change is that before I came, I thought people in foreign countries led a good and easy life. After I came, I found that ordinary people live their life in a similar way: we all go to work or go to school and then go to the supermarket from time to time. At the end of the day we come home to our families. That's the daily life of ordinary people. Foreign countries also have bad people. Some of my classmates ran into landlords who were especially selfish or mean. Many Chinese think that the moon in foreign countries is rounder. I think there are good people and bad people in every country. We should not consider everything in foreign countries is better. But I also do not agree with some people in China who defame foreign countries. I would not talk down foreign countries in that way.

Researcher: What do you think of some Chinese netizens' unfriendly remarks on Chinese international students?

Annie: I have read posts and comments made by some media and netizens that international students bring the virus back to China. I am not happy reading these comments. Because even though some international students have Covid-19 and return to China, they do not get it on purpose. They come back to China because their families are in China. Some even return with the hope to serve their motherland. Those people could have found a good job abroad or led a better life there, but they still choose to return to China. So I think what the media and netizens say is cruel and hurtful. My roommate wanted to go back but his flights were canceled twice. He was very anxious. Airlines are charging very high fees for tickets to China. Some airlines discriminate Chinese. As far as I know, some British people only needed to pay a few thousand Yuan to fly to China, whereas Chinese people to the same place needed to pay more than ten thousand Yuan for a ticket. Are you kidding me? One of my classmate bought a ticket for only several thousand Yuan half a year in advance when the pandemic was not so severe. But when he wanted to change the date later, the airline asked him to refund the ticket and buy a new one. If he did as he was told, he would have to pay three times the price. My roommate had problem with the the service of the airline so he filed a complaint. But he waited a long time for feedback.

Researcher: Do you think the Chinese government is responsible for the difficulty of traveling to China?

Annie: I haven't really look at the policy of returning to China. So I can not say how it could make an influence on me. But I think airlines and hotels for quarantine should charge less. I think the government should order airlines and hotels to lower the prices. But I think the rest of the requirements, such as multiple PCR tests, health codes and quarantine are necessary.

Researcher: Do you prefer the control measures in Ireland or those in China?

Annie: I think Ireland should learn from China's measures against the pandemic. Ireland's measures are too lax. Aren't many people calling for mask mandates to be imposed? The Irish government should pay for PCR test and medical expenses of the public. If people are required to pay for themselves, some people will hide the fact that they have COVID-19. As a result, the pandemic will never end and it will get more and more serious. But I admit some of China's restrictions are too strict. Many people are under quarantine. The economy is declining. For example, seven or eight rounds of PCR testing are not necessary. I think two or three rounds are enough.

Researcher: Do you think the Irish would be willing to learn from zero-Covid policy?

Annie: Absolutely not. No way they will accept it. First of all they do not take it seriously. Secondly, for them, freedom may be more important than life. They are not willing to give up freedom to save people's lives. If they are asked to isolate at home for a week or two or even a month, they will probably have a breakdown.

Researcher: Do you agree with their appreciation for freedom?

Annie: I do not think it is practical. Because I think nothing is more valuable than lives. If they have freedom but lose their lives, what is the use of freedom? Some people are exercising freedom but in doing so they spread the virus to others. Their behavior is very selfish. If the country needs a group of people to make a sacrifice, the group

should think about the big picture. You can not care only about your own interests, you still have to think about the collective. I do not understand why foreigners are so opposed to wearing masks. It's just wearing masks. It doesn't kill them. I agree that wearing masks is really uncomfortable. But if wearing masks can relieve the pressure on the health care system of the whole country, why can not you make such a small sacrifice? If someone has families work in the hospital, I think they may be able to understand the Chinese. Many health care workers in Ireland resigned because of too much work pressure and heavy workload. And I know foreigners do not like to work overtime. Chinese medical staff are willing to work overtime. They are used to it. But Irish medical staff are not used to working overtime. So they just resigned or went on strike. I think these are irresponsible things to do. Because medical workers have the responsibility of treating and saving ill people. They can not quit just because they are too tired or can not take vacations as usual. What about those patients? And their work will be passed on to other colleagues if they resign. So I do think that individualism is too strong in western countries. They are not willing to sacrifice their own interests and time for the majority of the society. I may be biased, but based on my experience in Ireland, I think most Westerners are self-centered. They are nice and friendly as long as you do not have conflict of interests. But when it comes to something related to their interests, they could be very difficult

Researcher: The zero-case policy in China has caused trouble to people's life and work. For example, there were reports saying many people in Shanghai had no food and were unable to seek medical treatment due to lockdown. Do you think such sacrifices are acceptable?

Annie: I think it should be made sure that people with illness should be treated in time. Our policy is to protect people's lives. It may be fine to sacrifice the economy. But when it comes to people' lives, such sacrifices are not acceptable.

Researcher: After living in Ireland for a while, do you see China or yourself as Chinese in different lights?

Annie: I think the Chinese need to be more brave and speak up. I noticed that both Russians and Ukrainians would demonstrate. And those Taiwan pro-independence groups also often bring up their demands. Why do not the leaders of our Chinese community have the courage to organize demonstration? Last semester, a Hong Kong pro-independence group held an exhibition in our university. I am sure you know about it. We had such a fierce discussion in the group chat, and the instructor was also in the group chat. However, no Chinese people have come forward to organize demonstrations and lead people to protest against Taiwan pro-independence groups and Hong Kong pro-independence groups. We should also speak up to let the world knows what China really looks like and the historical facts. But no Chinese makes such efforts. I think we need more brave people to organize demonstrations, especially the teachers in the Chinese office. They have been in Ireland for so long. They know much more about the policies of Ireland than us students who have just come here for a year or a few months. They know the laws and regulations on how to organize demonstrations. They have the ability to organize them. I believe that as long as they organize such an event many students would follow them without hesitation. Why nobody organize such activities? Why should we let others to defame the Chinese people and China? I am really not happy about it. There are also people who often promote Falungong on Henry Street. I think we hadn't done enough to stand up for China. One time, my friend told me that his teacher talked about the differences between China's dating culture and those of foreign countries. Foreigners simply do not understand how blind date works in China. Blind dates in China are just a way to broaden our network. But my classmate said that there were many Chinese students in his class, and none of them dared to speak out about the truth. If no one make the explanation, this misunderstanding will continues to last. The foreign students in his class will always carry this misunderstanding and the teacher will continue to tell it to other students. I think we really lack courage and wisdom in promoting our culture.

Researcher: As you mentioned, no students in that class dared to correct the

teacher. What do you think are the main reasons?

Annie: First, in China, teachers are a figure of authority and they have been one for a long time. We are afraid of offending the teachers because we are afraid that it would influence our grades. On the other hand, it was possible that those Chinese students remained silence out of consideration for their own safety. You never know whether there were supporters of Taiwan independence or Hong Kong independence in that class. My mother keeps asking me not to condemn those people in my WeChat moment. So I went to Twitter and argued with people who opposed China.

Researcher: What did you say to those people?

Annie: I posted documents of the UN and the English version of China-US joint communique. I told them the historical facts. I was not trying to scold them. I wanted them to know the real history. I think that the silence of the Chinese people has put us at a disadvantage in international public opinion. If we let things go on like this, the situation of Chinese students abroad may eventually become the same as that of Russian students. Now Russian international students, especially those in European and American countries, are facing criticism from everyone. Everyone blames them and Russia for the invasion. What can these Russian students do? Our safety is at stake if we let the misunderstanding of the Chinese people run deeper in foreign countries

Researcher: Did you come up with these thoughts after you came to Ireland?

Annie: Yes. I did not aware of these things before. To be honest, when I was in China, I knew that China was discriminated against by some foreigners or countries. But I had not face the discrimination and read unfriendly remarks because I had not use VPN to access websites of foreign countries. In addition, I had never come into contact with people from Hong Kong or Taiwan. But things changed after I came to Ireland. The day I arrived at Dublin, I met a driver who looked like a Chinese and could speak mandarin. So I asked him "Are you from China?" He stammered and said he was from Hong Kong. When I tried to talk to him in mandarin, he just told me

his mandarin was poor. All the people from Hong Kong and Taiwan people I met in Ireland are like that. They did not argue that they were not Chinese. They just said they came from Taiwan or Hong Kong. Since I came to Ireland, I have seen a lot of criticism on China. I like the teacher of my oral English class very much. He had lived in Korea for 17 years and in China for 7 years. He is knowledgeable about China. He also respects Chinese culture and us. So I felt very happy having his classes. We had many opportunities to discuss China, so that students from other countries can know more about Chinese culture.

But I also met a Chinese student who belongs to the so-called “anti-China party”. He was from Shanghai. In Ireland, he said that people in China had no freedom and that Chinese education destroyed the creativity of children. He said that China is a nation without room for creativity. I was very shocked to hear his speech. He had lived in the most open and prosperous city in China. What did China do to him? I wonder if he is crazy. So after seeing things like these, I felt more patriotic after coming to Ireland.

Researcher: What do you think when others point out the problems in China?

Annie: In real life, I have never met anyone who outrightly said that they thought China had no human rights or that China was very bad. I firmly oppose to the statement that China has no human rights. Those people have never been to Xinjiang or Tibet. I do not know where they get the idea and evidence that we have harmed our compatriots. I admit that China is not as free as some countries do. For example, China restricts freedom of speech and built the firewall. I did a questionnaire survey not long ago. Many people were afraid of disclosing their personal information or causing negative impact on China's image, so they dared not tell the truth. I think you can say the freedom of speech is restricted to some extent. However, it is absurd that foreigners or Taiwan and Hong Kong pro-independence groups claim that China has no freedom. Recently cases of corruption were exposed on the Internet. can not you see that netizen scold the government and request the

government to punish those corrupted officials? We also have the right to criticize the government, and no one is punished for doing so. So I do not know why foreigners can shamelessly say that we are oppressed by the government. The student I mentioned just now is gay. He may be unhappy with China not approving gay marriage so he opposes the government. But I think China and the Chinese people do not discriminate against homosexuals. There is no policy in mainland Chinese that discriminates against homosexuality. As for gay marriage, there are so many countries that do not approve gay marriage. If that is your reason for blaming China, you should also blame other countries in the world. Why do you only blame China? This is unfair. Even in the United States, not every state allows gay marriage. Moreover, in European and American countries, because of religious belief, there may exist stronger discrimination against homosexuality. But no one in China will beat you or kill you because you are gay. I think foreign countries have exaggerated the concept of freedom. China may not allow limitless freedom like some countries do, but that does not mean China is a totalitarian state.