

**ADAPTATION EXPERIENCE OF OVERSEAS  
CHINESE STUDYING IN GUANGXI PROVINCE  
THROUGH ‘CHINESENESS’ PERSPECTIVE IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

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HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

**by**

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**PENGALAMAN PENYESUAIAN PELAJAR CINA LUAR NEGARA  
BELAJAR DI WILAYAH GUANGXI MELALUI PERSPEKTIF CIRI-CIRI  
‘KECINAAN’ DI INSTITUSI PENDIDIKAN TINGGI**

**ABSTRAK**

Mobiliti pelajar global dalam pendidikan tinggi telah menyaksikan kemunculan arah aliran terbalik bila mana pelajar kembali ke negara asal nenek moyang mereka. Namun, pengaruh latar belakang nenek moyang yang sama dengan pengalaman pendidikan terbalik ini masih perlu ditangani. Begitu juga, jumlah pelajar berketurunan Cina di luar negara yang memilih untuk belajar di China semakin bertambah dibandingkan ke destinasi tradisional barat. Pada waktu yang sama, ianya masih belum dipastikan sama ada akar umbi dan asal usul yang dikongsi bersama dapat memberikan mereka pengalaman penyesuaian yang lancar di China. Dengan mengambilkira penyesuaian pelajar-pelajar antarabangsa daripada latar belakang dan asal usul yang sama di institusi pengajian tinggi di China masih kurang diterokai, apa yang mempengaruhi persamaan budaya ke atas penyesuaian di China masih perlu diselesaikan. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan menyelidik pengalaman penyesuaian pelajar luar negara berketurunan Cina yang belajar di universiti-universiti di China dengan memfokuskan latar belakang Kecinaan mereka. Khususnya, ia direka untuk meneliti bagaimana latarbelakang etnik Cina mereka, yang dinamakan Kecinaan, menjelaskan interaksi pengalaman penyesuaian mereka di China. Kajian ini telah menggunakan pendekatan penyelidikan kualitatif dan

kaedah kajian kes melalui temubual separa berstruktur dengan 20 pelajar berketurunan Cina dari negara Asia Tenggara yang sedang belajar di China. Pelajar-pelajar ini direkrut daripada tapak penyelidikan institusi pendidikan tinggi di wilayah Guangxi iaitu salah sebuah wilayah di China yang menerima pelajar terbanyak dari negara Asia Tenggara. Semua hasil temubual dianalisa dan diinterpretasi secara tematik. Hasil penemuan menunjukkan latarbelakang budaya yang sama tidak semestinya memberi galakan pengalaman penyesuaian kepada mereka, tetapi juga mencipta cabaran kerana identiti Kecinaan mereka, sehingga menarik dikotomi penyesuaian antara budaya dan intrabudaya kepada pelajar luar negara berketurunan Cina yang belajar di China. Malahan, Kecinaan individu meramalkan pengalaman penyesuaian mereka di China menunjukkan Kecinaan sebagai moderator dalam pengalaman penyesuaian pelajar berketurunan Cina dari luar negara yang belajar di China. Oleh itu, pengalaman penyesuaian pelajar berketurunan Cina dari Asia Tenggara yang belajar di China adalah suatu proses untuk mengartikulasi dan seterusnya menggambarkan 'Kecinaan' mereka dan mempromosikan pembangunan Kecinaan mereka, serta mencadangkan identiti etnik boleh menjadi pendorong kepada pengantarabangsaan pendidikan tinggi terbalik di China. Kesimpulannya, memahami 'Kecinaan' daripada penyesuaian pelajar berketurunan Cina Asia Tenggara mempunyai implikasi penting untuk pembangunan pendidikan tinggi China. Oleh yang demikian, satu Model *Recycling Forces and Counterforces* (RFC) antara Kecinaan dan pengalaman penyesuaian pelajar luar negara berketurunan Cina

yang belajar di China telah dicadangkan. Model RFC memberikan pemahaman kepada konsep Kecinaan dalam pengantarabangsaan terbalik pendidikan tinggi China.

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**ABSTRACT**

Global student mobility in higher education has witnessed an emerging reverse trend as students flow back to their ancestral homeland country. Yet, the influences of this similar ancestral background on their reverse education experience remain to be addressed. Likewise, an increasing number of overseas Chinese students are choosing to study in China rather than in traditional western destinations. At the same time, it is still underdetermined whether their shared Chineseness roots and origins can provide them with a smooth adaptation experience in China. Given that the adaptation of international students studying in China’s higher education institutions from similar backgrounds and origins is under-explored, what influence of cultural similarity on adaptation in China is still to be resolved. Thus, this study sets out to investigate the adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China’s universities with a focus on their Chineseness background. Specifically, it is designed to examine how their ethnic Chinese background, namely Chineseness, interplayed with their adaptation experience in China. This study has employed a qualitative research approach and case study method through semi-structured interviews with 20 Southeast Asian (SEA) overseas Chinese studying in China. They were recruited from the research site of higher education institutions in Guangxi

province of China, one of the provinces that receive the most SEA students in China. The interview results have been thematically analysed and interpreted. The findings showed that the same cultural background did not necessarily give them a boost to the adaptation experience but also created challenges due to their Chineseness identity, intriguing the dichotomy of intercultural and intracultural adaptation for overseas Chinese studying in China. Besides, individuals' Chineseness predicted their adaptation experience in China, indicating Chineseness as the moderator in adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China. Therefore, the adaptation experience of SEA overseas Chinese studying in China is a process to articulate and portray their "Chineseness" and, in turn, promote their Chineseness development, suggesting ethnic identity can be the impetus for the reverse internationalization of higher education in China. In conclusion, understanding "Chineseness" from SEA overseas Chinese students' adaptation has important implications for China's higher education development. Hence, a Recycling Forces and Counterforces (RFC) Model between Chineseness and the adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China has been proposed. The RFC Model provides insights into conceptualizing Chineseness in the reverse internationalization of Chinese higher education.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Research Background**

Global patterns of international student mobility in higher education are changing (Mulvey, 2021). Distinguished from the traditional global North-South and Center-Periphery perspective in international student mobility of higher education (Liu et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2021), there appear to be cases in which student mobility is reversed from home country to ancestral homeland country. For example, degree mobility students who choose to study in Cyprus, especially in the public sector, often have a Greek heritage (Statistical Service, 2016). African American students tend to travel to South Africa for their study abroad experience (Lee & Green, 2016). French-Jewish international students are drawn to studying in Israel (Bamberger, 2020). Likewise, a similar phenomenon is also found in China that descendants of Chinese migrants, namely overseas Chinese, have returned to their ancestral homeland, China, to pursue higher education (Hu & Dai, 2021; Ma, 2017).

The emerging trend of student mobility back to their ancestral homeland, namely reverse education flow, represents an important development for internationalizing higher education. This kind of reverse Internationalization in Higher education (IHE) is to address the issue of unequal distribution of higher education resources arising from the traditional internationalization model, which excessively prioritizes student mobility from global South to North, developing

country to developed country and periphery to center approaches (Lo & Yang, 2023; Xu, 2023).

To engage in this globalization and internationalization trend, China has implemented several initiatives, including the “Plan for Study in China” in 2010 and the “One Belt and One Road Initiative” in 2016, to entice international students to come to China to study (Chen, 2017). After the development in the decade, China has emerged as a prominent destination for international students, hosting a substantial number of individuals from abroad. As of 2018, the country has accommodated about half a million international students (MOE, 2019), positioning itself as the largest destination in Asia and the third largest globally after the United Kingdom and the United States (Chen, 2017; IIE, 2020). Table 1.1 presents an overview of the development of the Plan for Study in China in the past ten years.

Table 1.1 The development of the Plan for Study in China in the past ten years.(Hong & Hardy, 2022; MOE, 2019, 2020)

<b>Stage &amp; time</b>	<b>Initial building (2010-2015)</b>	<b>Rapid development (2016-2019)</b>	<b>Improving quality and efficiency (2020-present)</b>
Main task	Expand the scale and increase the number	Improve international education service	High-quality development
No. of international students (Thousand)	377 (2015)	489 (2018)	529 (2020)

It is shown that the Plan for Study in China was issued in 2010, starting with initial building in 2020-2015 to rapid development during 2016-2019 and toward improving quality and efficiency from 2020 onwards. The main tasks of the Plan for Study in China during this decade have also developed from the aim of expanding

the scale and increasing the number to improving international education service and oriented with high-quality development nowadays (MOE, 2019). In short, it has witnessed significant growth in the popularity and appeal of study in China. Quantitatively, the numerical data indicates a substantial rise in the population of international students in China. Qualitatively, there have been great endeavors aimed at improving the overall experience of international students, bringing about an enhanced degree of satisfaction and engagement among international students (Li & Fang, 2018; MOE, 2017).

Currently, emphasis is placed on quality at this stage. Quality is the foundation of international education in China, and the key to enhancing international competitiveness is to improve quality (MOE, 2019). Therefore, to strengthen the Plan for Study in China, it is necessary to enhance the educational experience and management of international students in China (MOE, 2020). Thus, it is believed that more attention must be paid to the positions and experiences of international students in China (Le Ha & Liu, 2021).

Against this background, the enthusiasm of international students of Chinese origin, namely the descendants of *Huaqiao* (an ethnically defined Chinese citizen living in another country) or overseas Chinese (those of Chinese ancestry being citizens of the host nation), who choose to pursue higher education in their families' homeland, China, has also surged dramatically (Hu & Dai, 2021). It is driven by China's rapid economic development (Wen & Hu, 2019), its emotional bond with China (Ma, 2017), and China's employment attractions (Larbi & Fu, 2017; Singh,

2022). Typically, it is argued that for the number of overseas talents introduced by the Chinese government's "Thousand Talents Plan" (Zhang & Krzysztof, 2021) in these decades, *huaqiao* and overseas Chinese have accounted for the vast majority (Qi et al., 2019), indicating an identity advantage of overseas Chinese in China for employment. Therefore, the current Talent Introduction Policy politically preferential from the Chinese government (Xu, 2019), has a specific attraction for overseas Chinese coming to China (Gbollie & Gong, 2020), and flowing back to China for higher education.

In reality, overseas Chinese who have acquired foreign nationality can enroll as international students to pursue higher education in China. In recent years, many colleges and universities have adopted the "Application-Review system," such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, Renmin University of China, Xiamen University, etc. (Zhang & Krzysztof, 2021). International students can apply to study in China's Higher Education Institutions by using the college entrance examination results of the country where they are located. In contrast, colleges and universities would set up different phases, such as examinations, interviews, and retesting for the enrollment of overseas Chinese students. Still, there are arguments that international student examinations have greater advantages for overseas Chinese as the subjects of these tests are similar to their college entrance examination (MOE, 2020). Besides, overseas Chinese students can spend one or two years studying the Chinese language in their respective countries before enrolling in China's institutions to pursue academic courses (Gao & Zhu, 2021).

In the meantime, many of these students receive financial assistance from the China Scholarship Council (CSC), which seeks to ‘increase mutual understanding, collaboration, and exchanges between China and other nations in various disciplines’ (CSC, 2015). Consequently, the CSC’s extensive financial assistance enables overseas Chinese students from a wide variety of developing nations, particularly those included in the “One Belt and One Road Initiative” (Chen, 2017; Hong & Hardy, 2022), such as Thailand and Indonesia, to pursue academic studies in China (Han et al., 2020).

Considering the popularity of China as an emerging destination for studying abroad and the increased influx of international students in China for higher education, academic research on international students studying in China has begun to flourish. Hence, scholars are dedicated to exploring the motivations and attractions of studying in China (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Mao et al., 2022; Wen & Hu, 2019; Wu et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023) in an attempt to understand the reasons for the boom of studying in China. Therefore, understanding the adaptation problems of international students from different political, economic, and cultural backgrounds in the Chinese environment has become important (Ding, 2016; Luo et al., 2023). Significantly, the study of the adaptation experience of international students in China is a timely response to the urgent needs in the current stage of Plan for Study in China, emphasizing quality assurance and the experiences of international students within the context of the reverse trend toward IHE (Hong & Hardy, 2022). Properly dealing with these adaptation problems is beneficial for international students to achieve a

satisfactory study experience in China, which also complies with the appeal for international education and the internationalization criterion of China's higher education (Lin et al., 2020).

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

It is argued that when overseas Chinese flow back to their ancestral homeland, China, for higher education, reverse mobility and reverse internationalization in higher education (IHE) have been staged (Wen et al., 2018). Although the reverse mobility of international students back to their ancestral homeland to pursue higher education emerges extensively, the influence of this similar background and origins on the experience of reverse mobility in IHE is still to be resolved.

Notably, it should not be overlooked that one of the essential pull factors for international student mobility is precisely based on cultural proximity (Ma, 2017). It is believed that cultural similarity between the host and home country could help international students experience fewer adaptation difficulties (Ward et al., 2001), thus enabling international students to better adapt to the host country (Alemu & Cordier, 2017). Consequently, similar cultural background between the host country and home country becomes a vital driving force for studying in China (Wen et al., 2018), which also explains to some extent the current concentration of international students in China, mostly from Asian countries (Chen, 2017), and the rise of reverse education flow of overseas Chinese studying in China. However, whether cultural similarity contributes so positively to the adaptation of international students as being

expected is yet to be determined since it has also found that the perceived cultural distance of international students in China does not predict their socio-cultural adaptation (English & Chi, 2020; Hu et al., 2016), and significant nuances still exist even within a common cultural background (Kell & Vogl, 2012). Regarding this, what indeed the actual narratives of international students' adaptation deriving from cultural similarity remains to be addressed and proved in the context of reverse IHE.

Hence, to unravel this underdetermined trend, this thesis tries to nuance the adaptation study in light of similar cultural backgrounds and homogenous origins through overseas Chinese studying in China. As ethnic "Chinese," overseas Chinese students have complex perspectives and perceptions of Chinese culture and identity, contributing to their unique adaptation experience in the context of China. Their methods and experiences adapting to the Chinese environment may also differ from international students without Chinese origins and local students (Gomes, 2018). Hence, several inquiries arise from their adaptation experiences of studying in China, such as, *"Will these overseas Chinese students adjust to Chinese culture and environment?"*, *"Will they achieve a good Chinese learning effect?"*, *"Will they not experience the problems other international students encounter during adaptation?"* All these concerns are left to be explored to address the issue of what influence of similar origins toward adaptation experience within the trend of international students' reverse mobility to ancestral homeland.

Besides, it is noted that reverse educational mobility can lead to neglected social adaptation problems (Zhang & Krzysztof, 2021). Overseas Chinese students

often have experience of living in two or more cultures and have family and cultural ties with their ancestral homeland country, China. Thus, they are assumed to have advantages over international students without Chinese origins and should play a more significant role as a bridge in cross-cultural exchanges. However, this assumption would lead to the “well-adapted” stereotype of the group of overseas Chinese students, and even if they do not adapt well, they will have to suffer in silence. Hence, the unique ethnic Chinese characteristics of this group and the challenges of their socio-cultural adaptation are worth paying attention to (Zhang & Krzysztof, 2021).

In the meantime, given that the adaptation of international students from similar backgrounds and origins is under-explored and what indeed, the influence of this kind of cultural similarity on the adaptation of international students is still to be resolved, relevant adaptation theories of international students have been consulted with extensive review. Typically, the authentic ones regarding adaptation strategies (Berry, 2005; Ward et al., 2020) and adaptation process (Ward, 2001) provide an overall systematic analysis of international student’s adaptation, while they mainly focus on inter-cultural or cross-cultural adaptation and fail to examine the intracultural factors. In other words, little recognition in the context of the same cultural origin, namely intra-cultural variance, the presence of variances within a dominant cultural group was ever made (Bjork et al., 2020; God & Zhang, 2019; Medina, 2008). Hence, adaptation theories on international students are problematized in the current knowledge base due to their insufficiency for nuancing

the complexity within the same cultural groups, namely intracultural adaptation of international students.

Therefore, the gap provides an opportunity to complement existing studies on adaptation through the perspective of intracultural variance, which refers to specific cultural differences between individuals or sub-cultural groupings, all of whom belong to the same or broader cultural group. Meanwhile, individuals or sub-cultural groupings will differ in their adherence to similar cultural ideas and norms despite sharing these values and standards (Schrauf, 2009). As a result of this, for overseas Chinese students, it refers to Chineseness variances, a term translated as *zhong guo xing* (the nature of being of China) or *hua ren xing* (the nature of being someone Chinese) (Wang, 2009). Due to the long-standing historical connections and cultural roots between China and Chinese people and culture, overseas Chinese share commonalities about Chineseness but also have variances regarding Chineseness, resulting from the localization of Chineseness in specific countries.

Moreover, as the adaptation of international students is a ‘subjective, sense-making, and culture-specific experience in China’ (Chiang, 2015, p. 397), the Chineseness variances are supposed to determine how overseas Chinese students adapt to the host culture in China. To be specific, the influences of Chineseness variances could serve in explaining their adaptation experience in China, either by identifying with or distancing themselves from “Chinese” qualities, demonstrating a unique experience for adaption challenges and coping with local Chinese culture, or distinguishing themselves as possessing a remarkable identity to thrive within it

(Skyrme, 2014). Therefore, the adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China is somewhat an interaction of their home country's Chineseness and local Chineseness in China (Shen, 2017). Then, it intrigues the problem of dichotomy about Chineseness during adaptation based on the same cultural origins that are worthwhile and necessary to be explored (Hodzi, 2019; Pain, 2018).

Thus, a deeper understanding of the adaptation of these subgroups in China can be made to tailor the targeted services and policies for international students in China accordingly (Zhang & Liao, 2021) and address the quality appeal of international education in the reverse internationalization of Chinese higher education (Hong & Hardy, 2022).

### **1.3 Research Scope**

The specific adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China differs from region to region and country to country, marked by their home countries' historical, cultural, economic, political, religious, and linguistic backgrounds (Li & Han, 2021). Therefore, rather than taking the whole overseas Chinese students worldwide as a focus, which is too broad and impractical, this research limits the scope through a group study within the region of Southeast Asia to reflect on the whole situation of overseas Chinese students studying in China.

Notably, with approximately 60 million overseas Chinese worldwide, Southeast Asia is the most dominant region, with approximately 41 million people, accounting for 68.3% of the global Chinese diaspora (Jia, 2020). As the largest

Chinese diaspora region in the world, Southeast Asian Chinese have always aroused intensive research interests among scholars to examine their ties with China historically and contemporarily (Chong, 2021; Hoon, 2017; Tong, 2010), which brings about the Sion-Southeast Asian Studies (Liu, 2001) or the area studies of Southeast Asia (Xie, 2021). Besides, ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations for 30 years have been developed into the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and ASEAN countries (Xinhua, 2021), promoting increasingly close political, economic, and cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asia region, as well as higher education cooperation such as ‘student mobility, institutional/program partnerships, and language training’ (Wen, 2016, p. 173). In this context, overseas Chinese from Southeast Asian countries are gaining international education in China. This claim is supported by the statistics from the Ministry of Education in China that the number of international students from Southeast Asia (SEA) countries such as Thailand (28,608), Indonesia (15,050), Vietnam (11,299), and Malaysia (9479) are ranked top four among the top 15 sending countries (MOE, 2019).

Thus, based on the close economic and political ties and cooperation between Southeast Asia nations and China and the statistics on the great number of international students from Southeast Asia, the scope of this research focuses on overseas Chinese from Southeast Asian countries who study in China.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

This research is conducted in the Chinese higher education context, focusing on the Southeast Asian overseas Chinese students' adaptation experience. It aims to explore the adaptation experience of Southeast Asian overseas Chinese students through Chineseness to achieve the following research objectives:

(1) To understand the adaptation experience of overseas Chinese students in China by identifying the challenges and issues they have encountered in China.

(2) To examine the coping ways overseas Chinese students adopted to solve the adaptation challenges and issues in China.

(3) To explore the concept of Chineseness in the adaptation of overseas Chinese student, specifically, the dichotomy between intracultural and intercultural adaptation.

The first objective aims to carefully grasp the challenges, and issues overseas Chinese students encounter to help them solve these problems and obtain a better adaptation experience. After discovering these adaptation challenges and issues, the second objective focuses on what coping ways overseas Chinese students employ to adapt to the Chinese environment to understand their interaction with the adaptation experience in China. Lastly, the third objective further explores how similarities and differences of Chineseness support or hinder the adaptation experience of Southeast Asian overseas Chinese students in China and vice versa and how this adaption experience influences their perceptions of Chineseness identity.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

Following the research objectives, the research questions in this study are formulated to facilitate the understanding of adaptation challenges and issues, coping ways for adaptation, and the concept of Chineseness among overseas Chinese students in China. The study is designed to address the following questions:

- (1) What are the adaptation challenges and issues of Southeast Asian overseas Chinese students encountered while studying in China?
- (2) In what ways, do the Southeast Asian overseas Chinese students cope with these challenges and issues that they experienced in China?
- (3) To what extent, will their adaptation experience in China interplay with their Chineseness?

## **1.6 Research Significance**

By responding to the emerging and under-researched reverse flow of overseas Chinese back to their ancestral homeland China for higher education, the findings of adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China through Chineseness in this study are significant both in practice and theory base.

Practically, the findings and results can be suggestable for future overseas Chinese students who seek to study in China to handle their adaptation challenges and issues, thus enjoying better cultural communication and overseas study experience. Moreover, the recommendations from this study can help practitioners who work directly with overseas Chinese students in Chinese universities and

colleges better prepare for and proactively address the needs of overseas Chinese students. By doing so, a better quality of international student education between China and Southeast Asian countries could be achieved, thus contributing positively to the regional cooperation in higher education between China and SEA. Besides, the findings can serve as reference resources for policymakers in the Chinese government to plan and construct corresponding strategic approaches for a more effective Plan of Study in China.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the understanding and knowledge about the adaptation of international students from similar cultural origins. It focuses on capturing the under-researched intracultural inquiries regarding international students' adaptation, thus enriching the connotation of intercultural adaptation theory base and shedding light on forming Chinese/Asian style cultural adaptation literature. Moreover, the research is critical to provide an innovative inquiry to explore the emerging reverse student mobility in the internationalization of higher education. In this vein, it could derive insights into new exploration for internationalizing higher education historically dominated by Western influences in global higher education. Specifically, conceptualizing Chineseness in the internationalization of Chinese higher education can thus lead to the implication of IHE at a broader level and identify how IHE transformed in different contexts and enrich the global studies on IHE.

## 1.7 Conceptual Framework

Based on the key terms around research questions and objectives, adaptation challenges and issues, coping ways, as well as the influence of Chineseness, are conceptualized as the general framework (see following Figure 1.1), which can conclude to the researcher's purpose in explanation of the relationships among 'who and what will be studied' (Crawford, 2019, p. 41). Thus, it provides hedging guidelines to explore the adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China and to identify how the adaptation experience and recognition of Chineseness will be interconnectedly influenced.

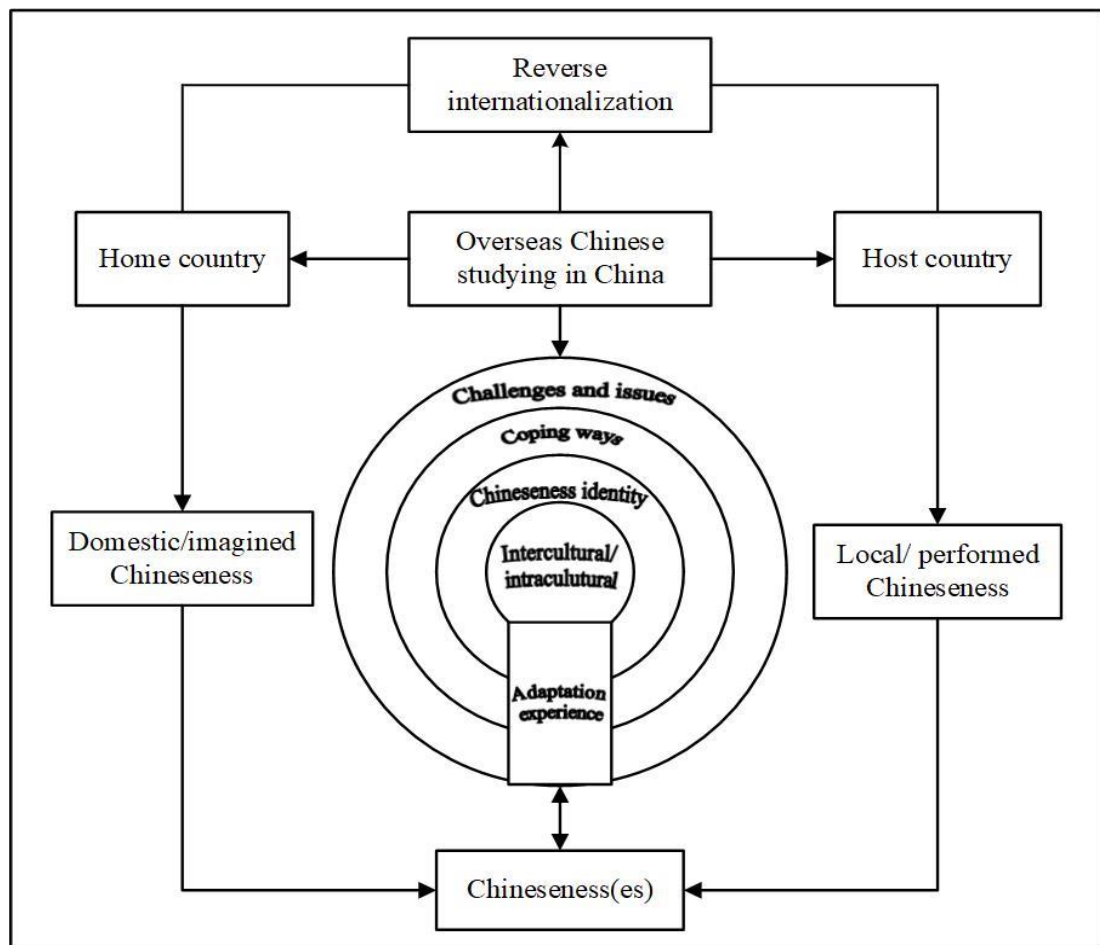


Figure 1.1 Conceptual framework

As a result of this, it is contextualized in the international student mobility of reverse internationalization in higher education and drawing on the theory of Kim's adaption mode (2001, 2015) and incorporating Berry's adaptation strategies (2005). Hereby, adaptation is more conceptualized as a perspective and a way to gather the facts and truths, namely the challenges and issues, coping ways, and Chineseness identity among overseas Chinese students to understand how imagined Chineseness in the home country will interact with localized Chineseness in host country transformed. Therefore, it can shed light on important implications for higher education development in China, namely the appreciation of the conceptualization of "Chineseness" to the development of reverse internationalization policy in higher education.

Besides, the Chineseness variances between China and Southeast Asian (SEA) societies have the potential to create a proactive framework for redefining the significance of Chineseness in the context of higher education (Lo, 2016). Hence, it is argued that these overseas Chinese students are accustomed to understanding and perceiving Chineseness relying more on the stories and narratives of their family ancestors, which exist in their imagination and aspirations. To some extent, they are subjective conceptions of a very hazy or imaginary homeland somewhere based on China's historical past, of the great and splendid Chinese civilization and traditional cultures, rather than the contemporary and actual fact of China as a globalized and modern state (Liu, 2012). Meanwhile, the proliferation of imagined identities and communities has been facilitated by digital technologies, student exchanges and

education cooperation activities, and a variety of economic prospects (Norton et al., 2015). Consequently, the domestically and imagined Chineseness is performed and developed divisively compared with local Chineseness and lived Chineseness when they come to study in China.

Therefore, the comparative approach of Chineseness in analyzing the specific adaptation experience will also be adopted to understand the attributions of their adaptation. Moreover, it is also intended to examine how SEA overseas Chinese students' domestic and imagined Chineseness (Toh & Liu, 2021) in their home country would interact with the local and performed Chineseness in the host country China, thus deepening the academic understanding of "Chineseness" as an ethnic, political, cultural, and emotional identity from different perspectives and standpoints. In this way, it will contribute to constructing a more multi-faceted and richer global Chineseness (Zhang, 2021) and highlighting the Chineseness in the student mobility of reverse internationalization of Chinese higher education.

## **1.8 Research Design and Approach**

Driven by the focus of research questions and objectives, qualitative research is selected as the strategy of inquiry to examine the adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China, which enables researchers to delve into the inner experiences and to discover how concepts are generated by and within cultures (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In the meantime, qualitative research can be utilized to develop in-depth and illustrated comprehensive information for understanding the

many facets of the topics under research (Queirós et al., 2017).

Specifically, a single embedded case study is adopted for this research because the researcher emphasized the overseas Chinese students from the region of Southeast Asia as the research scope defined. The purpose of a case study is to provide an explanation for why and how certain events occurred (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994), which involves selecting individuals or groups as subjects of study and systematically gathering and organizing comprehensive and objective details for multiple aspects, such as historical context, survey findings, and interview data. Hence, to highlight the research focus on Southeast Asian overseas Chinese as a case and deeply examine how their adaption is interconnected with Chineseness, it resorts to choosing a case study as the research approach.

## **1.9 Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis has seven chapters. Specifically, Chapter 1 provides the overview of the research background as the emerging reverse IHE regarding student mobility in higher education from home country to ancestral homeland country and the international education quality appeal in China, namely international students' experience in the Plan for Study in China presently. Hence, the problem for this study has been stated as the influence of similar cultural origins toward this adaptation experience of reverse student flow in IHE remains to be addressed.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature. This chapter establishes the context for the research by elaborating on the phenomena known as reverse IHE. Then, it examines

related theoretical research centered on adaptation experience by comparing intracultural and intercultural adaptation, summarizing intercultural adaptation modes, challenges, and strategies, and discussing the diversified and multilevel perspectives toward investigating the adaptation experience of international students. Also, the definition of overseas Chinese, the concept of Chineseness, and the international students' identity in China have been demonstrated. On this basis, existing literature gaps and conceptual frameworks have been identified.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology. This chapter primarily presents the research philosophy and approach adopted. It overviews the research design, research site selection and sampling of research participants, the data collection process, corresponding data analysis, ethical considerations, reflexivity, and trustworthiness. The findings are presented in three chapters to respond to the Research Questions in this study.

Chapter 4 presents the findings related to Research Question One. This chapter has identified the adaptation challenges and issues of overseas Chinese when they study in China, namely adaptation challenges from the academic domain, social life domain and challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and adaptation issues from Chineseness identity.

Chapter 5 shows the findings related to Research Question Two. This chapter has reported the corresponding coping ways overseas Chinese students adopted for adaptation challenges and issues they have encountered in China. It has identified four kinds of coping ways for adaptation related challenges and three kinds of coping

ways for adaptation related issues from Chineseness identity.

Chapter 6 provides the findings related to Research Question Three. This chapter has presented the interplay between the adaptation experience and the Chineseness of overseas Chinese studying in China, namely the influences of Chineseness on the adaptation experience of overseas Chinese and the adaptation experience's impact on Chineseness development.

Chapter 7 concludes with the discussion and conclusion. This chapter presents the discussion of the findings of three research questions by linking them with extant literature. It sheds light on the implications and recommendations derived from the findings. The contribution of this study has been summarized as proposing the Recycling Forces and Counterforces Model between Chineseness and the adaptation experience of overseas Chinese studying in China and also proving the insight of conceptualizing Chineseness in the reverse internationalization of Chinese higher education.

## **1.10 Summary**

An overview of important aspects of this study has been outlined in this chapter. Firstly, it begins with setting the context for the study by introducing the background of the emerging reverse student mobility in higher education of overseas Chinese students from their home country to their ancestral homeland country China, and also the international education quality appeal in China, namely international student's experience in the development of Plan for Study in China presently. Against

this background, the research problem of the influence of similar culture origins on the adaptation experience of reverse student mobility has been stated.

Secondly, this chapter provides the overview of the research scope identified within the Southeast Asian region, thus formulating the research objectives and questions and the research significance accordingly and outlining the conceptual framework of this study. Thirdly, the chapter also briefly presents the research design and approach as a case study in qualitative research, as well as the limitations of this study. Finally, the chapter concludes with the structure of this thesis. A review of the literature on reverse IHE and the adaptation of international students and overseas Chinese studying in China will be presented in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter establishes the context for the research by firstly elaborating on the phenomena known as reverse student mobility of IHE in the first section and secondly deconstructing the key terms around the main topic of this thesis within two sections. The second section examines the related research centered on cultural adaptation experience theoretically by comparing intracultural and intercultural adaptation, summarizing intercultural adaptation modes, challenges, and strategies, as well as discussing the diversified and multilevel perspectives toward investigating the adaptation experience of international students.

The third section demonstrates the scope definition of overseas Chinese, the concept of Chineseness, and the international students' identity in China. With the understanding of these terms, the ethnic identity and related cultural adaptation literature about overseas Chinese students in China are reviewed to demonstrate what has been known and identify the limitations and areas needed for further exploration. Based on it, the existing literature gaps and conceptual framework are presented in section four and section five respectively.

A comprehensive literature review process of the existing literature pertaining to the topic has been conducted, encompassing a thorough examination of various scholarly sources such as books, journals, official websites, and other published

materials. The sources were obtained mainly through available electronic database services such as Web of Science, ProQuest, China National Knowledge Infrastructure, and Google Scholar. Other sources were also collected from the government printed materials from the Ministry of Education in China. Conducting a comprehensive review and analysis of existing literature has facilitated the researcher's comprehension of the research problem and the existing literature gaps pertaining to the research.

## **2.2 Reverse Student Mobility of Internationalization in Higher Education**

Reverse student mobility in higher education refers to the direction of student mobility, which is different from the traditional trend of student mobility from developing countries to developed regions, from the global South to the North (Liu et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2021). For example, it discovered a counter flow of international students from Europe, Latin America, and North America attending a Mexican institution (Cantwell et al., 2009). In the meantime, distinguished from the traditional mobility direction, this reverse student mobility also flowed into emerging education hubs, including China, Malaysia, and other Asian country (Kondakci et al., 2018). More importantly, there are international students who flow from their home country to their ancestral homeland country (Bamberger, 2020; Hu & Dai, 2021; Lee & Green, 2016), which is generally referred to as the reverse internationalization trend in higher education (IHE).

Notably, under IHE, the scholarly discourse on heritage seekers in the study

abroad field has primarily focused on individuals of European descent from the United States who were engaged in flowing back to countries such as Ireland or Italy for higher education (Tsantir, 2005). Also, it can be indicated from the study corroborated by numerous different research conducted on African American students who pursued educational opportunities in Africa (Day-Vines et al., 1998; Morgan et al., 2002). A recent study showed that African American students going to South Africa to study abroad shared that ‘diaspora experience’ helped them learn more about their racial identities ( Lee & Green, 2016). Elsewhere, a study of French-Jewish international students in Israel found that students preferred to learn there because it helped them build up their ethnic identity capital and their cosmopolitan capital (Bamberger, 2020).

Meanwhile, it is argued that the existing trends of reverse mobility are shaped by factors such as language and culture. Over the past decade and a half, the predictive efficacy of language, specifically English, has experienced a notable decline due to the growing prominence of China (Barnett et al., 2016). In China’s context, attention has been given to the causes and motivations for this reverse mobility. According to Ma’s (2017) research on overseas Chinese students in China, they have chosen to return to their ancestral homeland to explore and establish their cultural identity. It was echoed by the study of Wu et al. (2021) exploring the motivation behind overseas students choosing to pursue their studies in China. Yet, whether the planned reverse mobility can work in China has been questioned by investigating the recent increase in international students’ number coming to China to