



Between heritage and host: Cultural impact on Chinese international students' learner identity

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Abstract

Chinese international students (ChISs) often encounter challenges in reconstructing their learner identities when transitioning between distinct educational cultures. Existing studies have predominantly focused on linguistic competence, leaving the broader cultural and pedagogical dimensions of learner identity underexplored. Grounded in MacFarlane's (2018) framework of learner identity negotiation, the learner identity reconstructions are contextualized within the tension between cultural heritage traditions and host cultural expectations. To investigate these dynamics, a narrative inquiry was conducted with two Chinese undergraduate students studying in the United Kingdom, exploring how they negotiated belonging and engagement in international higher education (IHE). The findings reveal that both participants maintained a strong reliance on the heritage culture's instrumental view of education, which limited their social engagement and sense of belonging in the host environment. Moreover, they both adopted AI technologies as coping tools to sustain academic performance, further reinforcing utilitarian learning orientations. The study highlights how cultural and technological factors intersect in shaping learner identity, offering implications for IHE policymakers and educators seeking to foster inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments.

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Introduction

Learner identity, considered as the internal force for displayed "education orientation and a positive approach to learning" (Lawson, 2014, p. 352), is central not only to linguistic competence development but also the educational process (Darvin & Norton, 2023). For international students, especially those moving between distinct linguistic and cultural contexts, their learner identity negotiation has been found to be dependent on how they perceive belonging, agency, and legitimacy within a new linguistic environment.

However, much of the existing literature on learner identity remains language-centric, focusing on the repositioning of learners' linguistic capitals between linguistic environments. For example, the study of Zhang and Huang (2024) investigated how individual's language and communicative competence (i.e., linguistic capital) influenced the way they view themselves and are viewed by others in social situations. Recent studies in teaching English to speakers of other languages (e.g., Chen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2024; Zheng, 2025) have begun to reveal that the negotiation of learner identity among Chinese international students (ChISs) is mediated not only through language use, but also through culturally embedded beliefs about education, teacher-student power relations, and emerging AI-mediated linguistic practices which have become new forces in identity negotiation.

MacFarlane's (2018) framework that conceptualizes learner identity as a negotiation between previous experience, social background, and learning context provides a promising theoretical foundation to examine learner identity negotiation beyond linguistic competences. Seeing higher education as an educational transition (MacFarlane, 2018), this study situates ChISs' learner identity negotiation at the intersection of language and education through an investigation of sense of belonging and active engagement, two interrelated themes of learner identity that guide students' success in international higher education (IHE) (Brunton & Buckley, 2021). Belonging alleviates the feelings of loneliness or isolation in a new educational context and determines meaningful academic and social engagements in the local community (Brunton & Buckley, 2021). Moreover, engagement indicates a sense of belonging manifested in students' coping mechanisms for academic and social stress (Xu, 2024). For example, an IHE student from a different linguistic background may struggle to meet the reading requirements of the curriculum but, motivated by pride in attending a prestigious college, engages in discussions with peers who share their languages to understand the reading materials better.

Within this interplay, international students' language proficiency and linguistic resources have been found to impact how students use, perceive, and recognize their learner positioning (e.g.,

Zirak Ghazani, 2026). From a macro-level, the connection, choices and proficiency between heritage and host languages may manifest different language ideologies for academic performances, thus differently shaping students' positioning and self-positioning within multilingual learning environments (Manan & Hajar, 2025). From a micro-level, language proficiency, and linguistic resources have also challenged individual students' reflection, adaptation, and re-positioning across language contexts, such as English as a foreign language (EFL), English-medium instruction (EMI), and English as a second language (ESL) in education (Zhang & Huang, 2024). Specifically, the "widespread instrumental view of English teaching [in EFL education], where memorization and drills are seen as necessary for language learning" (Sun et al., 2025, p. 8), hinders the development of language-based communicative competence (Wang et al., 2024), leaving them overwhelmed, perplexed, and eventually under-positioning themselves when the linguistic context transits from EFL to ESL.

Based on the previous deliberation, this study investigates the learner identity construction of ChISs in a distinct culture (UK) as a re-negotiation among previous experiences, social background, and learning contexts for academic successes impacted by their heritage cultures. The choice of Chinese students in the UK is because of the sizeable number of ChISs in the UK (Guan et al., 2023) and because of the distinct cultures providing illustrative patterns of learner identity negotiations as a transition between educational cultures and norms (Liu et al., 2024). Theoretically, this study advances the understanding of ChISs' learner identity construction beyond language considerations, highlighting the negotiations of learner identity between heritage and host cultures. Practically, this study guides the internationalization efforts of IHE institutions by leveraging cultural impact to better understand and support ChISs, fostering inclusive practices, enhancing cross-cultural engagement, and addressing the specific challenges of their learner identity construction.

Literature review

Studies (e.g., MacFarlane, 2018; Xu, 2024) have reported two major themes, belonging and engagement, as context-specific manifestations of learner identity in IHE. Specifically, these studies suggest that student belonging intersects with learner identity in terms of expected and perceived norms of cultural, spiritual, social, and linguistic interactions between the learner-self and institutional agents (e.g., teachers, student support staff, designed curriculum, and social stereotypes in interactions) (Ajjawi et al., 2023). Moreover, student engagement is reciprocally related to learner identity as students with different learner identities engage with pedagogical approaches (e.g., critical feedback) differently (Rose et al., 2025), and student engagement potentially shifts learner identity based on engagement experience and social

consequences it produces (Johnson Jr. et al., 2025). With these impacts, learner identity determines IHE learner behavior on both individual and interactive levels, which, in turn, determines the academic and social success of ChISs (He et al., 2024). Therefore, based on the seminal work of MacFarlane (2018), which is illustrated in Figure 1, and considering the distinctiveness of Chinese and Western cultures, we deliberate ChISs' construction of learner identity as a three-way negotiation among aspects of previous experiences, social background, and learning contexts in the transition between cultures, guiding the analysis of this study. The impacts of these dimensions in the negotiation are reviewed below.

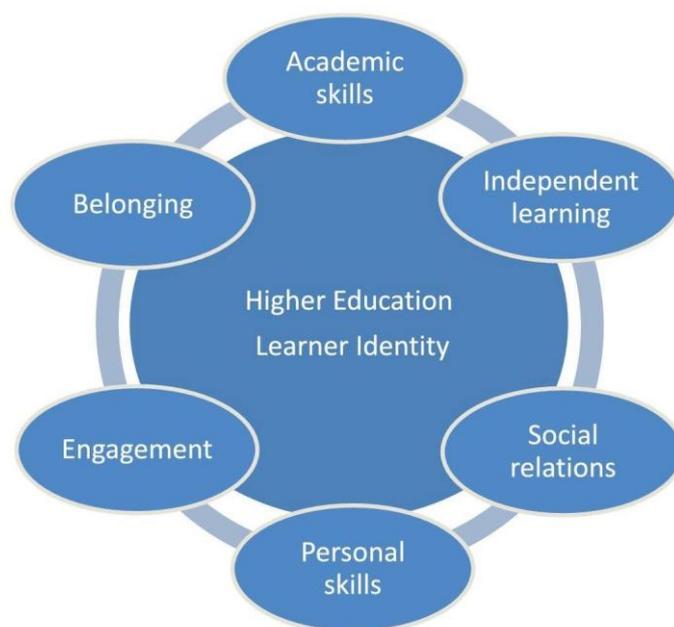


Figure 1. The identity formation in higher education (adapted from MacFarlane, 2018).

The impact of previous experience

With the significance of learner identity reconstruction stretching throughout the entire IHE journey (MacFarlane, 2018), the previous experience dimension refers to not only the academic and social experiences that ChISs have undergone in their heritage country, but also the ones they have experienced in the host country, making the negotiation of previous experience a mixed impact from both cultures (Liu et al., 2022). Studies have suggested that, in exam-oriented educational cultures (e.g., China, South Korea, Singapore), learners' academic and social identities were shaped by a high-stakes, test-based educational paradigm, with a strong emphasis on test preparation, rote memorization, and uniform evaluation (Xu, 2021). From the engagement perspective, students' academic and social experiences in these cultures (e.g., China, South Korea, Singapore) are portrayed with engagement in intense teacher-led instructions and highly structured study routines (Zhao & Qi, 2023). This is, at least partially,

the product of current educational system designs, which tightly link both teachers' professional ethics and personal interests (e.g., bonus and promotion) to students' test performances (Wang, 2023), driving them to "provide learners with clear guidelines and step-by-step instructions in task-performing" (Jiang et al., 2024, p. 310). From the belonging perspective, the heavy academic pressure students receive has been found to hinder the development of supportive learning communities due to the lack of socialization time and the competitive environment (Tan, 2020). Moreover, the academic pressure of Chinese students has been reported to originate from both internal drives (e.g., the desire to enroll in prestigious universities) and external forces (e.g., parental beliefs that prestigious college graduates find well-paid jobs and high social status) (Zhang et al., 2024), further portraying their construction of belonging in education with pressure and competition.

On the contrary, students' experiences in the host culture (the UK) can differ. After commencing their IHE, ChISs were exposed to learning environments often characterized by academic freedom that embraces critical thinking with multidimensional evaluations (MacFarlane & Han, 2024). In this environment, teachers assist students' learning by providing suggestions instead of instructions, and students' adherence to the suggestions is voluntary, not compulsory (Rothwell, 2025). Moreover, higher education students in this learning environment are expected to be more driven by internal motivations, such as personal and professional interests (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021), instead of external regulations, such as parental pressure.

Therefore, negotiating previous experience in ChISs' learner identity construction may be shaped by the unique features of educational paradigms in the heritage and host cultures. Specifically, studies have found that ChISs have "develop[ed] the habit of learning by closely following teachers' instructions" (Zhang et al., 2025, p. 11), and their learner identity depicts specific passive learning orientations (Sun et al., 2025). However, "learners are not simply passive recipients of the imposed positioning" (Zhou & Liu, 2023, p. 385). In their transition to autonomous and self-initiated learning environments such as those in the UK (Liu et al., 2024), ChISs have also been found to actively assert their agency in the re-negotiation and re-positioning process of their identities (Zhou & Liu, 2023), indicating active contests of stereotypes and mispositionings in IHE contexts.

Nonetheless, these studies (e.g., Zhou & Liu, 2023; Zhang & Huang, 2024) have primarily focused on language learner identity constructions, with little focus on ChISs' educational orientation and approaches to learning in IHE, which, as Lawson's (2014) definition proposes, manifests the internal struggles of learner identity negotiation as belonging and engagement. Granted, students' language identity construction that navigates through and is navigated across different language contexts shapes their success in IHE (Zhang & Huang, 2024). We deliberate that this language-based approach may underrepresent other negotiation powers of students'

learning in IHE, such as the previous educational experience. To name one example, Zhang & Huang (2024) reported a Chinese international student who succeeded in EFL, EMI, and ESL higher education contexts by positioning herself in English communications and perceiving recognition and legitimacy in English-mediated interactions. Nonetheless, such negotiations of identities struggled with the tensions between her internalized native-speakerism and her newly experienced multilingual identities, which may not only be a negotiation of language and social capital but also be of the sequential impacts of her previous experience in the three higher education contexts. As Brunton and Buckley (2021) suggest, learner identity is a coherent reconciliation of past and present educational experiences. Thus, with the distinct differences between the heritage and host cultures' educational experiences for ChISs in the UK, we suggest the necessity of investigating learner identity construction beyond language perspectives.

The impact of social background

ChISs' learner identity construction can also be marked by differences in social background between the two cultures. In this study, the social background does not refer to the social class of the students because, apart from economic capital perspectives, "there are no distinct class differences in habitus in urban China" (Tu, 2022, p. 828). Rather, we focus on culturally shaped instructor-student social-interactive paradigms that may weigh in the negotiation and construction of learner identity, such as power distance (Wang, 2023). In fact, with the plentiful daily face-to-face consultation opportunities, teachers' overt favoritism towards best-performing students, and students' deeply rooted reverence and respect for teachers (Hill, 2022; Wang, 2023), we consider the power distance in the heritage culture of education to be small yet pronounced. In this way, teachers can develop a strong rapport with students to facilitate learning (Yuan, 2024), provide close guidance and instructions for students' academic success (Jiang et al., 2024), and ensure effective disciplinary regulations when students behave in unfavorable ways (Li et al., 2024). Considering that teachers' career development in the current educational system heavily relies on their students' high-stakes test performances, we consider Chinese teachers and students to be in symbiotic relationships that are mutually dependent and collaborative by nature.

Conversely, the power distance and relationships between the university teaching staff and international students in the host culture are differently characterized. From a student perception perspective, although many studies have suggested the variety of programs provided for assisting international students in accommodating themselves academically and socially (Hart & Rodgers, 2024), international students may perceive the power distance with a self-constructed understanding instead of a resource-based understanding (Ding & Wang, 2025).

For example, Ovink et al. (2024) found multiple cases of international students reporting that "professors are less likely to reach out to someone like her [an international student]" (p. 19), leaving their academic success under-supported (self-constructed understanding), despite the large number of support seminars or workshops available (resource-based understanding). Moreover, university teaching staff's job descriptions and evaluations in the host culture are based not only on teaching performance but also on research outcomes (O'Connor & Doyle, 2023). Therefore, different from the heritage culture where teachers, professors, and tutors work closely with the students for academic success (Wang, 2024), ChISs may perceive a greater power distance with teaching staff in the host culture than those in their heritage culture, which manifests as perceiving insufficient support for their IHE (Guo et al., 2025).

Thus, the different social-interaction paradigms that ChISs experience in the two distinct cultures necessitate a social-interactional investigation of their learner identity negotiation and construction. With consideration of the cultural impact on identity and behavior (Bai & Nam, 2024), we contemplate that students' social background may contribute to learner identity through, and be reciprocally manifested in, their engagement and belonging.

The impact of different learning culture and contexts

This dimension focuses on changes and transitions, instead of differences (MacFarlane, 2018). In other words, this dimension is about how students perceive, act, and struggle through differences (Brunton & Buckley, 2021). In the previous sections, we covered some negotiations and transitions in learner identity construction. However, this dimension details the nuances of ChISs' learner identity construction in transition.

Studies have found that ChISs demonstrate reliance on heritage culture peers with a reluctance to interact with the host culture agents (teachers and peers) (Meng et al., 2021). On the one hand, some studies (e.g., Cao et al., 2021) have identified this reliance as a coping mechanism for changes in culture and educational paradigms, so that they feel safer, securely bounded, and positively positioned in interactions. On the other hand, some (e.g., Zhang & Huang, 2024) have seen it as shaped by the positioning of oneself and others in interactions according to their own language ideologies. We deliberate that both points have merits, as learner identity is a fluid and context-specific concept that depends on how one views oneself and how others view oneself (Wang et al., 2021; Zhang & Huang, 2024). Thus, learner identity is, by definition, reciprocally constructed through actions (e.g., the coping mechanism) and perceptions (e.g., the negative positioning by others). To exemplify, an international student may feel insecure at the beginning of their IHE in a different host culture (perception), thus seeking connections with peers from the same heritage culture for emotional support (actions). After developing

connections, they receive acknowledgement (actions) for their academic intelligence and communicative competence in the host language (perception), making them more comfortable in academic and social interactions with agents of the host culture (perception), sparking the expansion of friend circles that produce genuine belonging (perception) and engagement (action) in IHE.

From the action-based perspective, studies have found that ChISs' identity negotiation in learning contexts has increasingly involved technological mediation, particularly in IHE settings (Zheng, 2025). While digital technology use has been a long-standing feature of student learning experiences, recent research shows that ChISs' adoption of AI technologies features in their learner identity negotiation between heritage and host cultures. For instance, when faced with linguistic challenges, studies have found that ChISs specifically utilize AI technologies to create translanguaging spaces that maintain their academic development (Liu & Chen, 2024), to preserve their classroom participation through auto-transcription during lectures (Qu & Song, 2024), and to guide their social interactions in unfamiliar cultural contexts (Çimşir & Kaynakçı, 2024). Zheng (2025) further argues that AI technologies have become identity-mediating tools through which ChISs negotiate their academic legitimacy and linguistic competence within Western academic environments. These studies suggest that technology adoption shapes how ChISs position and negotiate their learner identities in response to cross-cultural academic challenges in both academic and social contexts.

From the perceptual perspective, we deliberate a potential prevalence of the instrumental view of education. Studies have found that ChISs have shifted their preference for seeking foreign country jobs and immigration (Ross et al., 2013) to considering home country employment prospects with a focus on return-on-investment (e.g., high salaries, prestige job titles) (Guan et al., 2023). In other words, ChISs' participation in IHE may depend on their perceived relationship between IHE participation and future success (Bozzato, 2024). Considering the weakened projection between language skills and career prospects in China (Liu et al., 2024), we suggest ChISs' learner identity construction in IHE is more than the negotiation of languages and ideology, but also the negotiation and positioning of the self in the broader differences of educational culture and context.

Research questions

Based on the previous review of the three-dimensional learner identity construction framework (MacFarlane, 2018) across the Chinese and UK educational contexts, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do ChISs in UK universities negotiate between heritage and host cultures'

educational experiences in learner identity construction?

RQ2: How do ChISs in UK universities negotiate the social-interactional paradigms between the heritage and host cultures in learner identity construction?

RQ3: What perceptions and actions reflect their negotiations and constructions of learner identity in belonging and engagement?

Method

This study employs a narrative inquiry approach to explore the construction of the learner identity of two ChISs currently pursuing undergraduate education in the UK. To investigate the learner identity construction and negotiation considering the heritage and host cultures, two students, Alice and Sean, were purposefully sampled to reflect variation in age, gender, major, personality, English proficiency, family income, and prior learning experiences. The sampling sought to center between-culture differences as a point of analytic focus, though limitations do exist in sample size to ensure the differences were the only consistent factor influencing their identity negotiation.

The narrative inquiry is a particularly suitable study method for this investigation, as it enables participants to articulate their personal narratives in a natural progression of experiences, facilitating deeper understanding through which researchers can extract meaningful insights (Clandinin, 2006). Moreover, narrative inquiry has been widely adopted to articulate the experiences and thought processes of ethnic minorities (e.g., Chen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2024) and clarify the rationale behind perceptions and behaviours within distinct learning environments (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021). As members of a minority group in a foreign society with a different linguistic environment, many ChISs commence their higher education journeys shortly after turning 18, often facing challenges due to differences in learning culture and contexts (Cao et al., 2021), suggesting possible challenges in language and representativeness (Chen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2024), thus justifying the narrative inquiry approach for this study.

Participants

Both participants in this study signed an ethical consent form, approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the affiliated institution.

The first participant, Alice, is a 23-year-old final-year undergraduate student enrolled in a

prestigious UK university, majoring in Media, Film, and Television. Alice's family owns a few businesses and enjoys a substantial yearly disposable income of several million Chinese Yuan. This has supported Alice in pursuing personal interests such as painting, drawing, and film-making since primary school. Despite Alice's extracurricular passions, her school performance in high-stakes examinations was sub-optimal, evidenced by the IELTS score of 5.5 (below average) after three attempts. To start her international education, Alice undertook language courses and university foundation programs before university enrolment. Alice is introverted, remarking, "I can express myself better with my art projects, so I never bothered to learn how to initiate or maintain relationships."

The second participant, Sean, is a 19-year-old first-year undergraduate student enrolled in a different top university in the UK, majoring in Finance. Raised in a working-class family with a slightly above-average income, Sean could pursue personal interests such as jazz drums and computer games but mainly focused on his academic studies at school. Moreover, Sean's academic performance has consistently placed him in the top quintile in every grade, and he scored an IELTS of 7.0 (above average) on his first attempt. Sean is outgoing and enthusiastic, valuing the stress-relieving nature of friendships.

Data collection and analysis

Because learner identity construction is an individualized concept that often happens unconsciously (McDonald, 2024), data were collected through unstructured individual interviews for their ability to "generate data with different structures and patterns" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017, p. 241). With interviews conducted in Chinese (students' first language), participants were asked to share their perceptions, intentions, actions, and reflections on their sense of belonging and engagement in IHE. In this way, the participants not only answered questions regarding their conscious construction of learner identity, but also reflected their negotiations unconsciously through their perceptions and authentic behaviors within IHE, thus better indicating their learner identity construction and negotiation. To bridge any potential gaps between the researchers' comprehension and the narrative content (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006), the study actively encouraged participants to provide detailed answers while continuously validating researchers' interpretations and assumptions against the participants. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes, and the transcripts were translated by an independent translator.

Moreover, both participants had established close prior relationships with the first author, which allowed ongoing participant feedback for clarification throughout data collection and interpretation. Though the formal member-checking was not conducted, the established rapport

allowed for cross-referencing and triangulation for credibility and accuracy of the data and interpretation. Both interviews were conducted by the first author and subsequently transcribed by an independent assistant for coding and analysis.

Following up, the transcribed data were imported into NVivo 14 for coding and analysis. Following the step-by-step instructions for narrative inquiry provided by Miles and Huberman (1994), we began with data reduction after transcription, in which we selected, focused, simplified, and abstracted the narrative transcriptions connected to the research questions. In the second step, data display, we organized the meaning-making excerpts from the previous steps into convenient and compact forms. After that, we extracted valuable themes (the conclusion-drawing step) and checked for the themes' reliability with both original and compact transcripts (the verification step) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The inter-coder reliability reached 0.89 with Krippendorff's alpha. This allowed us to draw out convincing common themes of importance and trustworthiness across their individual differences.

Findings

The analysis was guided by MacFarlane's (2018) learner identity negotiation framework. Rather than applying the framework in a rigid, category-driven manner, it was employed as a sensitizing lens to interpret how the participants negotiated their learner identities through the key dimensions of engagement and belonging. Moreover, because of the exploratory and interpretive nature of narrative inquiry, the analysis prioritized inductive meaning-making to capture participants' lived experiences before mapping them onto the theoretical dimensions.

From the collected narratives, we identified that both students heavily relied on their heritage culture when constructing their learner identities. They relied on previous experiences to negotiate engagement and belonging in IHE through their shared preference for instruction-based education and instrumental views of IHE, to the extent that they utilized AI technologies to sustain such preferences in different cultural and learning contexts. These findings are explained below.

Reliance of heritage culture's ways in host IHE spaces

First and foremost, the similar themes in Alice and Sean's narratives emerged the influence of heritage culture experiences in learner identity negotiation for their IHE in the UK, maintaining traditional educational paradigms that guided their engagement in the current IHE learning

context, although their educational experiences in the heritage culture differed. Specifically, the heritage cultures' model suggests that learner identity was constructed in a "passive" way, instead of promoting the active learning and reflection required by the host culture. As suggested:

Alice: I followed whatever the professors and tutors told me to do, and I realized that it was a good way to get better grades. ... A professor, saying if I needed it, suggested a workshop for me to help me with my English. But I didn't go.

Sean: I carefully read the course outline because it had the marking criteria. Following them, I got better grades. ... It's just like following teachers' instructions in high school but in a written format so it's more trustworthy.

Alice: A professor, saying if I needed it, suggested a workshop for me to help me with my English once. But I didn't go. ... I didn't want them to see me as an incompetent English user. ... Yes [major-stipulated high creativity demands], but I just presented what I'd learnt in my projects. ... I hardly booked any open-office hours.

Moreover, the impact of the heritage culture paradigm may have long-lasting effects. Although Sean had only been in the UK IHE for a year, Alice relied similarly on the heritage culture's educational paradigm after participating in IHE for four years (including her language and foundation programmes). According to both of them, this reliance was the possible behavioral reflection of the instrumental view of education (i.e., education as a means to achieve practical outcomes rather than personal or social growth) internalized with previous experiences in the heritage culture. In other words, although their learner identity was re-negotiated in the new learning culture and context, they still see education as a means to an end, as suggested by the following responses:

Alice: I hope to work in the movie industry one day. And a bachelor's degree from [the university] would be a stepping stone. Therefore, all I needed was a passing grade.

Sean: To find better jobs in Finance, I need to have a master's degree and internship experience. For this purpose, I wrote my essays according to the criteria, did my online tests with AI's help, and acquainted myself with professors so that they would write me recommendation letters for my master's applications. I also have internships arranged for the summer, which will help me in the future.

Therefore, the instrumental view of education among the two ChISs portrays their learner identity construction and negotiation, showing the overwhelming impacts of the heritage

culture's educational paradigms with perceptions and actions of the learner identity negotiation formed around such views. Therefore, the two participants exemplify that, when having the instrumental view as an ideology, such an ideology would heavily shape their learner identity negotiation, which overshadows the importance of belonging and engagement in the host culture, fueling their learning identity construction with reliance on the heritage ways despite their previous experiences in the host culture.

Persistence of heritage culture's social-interactional paradigms in host IHE spaces

The instrumental view of education guided not only the negotiation between heritage and host educational paradigms within learner identity construction, but also the social-interactional paradigms in their learner identity construction. Perceiving the negotiation and construction of learner identity based on the projected relationship between IHE and future success (Bozzato, 2024), the two interviewees reflected the following in their social-interactional perceptions and actions in IHE:

Alice: I never initiated any conversation with my professors, tutors, or local peers. I don't want to work in the UK, and my English is not good. Why torment them by trying to develop relationships?

Sean: What's the point [making friends with local teaching staff and peers]? Apart from wanting to do my Master's degree in [a different UK university], I don't need anything from them.

Therefore, apart from their institutional identities as graduates from elite UK universities, they show little sense of belonging and engagement in their social-interactional negotiation of learner identity, reflected in their minimal willingness to engage socially, limiting their belonging and engagement in IHE. The relationship between the instrumental view and socialization was best explained by Sean:

Personal aspiration first, always personal aspiration first. You know I like to make friends, but my parents did not spend this much money sending me here to make friends. I have to think about my future! Therefore, the friend-making time has to suffer.

This reluctance in social interactions with UK peers can be traced to the influence of the heritage culture's collectivistic yet academically utilitarian orientation, where interpersonal relationships in educational contexts are often secondary to goal attainment and academic success. Such cultural values shape their perception that social interactions have little

instrumental value within the IHE environment.

Challenges and strategies of the heritage-culture-impacted learner identity construction

The two students' dependence on their heritage culture's educational paradigms, which is characterized by teacher-centered instruction and structured academic support, has influenced their perceptions and coping strategies when facing challenges in the host IHE context. Their reliance on heritage culture's educational paradigms and limited socialization has made them feel isolated, academically challenged, and underrepresented. For example, both Alice and Sean reported that:

Alice: My teachers in the language courses were very nice and helpful, but they had so many other students to take care of, so they couldn't really spend much time helping me. ... Even now, it's kind of the same because the classes are so big. I heard that students in [a different UK university of art] get one-on-one lessons, and their teachers really help them a lot with their work. I kind of envy them.

Sean: It is very difficult to consult a professor or a tutor [for course knowledge explanation]. We [international students] spend so much money on tuition, and I thought we would get the help we needed. As it turns out, we have to find ways to help ourselves learn.

Such challenges were manifested in dissatisfactions, complaints, and stresses. One of the participants was even diagnosed with depression. Although such information cannot be disclosed due to ethical concerns, this response further suggested the impact of the heritage culture in learner identity negotiation and construction, especially the impact of the instrumental view of education. As previously reported, both participants see IHE as a means to an end, that they eventually would return to China for work and life. With this perception in mind, the instrumental view becomes a coping mechanism for challenges and stresses, which are negotiated into learner identity construction powerfully. As stated:

Alice: I only need the graduation certificate to join the film crew my parents arranged for me. So I don't have to push myself that much.

Sean: I'm only here for three years and will go back to China for work. Even if I make connections with local people here, they don't bring me much value.

Moreover, this coping mechanism is enhanced by technologies such as AI, further reducing the impact of differences in learning culture and contexts under the instrumental view. Both

students reported using AI technologies for various purposes for IHE, such as language, consultation, evaluation, and generation. For examples:

Alice: AI's auto-speech recognition and translation software helped me to understand the class contents moments after my teacher taught it in class. ... If without [AI and other digital technologies], I don't even think I can pass my courses... I have many group meetings and group assignments needing digital technologies [for ideas, contents, and oral translations].

Sean: I find ChatGPT helpful in terminology clarification. Although teachers are more reliable sources, it takes too long to book an appointment with them. So, most of the time, I use this alternative. ... I also use ChatGPT to evaluate my essays and suggest improvements so that I can gain better grades.

Based on these reflections, we conclude that Alice and Sean's learner identity negotiation depicts influences of the heritage culture, which is characterized by the instrumental view of education that reciprocally contributes to their learner identity negotiation process through the focus on future work and life, as well as the integration of AI technologies.

Discussions

The present study investigated the impact of heritage culture on ChISs' learner identity construction within UK higher education. The findings offer indicative insights into how belonging and engagement in learner identity from educational transition perspectives, showing that it is not only a linguistic construct but also an exercise of cultural, educational, and technological capital. Both participants' narratives indicated that their instrumental view of education, developed within the heritage culture, shaped their engagement, academic communication, and socialization. The implications of such findings are discussed below.

Theoretical implications

The findings contribute to learner identity theories by examining the role of heritage culture in shaping learner identity across cultures. Based on MacFarlane's (2018) learner identity negotiation framework, we propose that learner identity construction across linguistic contexts (e.g., from EFL to EMI or ESL) may require re-negotiating and re-positioning linguistic competence and language use, as well as negotiating experiences, backgrounds and the learning cultures. This three-dimensional negotiation of learner identity may be critical to consider when

pervasive language contexts change for international students, as such changes often indicate a structural shift in context-specific thought patterns and cultural behavior that raise challenges and require solutions in IHE (Lucy, 2016; Cao et al., 2021). Therefore, the study suggests that existing models of learner identity may need to consider the educational and social-interactive habits of the heritage culture, particularly in contexts where individuals navigate between distinct heritage and host cultures.

From a language education perspective, the shift from EFL to EMI or ESL environments not only introduces a new linguistic context but also transforms the educational expectations attached to language. In the heritage culture, English is often viewed instrumentally (Sun et al., 2025). Whereas in the host culture, English is a language of inquiry and participation that reshapes educational power hierarchies, thus learner identity. In other words, student success depends less on linguistic accuracy alone and more on how language is used to build engagement, confidence, and communicative belonging within academic communities.

The study also suggests that the instrumental view of education may shape learner identity construction. When education is viewed instrumentally, language may be perceived primarily as a tool for functional communication or professional success, rather than as a marker of power negotiation for learner identities (Ashwin, 2024). Specifically, this view could lead to tension for individuals who may prioritize attachment to the heritage culture when learning in the host culture. In contrast to some studies that have suggested active acculturation of ChISs in Western host cultures (e.g., Yan & Berliner, 2011), both Alice and Sean displayed reliance on the heritage ways. Considering the fact that over 85% of ChISs return to China after their international education (Guan et al., 2023), the impact of this instrumental view derived from the heritage culture may prevail beyond the two sampled students in this study, further suggesting the potential need for theoretical models to address this view in learner identity negotiations.

Furthermore, this study could add layers to learner identity construction negotiations by finding that intensified technology utilization could act as both a barrier and a facilitator in learner identity negotiation in the host culture. Studies (e.g., Wang & Guo, 2026) have reported that AI technologies provide personalized educational resources that align with learner interests, goals, and modalities. On the one hand, because of the instrumental view of education, learners may use technology primarily for utilitarian purposes (e.g., completing assignments, passing exams) (Holmes & Porayska-Pomsta, 2023) rather than for genuine belonging and engagement within learning communities. On the other hand, the utilization of technologies can help learners explore content that aligns with their interests and goals, fostering a sense of agency in their identity construction (McGivney, 2025). Thus, AI could have the potential to become a unique technological capital in learner identity negotiation and construction. Specifically, the

users' anticipation that AI is factual and the cultural misappropriation of sensitive materials (Dai & Zhu, 2025) add novel dynamics to human-technology communications, thus shaping AI ideologies and the subsequent identity negotiation (Darvin, 2025). As it is not this study's focus, AI's unique power in identity construction is left for further investigation.

Practical implications

The findings suggest that educational designs in host cultures should consider the possibly distinct beliefs held by heritage communities. Drawing from the dimension of changes in learning cultures and contexts (MacFarlane, 2018), this study identified struggles in ChISs' learner identity construction, both academically and socially. Although their instrumental view and use of AI helped mitigate such challenges, they may also isolate international students from the local learning community for a sense of belonging and engagement. Therefore, we suggest policymakers and educators design programs that align with these perceptions and actions to foster a broader, integrative approach to education that considers these dimensions. For example, practitioners can prompt students to identify and write about the educational values and assumptions they bring from their heritage culture, followed by discussions of values and assumptions to compare perspectives and recognize cultural differences in learning expectations. Through such reflective activities, not only can students balance their expectations in IHE, but also institutions can foster a more inclusive learning environment through mutual understanding and cultural adaptation.

The participants were also found to rely heavily on their previous experiences and social-interactional paradigms in learner identity construction, which resonates with the appeals of pre-arrival programs (O'Brien et al., 2023). Scholars (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2023) have argued that, through alignment of student expectations across cultures, such programs aid students' learner identity negotiations before the transition challenges occur and students resort to heritage ways for emotional support (Zhao & Qi, 2023). Therefore, language support alone may not be adequate for IHE students. More comprehensive pre-arrival programs may be paramount to their IHE success. The design and effectiveness of such programs are left for curricular and policy researchers to investigate.

Last but not least, the findings may be used by practitioners in counselling or social work to better understand the challenges faced by individuals navigating between heritage and host cultures in IHE. Considering the nuanced differences in heritage cultures, tailored support services could address the impact of limited socialization, reliance on technology, and the instrumental view of education, thus fostering genuine belonging and engagement for international students. We also call for further empirical studies to explore how these elements

(e.g., educational paradigms, socialization behaviors, and technology use) vary across different heritage cultures.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. The small sample size of two participants limits the generalizability of the findings, thereby limiting the depth and the transferability of the findings. Moreover, due to the small sample size, participants' reflections may be influenced by recall or social desirability biases. Furthermore, the pre-existing rapport between the participants and the researcher, although it helped to triangulate the data, might have shaped the tone and openness of responses. Therefore, we recommend future research includes a larger and more diverse sample, adopt longitudinal designs, and integrate multiple data sources to better capture the dynamic process of learner identity negotiation.

Disclosure statement

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