

# International Education in Hong Kong: Paradoxes in Intercultural Communication, Adaptation, and Acculturation Strategies

under review

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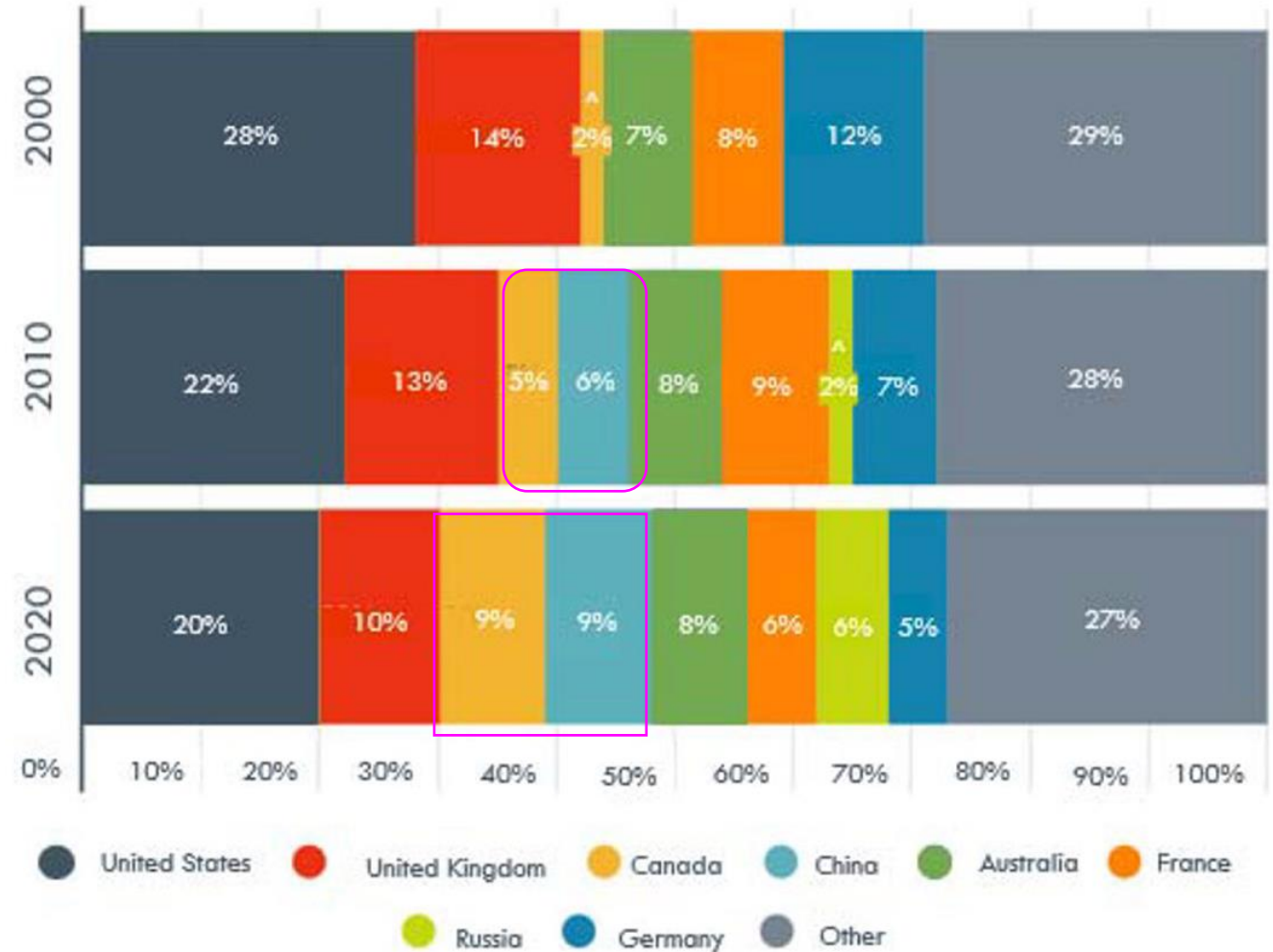
## INTERNATIONALLY MOBILE STUDENTS GLOBALLY, 2011 – 2020



## COVID-19's impact on global student mobility

- Destinations with vaccine availability, open borders, and in-person instruction stand to gain a competitive share of the global market going forward

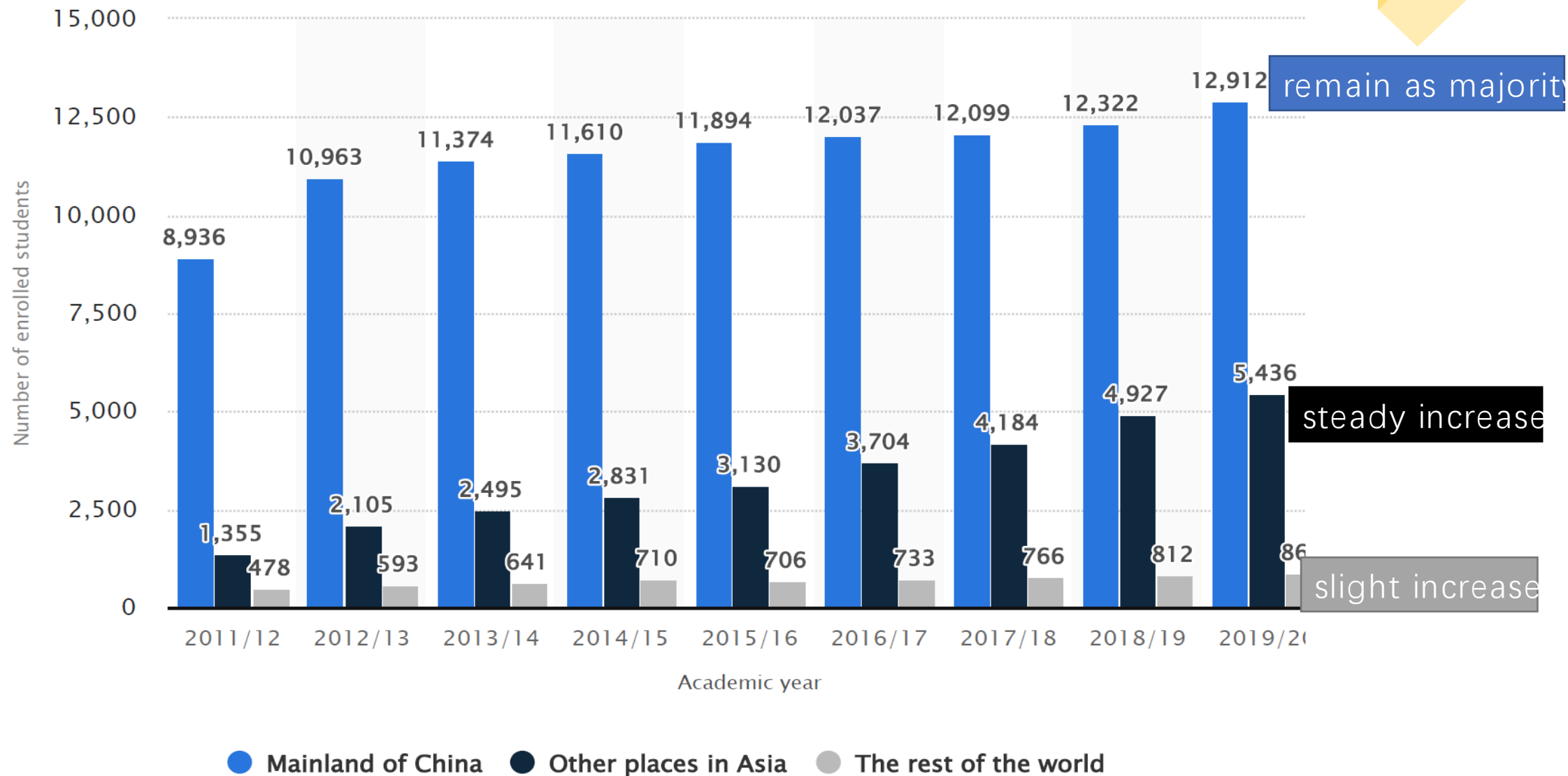
IIE and IC3: international student mobility flows shifted in the 20 years from 2000–2020



The demand for study abroad remains strong.



# Enrollment of non-local/international students in UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong from academic year 2011/12 to 2019/20, by place of origin\*



# Research Background

**Changes of  
International  
student mobility**

**qualitative**

characterised by rising competition  
between traditional and emerging higher  
education destinations

**Reasons for the  
global landscape  
change**

**Reconsidering studying in the West:**

❖ In Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic, geo-political conflicts, concerns over racism/discrimination (Yang, 2022)

**Hong Kong becomes a popular study destination:**

❖ the rise in global standings of Asian universities (Mok & Kang, 2021)

❖ geo-political ties in a post-colonial era creating new networks of international student mobility (Mulvey, 2021),

❖ proximity to home and perceived safety (Mok et al., 2022)

# Research Background

Hong Kong, an emerging regional education hub

“One country two systems” constitutional framework

❖ Attracting a growing number of international students

❖ The Hong Kong Government’s vision: being an education hub with the recruitment of ‘non-local students’ a critical ingredient (Cheng, Cheung, & Yeun, 2011).

Hong Kong provides a unique context for higher education mobility:

The education system of Hong Kong combines Western and Chinese elements (Li, 2007)

It gives rise to a diverse linguistic, demographic, and sociocultural environment (Cheng et al, 2015)

## Higher Education in Hong Kong

- ❖ expand in the early 1990s ;100,000 student places (UGC, 2022)
- ❖ eight public-funded universities, “world-class” standards: HKU, HKUST, and CUHK
- ❖ Most degree programmes are English-medium
- ❖ policy document of UGC in 2004: Hong Kong Higher Education: To Make a Difference To Move with the Times

- 1) a doubling of the non-local student quota to **20 percent** for public-funded programmes
- 2) removal of restrictions on non-local students for postgraduate programmes
- 3) scholarship schemes to attract talented non-local students
- 4) rights for graduates to seek employment after graduation (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021; Vyas, 2018).



# Research Background

expansion of non-local students in Hong Kong

- ❖ In 2000/01, non-local students made up only **2 percent** of the student body at public universities.
- ❖ In 2021/22, this figure had increased to **20 percent** or over 20,000 students
- ❖ the majority (73 percent) of these non-local students come from Mainland China, **23 percent** from other parts of Aisa and only **4 percent** from other continents  
(University Grants Committee, 2022).

# Rationale to conduct a study

- ❖ The global landscape of international student mobility is changing (de Wit and Altbach, 2021): shifting from West to East
- ❖ It has emerged as an important field of study and international students have **become a pressing policy concern** for governments (Brooks & Waters, 2022), and policy makers such as university senior management and researchers.
- ❖ Not much work has been done on international students in Hong Kong



- ❖ There is a growing need to better understand the experiences of international students in East Asia as they adapt to living and studying in a new environment.
- ❖ A good model for East Asian Countries

# Research Gaps

- ❖ The current research builds on Yu and colleagues' work (e.g., Yu, 2021; Yu, Mak, & Bodycott, 2021; Yu, Vyas, & Wright, 2020) to explore intercultural communication, adaptation, and acculturation experiences among international students at a Hong Kong university.



- ❖ we put forward the case that there were **paradoxes between** the international students' **enthusiasm** for engaging with students from different backgrounds on the one hand **and a lack of interaction and friendship** with local students on the other hand.
- ❖ We further discuss **the reasons for this paradox, the strategies** students adopt in response, and **the implications** for their academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation.



# Theoretical basis

The theoretical basis for this study is situated within two fields:

- 1) cross-cultural psychology (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999)
- 2) social psychology of language (Clément et al., 2003).

- ❖ In the bilingual context of Hong Kong, international students are caught up in a situation where sociohistorical factors mean that the language of university teaching is English, and the daily communication language is mainly Cantonese.
- ❖ Second language acquisition is often described as one of the most effective means of producing and strengthening intercultural communication (Clément et al., 2003).
- ❖ The Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model is often employed as a measure of language use in the context of inter-cultural interaction.



To bridge these theoretical gaps, this research presents an interactive and responsive model that links acculturation strategies, L2 WTC and adaptation

# Research objectives

- ❖ to explore the inter dynamics among intercultural communication, adaptation, and acculturation strategies of international students in Hong Kong.
- ❖ to consider the differences in how and why international students across different cultural backgrounds communicate and acculturate when two or more cultures come into contact.
- ❖ to examine whether different L2 WTC and acculturation strategies will lead to different adaptation outcomes.



# Methodology



**Design: qualitative research design**

(Semi-structured interviews of 45-60 minutes / each)



**Sample: 24 international students at a world-class university in Hong Kong**

## Demographic information

- 24 international students (11 females, 13 males);
- 12 undergraduates, 12 postgraduates;
- 14 from Asian countries (including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, and Sri Lanka)
- 10 from Western countries (including Australia, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States)



# Methodology

A three-step process for thematic analysis informed by Miles and Huberman (1994)

**Step 1:** line-by-line “open” and “axial” coding of data into emerging themes

**Step 2:** constructing a “coding scheme” to identify the core relationships

**Step 3:** drawing conclusions from interview data



3 themes:

- (1) perceived barriers to interactions and friendships with locals
- (2) acculturation strategies
- (3) academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation.

# Research Findings

## Theme 1: Barriers to interactions and friendships with local students



### Perceived cultural differences

Perceived cultural differences stood out as one of the most critical factors that led to a lack of interaction or friendships between international and local students.



### Low motivation to learn Cantonese and low confidence in speaking English

The language was one explanation for the lack of interactions and friendships with local students. The participants highlighted a language divide between international and local students.



### Outsiders in an “internationalised” university

Quite a few participants were sceptical about the extent of internationalisation at the university.

# Research Findings

## Theme 2: Acculturation Strategies

### Identification with other international students

most international students identified with other international students, rather than building ties with the host culture. Specifically, the participants described how friendship groups were typically based on shared nationality, language, religion, and/or ethnicity.



### Co-national and Western identification

Participants from countries under-represented at the university most often discussed not being part of a close-knit student community. Instead, these international students formed a university social group at the university based upon a shared “Western” identity.



## Theme 3: Academic, Sociocultural, and Psychological Adaptation

### Sociocultural adaptation 02

11



### 0 Academic adaptation

- ❖ some students from Asian countries: the challenges of adapting to the university's English-medium-of-instructions.
- ❖ international students from Western countries: challenges in adapting to unfamiliar educational approaches and styles. E.g. teacher-centred teaching, limited classroom discussion, more rote learning, and greater weight given to examinations.

The participants typically discussed more difficulty with “fitting in”, acquiring culturally appropriate skills, and interacting in the new environment. It was this that led to their feelings of being “outsiders” at the university and society.



### 03 Psychological adaptation

The international students discussed psychological adaptation in Hong Kong, emotional or affective aspects of adaptation, levels of well-being and satisfaction.  
e.g. feelings of homesickness and loneliness

# Further Discussion

## A “wall” separating international and local students

A mismatch of language awareness and perceived cultural differences that prevents international students from integrating into the university and wider society, often resulting in feelings of being “outsiders”.

A lack of resources as newcomers to cope with “fitting in” issues seemed to lead some students towards a separationist strategy. If unresolved, these students can be most vulnerable to psychological adaptation difficulties related to well-being and satisfaction.

## Sociocultural adaptation over academic adaptation challenges

01

02

## Acculturation strategies: identifications with co-nationals and other international students

Most international students ended up socialising with their peers from the same or similar cultural backgrounds.

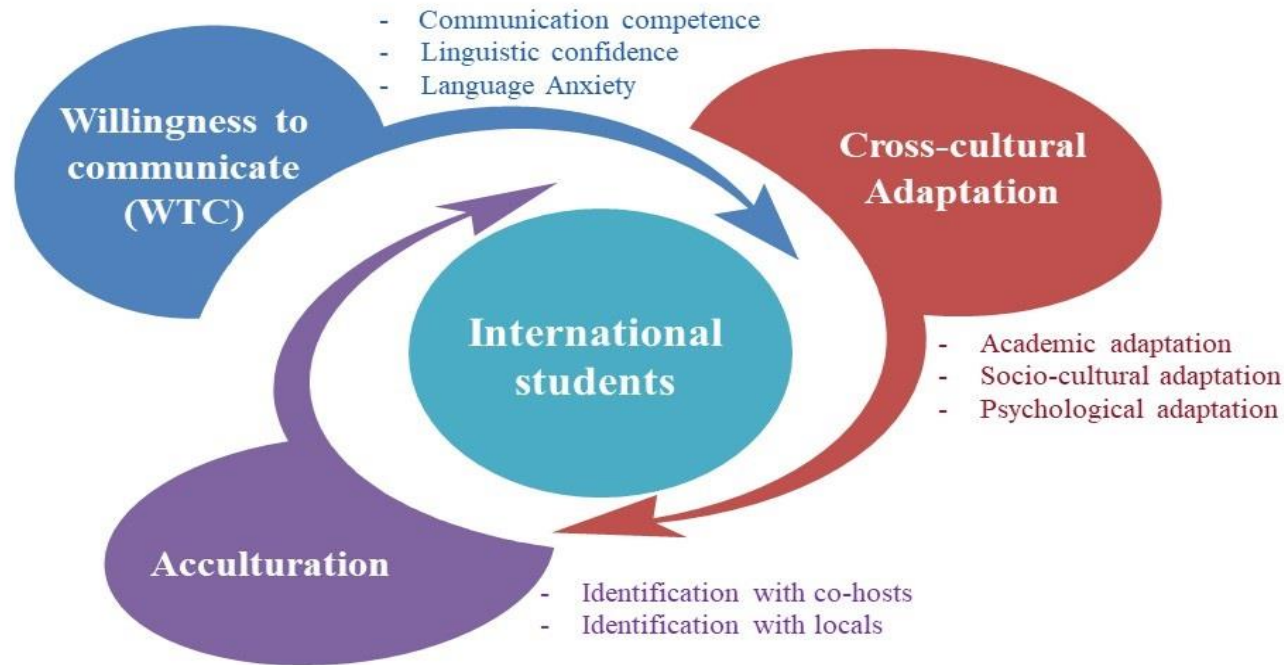
Intercultural communication and adaptation are closely related: a bilateral understanding and mastery of each other’s culture and language can be a crucial step for both international and local students. An effective acculturation strategy is another crucial factor determining the success of intercultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation.

04

## A Proposed Framework

# Further Discussion

The framework depicts the dynamics of the interactive and responsive relationships among transnational communication, acculturation, and adaptation.



## future studies:


- ❖ to explore the nuance of the multi-dimensional cross-cultural adaptation issue experienced by international students
- ❖ to test the interrelationships among academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation.



# Implication of the Study

Universities can play pivotal roles in facilitating communication between local students and international students.

a series of activities that could be initiated or expanded as part of higher education hub initiatives.



- (1) A more comprehensive student orientation programme aimed at providing newcomers with the essential skills, knowledge, and contacts to survive in daily life;
- (2) Practical and dialogue-oriented Cantonese classes for international
- (3) Cultural and language exchange pairs between local and international students
- (4) Curriculum development: learner-centred pedagogy, classroom discussion, more assessments as group projects
- (5) Inclusive student clubs or societies
- (6) Workshops and seminars on Hong Kong's societal issues

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Thank You!