

**From Macao to the United States and Canada: A Transnational Journey of Longing for Belonging**  
**De Macao aux États-Unis et au Canada : un périple transnational à la recherche d'appartenance**

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International Students from Asia in Canada's Postsecondary Institutions: Disconnections and Connections

Étudiant.e.s internationaux en provenance d'Asie dans les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire au Canada : connexions et déconnexions

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Résumé de l'article

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# From Macao to the United States and Canada: A Transnational Journey of Longing for Belonging

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Vander Tavares, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences

**Abstract**

Framed as a narrative inquiry, this investigation focuses on the lived experiences of Seth, a 24-year-old international student from Macao at a university in Ontario prior to the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore the participant's experiences of belonging and identity formation over the course of his transnational journey. Seth's story highlights the importance of meaningful social interaction for the sociocultural adjustment and academic performance of international students. This paper provides insights into the needs of international students that may be useful for institutions of higher education as they continue to internationalize higher education and develop equity and inclusion-related strategies for international students.

**Résumé**

Cette investigation, formulée en termes de séquence narrative, se penche sur les expériences vécues avant la pandémie par Seth, un étudiant international de Macao âgé de 24 ans dans une université ontarienne. Par le biais d'entrevues semi-structurées, les expériences d'appartenance et de formation identitaire du participant au cours de son cheminement transnational ont été explorées. L'histoire de Seth met en relief l'importance d'une authentique interaction sociale comme soutien à l'adaptation socioculturelle et au rendement académique de l'étudiant international. Cet article permet de saisir les besoins des étudiants internationaux d'une façon qui pourrait s'avérer utile pour les établissements d'études supérieures qui poursuivent l'internationalisation de leurs programmes d'études, ainsi que le développement de stratégies visant l'équité et l'inclusion pour les étudiants internationaux.

**Keywords:** identity, Asian international students, Macao, Canada, higher education, narrative inquiry, belonging

**Mots clés :** étudiants internationaux d'Asie, Macao, Canada, études supérieures, séquence narrative, appartenance

## Introduction

The global pandemic has had a dramatic impact on institutions of higher education. Existing socioeconomic issues, such as access to teaching and service by students without a reliable internet connection, have become more complex while new questions have also been posed—questions whose responses by institutions of higher education are likely to have a direct influence on the future of higher education globally (Neuwirth et al., 2020). The impact of the pandemic on international students has generated further opportunities for critical discussions in relation to how internationalization may be reformed in light of the ways in which the mostly digital and virtual pandemic-informed landscape of current higher education has exacerbated the challenges international students encounter (Bista et al., 2021).

Despite the need to address persistent issues, the positioning of international students as sources of cash has surfaced quickly again. For instance, in a recent column in *University Affairs*, Munroe (2021) wrote about the increase in enrollment of international students in Canada for the upcoming academic year of 2021–22. For the author, such an increase was positive since “universities from coast to coast have become increasingly dependent on the significantly higher tuition fees paid by international students” (para. 2). Additionally, the author pointed to statistics from 2017–18 which reveal that almost “40 per cent of all tuition fees” were paid by international students, bringing approximately \$4 billion in revenue to Canadian universities (Munroe, 2021, para. 2). In here, we find international students positioned as sources of revenue, which is problematic to say the least (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016), even more so in a time of crisis. Such an approach continues to reduce the complex experiences of international students to lifeless figures and perpetuates disengagement with the students’ needs at a meaningful level (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019; Tavares, 2021b).

In this paper, this approach to (re)presenting the needs and experiences of international students is reversed. Framed as a narrative inquiry, this investigation focuses on the experiences of one international student from Macao, in line with the scope of this special issue on Asian students in Canadian higher education. While the pandemic has placed most international students in Canada in contexts of individual and virtual learning where students are apart from one another (Tavares, 2021a), the broader issues of belonging, integration, and isolation are not new and transpire beyond the academic classroom (Slaten et al., 2016). Furthermore, the reversed approach herein focuses on one student as a whole and complex individual rather than a statistic attached to the vision of Asian students as a monolithic group (Chang & Karl Kwan, 2009; Lee, 2006). This narrative inquiry explores the lived experiences of Seth, a 24-year-old international student from Macao at a university in Ontario prior to the pandemic.

There are two areas of concern within this inquiry. The research question guiding the first area of investigation is: How did Seth’s transnational journey impact his sense of identity? As a student who had studied in the United States prior to moving to Canada, Seth’s journey unfolds under the influence of multiple sociocultural contexts. The second research question is: What experiences contributed to Seth’s feelings of belonging, particularly in Canada? This paper begins with a conceptual overview of transnationalism within the context of higher education. Subsequently, it discusses the experiences of Asian students in institutions of higher education within the social, academic, cultural, and linguistic domains. The next sections present an in-depth explanation of the research methodology and a narrativized account of the findings. Finally, this paper is concluded with potential recommendations for academic communities.

## **Transnationalism and Higher Education**

Insights from research on transnationalism can enhance the understanding of how international students navigate life. Transnational individuals take on and construct new identities for themselves as they move from and to different national spaces. Trueba (2004) spoke of a “unique capacity” of transnational individuals (p. 39) that includes the contextualized ways in which they not only navigate, but also succeed through difference in several domains of lived experience, such as the political, social, cultural, and linguistic. In the context of higher education, transnationalism is fueled by internationalization and vice versa. Internationalization may be seen as the development of intercultural and international dimensions of teaching and learning, while attending to issues of fairness and equity for diverse and minoritized groups (Knight, 2011; de Wit, 2020). While it is important to approach lived experiences of transnationalism from a perspective of agency, the impact of structural barriers to success should also not be underestimated.

International students can be considered transnational individuals because, among other aspects, of their continuous engagement with multiple spaces. Transnationalism has been traditionally contextualized from a perspective of economics (Smith, 1994). As such, it stressed the ways in which economic conditions of certain countries motivated migrants to move internationally for better work opportunities while financially supporting their households in their country of origin. However, as Phillips (2018) explained, “while this pattern of movement by individuals seeking a better life is not new, the contexts have changed” (p. 122). Indeed, the market value of a foreign degree, foreign work experience, and the study of English in officially English-speaking nations influence international students’ motivations and normally invert the traditional financial flow of new-to-home-country as many international students receive direct support from families (Tan, 2015).

By listening to international students’ voices, we gain access to the kinds of issues they encounter in their transnational journeys of education. Of great relevance here is discrimination on the basis of culture and language: neo-racism. Many institutions of higher education have placed an emphasis on “diversity,” typically advanced through discourses that position multiculturalism and multilingualism as important for the preparation of global students and the future of higher education (Tavares, 2021c). Yet, international students’ experiences, particularly those of students from the Global South (and) who speak English as an additional language, generally substantiate what Lee and Rice (2007) termed as “neo-racism.”

Neo-racism encapsulates discrimination that is justified by the hierarchy of languages and cultures. In other words, discrimination towards multilingual and racialized international students becomes acceptable because it aims to preserve the “good” cultures. Accented forms of speaking, along with different ways of behaving, dressing, eating, and interacting are deemed threats to the ecology of the host environment (Lee, 2007). The impact of neo-racism is such that international students may respond by withdrawing themselves from the community to which they hoped to belong (Halpern & Aydin, 2020; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). At other times, international students cope by assimilating and distancing themselves from their heritage languages and cultures (Dutta, 2016; Tavares, 2022a). In any circumstance, these choices significantly affect how the students see their place in the new environment.

Despite the structural challenges, international students are also agentive and active individuals who can shape the course of their journeys. Agency involves a complex and reflexive process of (self-)negotiation by international students and is “revealed through how they think they are expected to respond . . . and how they personally want to respond” to the situations around them (Tran & Vu, 2018, p. 168). Of course, the support international students receive from the host

institutions is inextricably embedded in how the students negotiate and are able to exercise agency. Since Asian students are not a monolithic group, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and class differences act differently in the ways in which international students individually resist, confront, and overcome marginalization. As Bandura (2006) explained, agency is enacted socioculturally, which differs from individual to individual based on their positioning in life.

### **Chinese International Students' Experiences of Belonging**

Research on student belonging in higher education continues to grow as university campuses become increasingly more multicultural. Sense of belonging for students may be considered as the positive perception stemming from continuous interaction and feelings of acceptance, appreciation, and care by others (Slaten et al., 2016). Research has shown that strong sense of belonging has a positive impact on the academic success of international students (Glass & Westmount, 2014). Additionally, whether and how an international student experiences a sense of belonging has significant implications for their identities. Identity may be understood in terms of how an international student sees their place in the world, particularly in the new host (campus) community, and how their sense of self is influenced by individual social and cultural experiences as well as the student's traits (Norton, 2013; Tavares, 2021d).

The emphasis on understanding an international student as a whole individual represents a move away from the emphasis on the collective. In other words, the individual international student and their experiences are not merely an extension of their ethnic, cultural, or linguistic associations. "Group" perspectives are still relevant; however, unlike a traditional social psychology perspective (Tavares, 2021d), the identity of the individual is not necessarily shaped by the dynamic of the group(s) to which one belongs, though they may still play a role in influencing the choices and behaviours of the student given identity development is also a social process. Such a view of individual identity also recognizes that the individual is not simply a product of their environment, and as such, is able to influence some of the outcomes of their sociocultural experiences by employing contextualized forms of agency (Bandura, 2006). Departing from this understanding, while the experiences of Chinese students are examined broadly in this section, it is important to stress that Chinese students are not a homogeneous group.

Over the last few years, research about Chinese students in higher education has grown as the number of Chinese students who pursue overseas education has increased. One area of great concern is language, specifically proficiency in English for both everyday and academic forms of the language. The mismatch between some students' level of proficiency and that which is expected by the academic community is known to create barriers for the students in terms of understanding lectures, assignments, their peers, and quotidian tasks off campus (Cun & McVee, 2020; Leong, 2015; Liu, 2011). When it comes to social interaction with locals, the feeling of "fitting in" can be affected by challenges around comprehension of cultural forms of the language, such as jokes, slang, humour, and idiomatic remarks (Cheng et al., 2004; Xie, 2017). As a result, language continues to be identified as a critical factor for how (much) the students feel satisfied with their social and academic experiences.

Cultural differences also play a role in how Chinese students feel integrated into their host communities. Zhou et al. (2021) explained that, in the Chinese education system, Chinese students are expected to learn primarily through listening and test-taking. In this scenario, the teacher holds essentially all the power in the classroom. In contrast, the interactive nature of North American higher education can pose a conflict to the students. As a result, the difference in learning style not only poses an initial threat to the students' success, but also leads to stereotypes that affect the

students negatively. Some of these stereotypes position Chinese students as overall passive and uncritical individuals (Lun et al., 2010; Xiao, 2021). These and other stereotypes directly interfere with how Chinese international students are perceived in their host communities and, by extension, their sense of belonging (Heng, 2017).

### **Accessing Experience through Narratives**

Narrative inquiry has become a prominent approach to qualitative research within the disciplines, particularly the social sciences. This is not necessarily a surprise, since the study of narrative is “the study of the ways human experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Indeed, narrative inquiry is both a methodology for inquiring into people’s experiences and “a view of the phenomena of people’s experiences” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 542). Researchers employing narrative inquiry are concerned with situating the stories told and lived by the participants within dominant narratives that sit within the cultural, social, and institutional domains. Therefore, narrative inquiry can illuminate the ways in which participants’ stories not only replicate “grand” discourses at the personal level, but also challenge and confront them.

An essential component of doing narrative inquiry is attending to relationship. This includes interpersonal relationships identified by the participants, the researcher-participant relationship, and the relationships of experiences identified through time and across contexts (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). The relationship between researcher and participant is deepened by the researcher’s respectful and reflective involvement in the participant’s context of lived experience. Considering the centrality of relationship, an attention to ethics remains indispensable throughout the research experience. In addition to ethics approval by a research board as well as informed consent by the participant, ethics in narrative inquiry entail “thoughtful sensitivity and wide-awakeness” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 544), especially when the stories of vulnerable people are shared (Wells, 2011).

Field texts, typically referred to as data in traditional research, are understood broadly in narrative inquiry research. As such, field texts may emerge from interviews/conversations with the participant, observations, and artefacts, which may include documents, photographs, artwork, and personal objects. When composing field texts, researchers attend to the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011). Temporality means that the composition of field texts is the product, on one hand, of interactions between researcher and participants, and on the other, of participants’ reflections on and of experiences that occurred earlier in life. Sociality considers the balance between participants’ internal and external responses towards life experiences. Lastly, place considers both the sites in which lived experiences and inquiry events took place.

### ***Participant and Setting***

The participant, pseudonymized as Seth, was 24 years old at the time of the study and lived in “Lake City,” the pseudonym for the city in southern Ontario where the university was located. The pseudonym “Pond University” is used for the large, research-oriented Canadian university under consideration in this study, one of the larger universities in the province with a substantial international student population from over 100 countries. Seth was an undergraduate student completing a major in linguistics at Pond University following his transfer from a college in California, where he studied computer science. The move to Canada was motivated by his best friend’s move to Kingston, Ontario. Seth’s multilingual repertoire included English, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Japanese, the latter consisting primarily of self-teaching based on personal interest

in Japanese culture and language. His family lived in Macao and only infrequently was he able to travel to Macao to see his family members. Seth responded to an invitation which I sent to the manager of an international student group at the university for circulation among the group members. This invitation was for participation in a larger research study I was conducting with multilingual international students at Pond University. The study sought to understand multilingual international students' experiences in relation to socialization, academics, language development, and cross-cultural knowledge.

Macao is both a city and a region with special administrative status belonging to the People's Republic of China. By the end of 2020, Macao had a population of approximately 683,100 people (Government of Macao, 2021). Macao has a long and complex history as a former colony of Portugal that began around the year of 1557. Given its coastal location, the Portuguese Empire "rented" the city from China, gradually influencing its sociocultural and political development until 1887, when Macao was officially transferred to Portugal (Jarnagin, 2011). In 1999, however, the region was returned to China. In light of such developments, Macao is considered a richly multicultural and multilingual place (Byrne, 2011). Cantonese and Portuguese are the official languages, though only a minority of the population speaks the latter. Other languages spoken in Macao include Vietnamese and Tagalog.

Differently from mainland China, Macao was not under the one-child policy. This particularity is evident in the fact that Seth was the youngest of four siblings—he had three sisters who all lived in Macao. Seth disclosed little about his family, in spite of our frequent meetings for the interviews in which I attempted to learn more about his upbringing and schooling. As a result, information about his family is generally absent from his overall story; however, this can also be seen as a choice made by him as to how he wanted to tell or (co-)shape his story. Though it might have been contextually important for understanding particular feelings, behaviours, and choices made by Seth, relationship with family did not emerge with the same degree of significance as relationships with local peers did during the analysis of field texts. As the researcher, I respected how and what information Seth chose to share. Coming from a middle-class background, Seth received financial support from his parents for his studies abroad. The encouragement by his parents to study abroad at the age of 15 reflects a growing cultural trend in China and some other Asian countries in which learning English early and/or abroad is viewed as an investment that helps position children superiorly within the job market in the future (Mwalongo, 2016). This is also the case with receiving a Western education, which has gained much cultural value in East-Asia recently (Griner & Sobol, 2014).

### ***Composition and Analysis of Field Texts***

Four semi-structured, in-depth interviews were recorded with the participant in the winter of 2019. Each interview lasted about 50–60 minutes and covered topics related to academics, social and cultural adjustment, language learning, and work experience. The interviews began after the study received ethics approval by the university. The interviews became the sites where both the researcher and the participant could engage in dialogue and reflection in relation to the topics of investigation covered (Richards, 2009). Each interview was summarized by the researcher and discussed with the participant for clarification in the following meeting. The excerpts drawn from the interviews and used in the findings section reflect the socially situated and influenced accounts by the participant of the events he subjectively experienced.

In analyzing the field texts, the researcher remains mindful of the dual audience: the public and scholarly communities. As such, the research text—the final document presenting the



findings—needs to reflect an engaging story, while also seeking to answer the question of “so what?” to the scholarly community (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). The analysis consisted of writing a personal summary for the participant that included a beginning, middle, and end within which a sequence of events was established (Murray, 2003). In doing so, the focus is on the individual within the context(s). Savin-Baden and Niekerk (2007) explained that “this process demands that we locate the person in a context and community, describe what she/he does and how she/he sees her/himself” (p. 466). Moreover, this process also allows for reflexivity on the part of the researcher as they write and reflect on the summary with an attention to their goals, concerns, and conceptual “baggage,” which subjectively inform the researcher’s writing of the personal summary.

Since its uptake in the scholarly community, there have been some suggestions as to how to construct a “good” narrative. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have drawn attention to the need to see narratives beyond the traditional constructs of validity, reliability, and generalizability. The authors proposed that a good narrative invites the reader to participate in it. An invitation entails “imagining the scenes in which the particulars could occur” because emotions are invoked through the details rather than the general (p. 8). The result of such attention is what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) called authenticity. Furthermore, a plausible narrative is “one that tends to ring true” (p. 8). Plausibility involves reconstructing a story that is believable, which holds more weight in empirical over fictional narratives.

Lastly, in designing a narrative, the researcher should also attend to the concepts of scene and plot. The first concept is about developing character(s) and environment. The environment may be the social, cultural, and/or physical contexts surrounding the narrative that play a part in how characters are able to act. The second concept, plot, is about the development of time. It means having a narrative that has a beginning, middle, and end, or in other words, a past-present-future. These are not extensive criteria by which to evaluate a narrative. Nevertheless, they provide a structure that can uniformly guide the retelling of stories in research (see Clandinin, 2006). This structure helps with what Benson (2014) identified as one of the challenges of narrative analysis: “lending narrative coherence to nonnarrative data in order to bring out or highlight meanings in relation to the research issue in focus” (p. 163).

Another important element within the framework of designing narratives is justification. In the words of Clandinin et al. (2007), justification is essentially “the reasons why the study is important” (p. 24). As such, justification should be presented within three domains: the personal, the practical, and the social. The personal justification is about “situating yourself in the study” (p. 25). The personal justification is guided by the following question: What is the researcher’s relationship to and interest in the inquiry? (p. 25). The practical justification is related to how the narrative may “be insightful to changing or thinking differently about the researcher’s own and others’ practices” (p. 25). Finally, the social justification is about the potential issues that the research text attempts to address both socially and educationally, though much more broadly.

The justifications for this study are as follows. As an instructor with over a decade of teaching experience, I have become increasingly more preoccupied with understanding my students as whole people. However, the busy, timed, and structured nature of teaching in my own context often resulted in few opportunities to meaningfully understand the lived experiences of students beyond the classroom (personal). It is also my hope that this study will impact practitioners to identify and address the ways in which the current paradigm of education has obscured the importance of relationships and mutual understandings between (international) students and instructors (practical). Lastly, I was particularly interested in how the experiences of

Chinese students from Macao are represented in the Canadian literature. A call to move away from the representation of Chinese students as a monolithic group has been growing and I believe that this study contributes to such efforts (social).

Narrative inquiry can help highlight the process, rather than the product, of human experience. The approach demonstrates the intricacies of events and experiences that may often be “taken for granted” and reveals the ways in which meaning-making occurs as a situated, contextualized process. In this sense, Seth’s narrative foregrounds how his experiences were built upon the dynamic interplay between him, as an individual, and the different environments in which his experiences took place. A narrative is not simply about telling a story, but also accounting for how cultural and social processes are experienced by different individuals. As with any research approach, narrative inquiry also has limitations. Due to space, for instance, a narrative will answer some questions while leaving others unanswered.

### **Findings in Stories**

The findings are presented in three parts that individually represent the beginning, middle, and end of the story of Seth’s journey. The findings are discussed in relation to the guiding questions in the final section.

#### ***Part I: International Beginnings in Macao***

Seth was born and raised in Macao, a small region on the south coast of China. He lived with his parents and siblings, all of whom were older than him, until the age of 15. During the period of Seth’s upbringing, Macao might have seemed like a culturally hybrid place to a foreigner, where the Chinese and Portuguese architectures merged in some neighbourhoods but juxtaposed memorably in others. For Seth, however, that was Macao, or simply the familiar. As with many urban areas of China, English had been emerging quickly as an instrument that connected the local to the international. Nevertheless, as a child of Cantonese-speaking parents, his contact with the English language remained superficial throughout the first years of his childhood, a time when his interactions with others transpired entirely in Cantonese.

Seth’s first formal exposure to the English language was mediated by his school. At the age of 7, he began elementary school in Macao, a time when, coincidentally, English as a foreign language had just been implemented as a mandatory subject into the school curriculum. In retrospect, Seth considered the pedagogy to be “very basic” because it introduced students to simple sentences while relying primarily on the teaching methods of translation and repetition. Seth progressed in all subjects in school as the years went by; however, his proficiency in English developed slowly, which he attributed to being the result of the teaching methods used by his instructors. In the upper grades, the focus in the English courses shifted to learning reading and writing. Consequently, Seth’s speaking and listening skills remained rudimentary throughout his schooling.

This early pedagogical experience influenced Seth’s beliefs about Chinese students’ proficiency in English in general. Seth believed that Chinese students, including himself, were distinctively more skilled in reading and writing. Indeed, he recalled that the exams in the English language courses concentrated overwhelmingly on reading and writing. Yet, he argued that speaking was not only the most important skill for a multilingual speaker of English to have, but that speaking was also the most conducive way to acquire a foreign language: “if you really want to learn a second language, you have to talk to people,” he explained. Nevertheless, the asymmetrical levels in the English language did not stop him from believing in his dream of living

and studying abroad. In 2010, when Seth was 15 years old, he left Macao on a plane destined to a completely new place: New York state.

Seth's experience in the new, unfamiliar environment was characterized by growing hardship. To begin with, he was unprepared for the weather and the impact it had on social life in the new locale. New York's winters were long, cold, gray, and snowy, which altogether contrasted sharply with the climatical profile of Macao. Nevertheless, the most significant challenges laid in the academic and linguistic domains. Although Seth was an incoming high school student from abroad, his linguistic proficiency was not assessed prior to the commencement of his studies by the host school. Consequently, he began his studies in Grade 10 simply because he had completed Grade 9 in Macao. Since his proficiency in English was not considered in the process, he struggled to meet the linguistic and academic expectations in place. The lack of a support program specifically for multilingual international students at the school only exacerbated such difficulties.

In visualizing the past experience, Seth could not dispel the imprint left by the adversity he faced. "It was a difficult time for me—'cause that was when I had first moved to the States," he explained. Seth's oral participation in his Grade 10 classes was minimal. To elaborate, his proficiency in English was still developing, but equally important, feeling comfortable enough to jump into dynamic conversations was something that took time. Some of his teachers were not prepared to teach the content in a manner that would also facilitate the acquisition of language. In the first year in New York, he felt socially isolated as his attempts to make new friendships depended largely on knowledge of cultural forms of the language to communicate informally with his peers during after-class activities. He had moved to the United States with a clear vision of how the opportunity would contribute to him becoming his hoped-for self. However, there were some unexpected obstacles along the way.

As an instructor of English myself, I could understand, though from a different perspective, Seth's feelings of frustration and disappointment. In other words, when attempting to make sense of his experiences of adjustment, it was impossible to isolate my own teaching experiences—they contributed to my feeling with and for him. Language proficiency is indispensable to academic achievement and, as research suggests, many multilingual international students successfully demonstrate their proficiency through international tests. However, classroom socialization and participation often depend on an informal register of English which multilingual international students develop as their time in an English-medium environment unfolds. In addition to having an insufficient level of both registers by the time Seth left home, there was also little to no support offered to him. While I felt empathy, I grew increasingly more impressed by his resilience in the face of such difficulties.

### ***Part II: Contrasting Experiences in the United States***

The first several weeks of adjustment were challenging and intimidating, but they also contributed to Seth's increased confidence and knowledge. The increased confidence fuelled his desire to further develop his proficiency in English, despite the few meaningful opportunities available to do so with his peers in school. For much of first year, Seth resorted to watching videos on YouTube recorded by native speakers of English. He would pay close attention to the pronunciation of the words and mimic it multiple times on his own. The videos also presented him with new vocabulary, which he would memorize and later apply in conversation with native speakers. Self-teaching was far from how Seth had originally envisioned learning English in an English-speaking environment, but giving up was also not an option. Nevertheless, his attempts at changing the course of his overall experience were still falling short of what he very passionately desired.

The continuous difficulty in connecting socially with locals had major implications for Seth's identity. Seth had an inquisitive and gregarious personality. However, for a long period of time now, he had not been feeling like his "true" self, especially due to the absence of a steady social network. One afternoon, as Seth waited for the bus at the bus shelter, he attempted to initiate conversation with the fellow waiting passenger. The man entertained Seth's interactional attempt at first, albeit with laconic responses, but quickly ended the conversation by moving away from Seth. Yet, at that moment, Seth rejected the feelings of self-blame which he had uncritically accepted in the past. Instead, he attributed the unwanted outcomes of his attempts to be a product of the local culture.

In Grades 11 and 12, Seth's experiences improved significantly, but the initial period left an imprint on his identity. As the end of high school approached, Seth viewed his upcoming graduation as an opportunity to reinvent parts of his journey. He capitalized on his continuity to college to relocate to a place he had put much faith in for his new beginning: California. The sunnier and warmer weather was the number one factor guiding his decision to start over again, despite once more not knowing anyone in the new place. Indeed, the college experience in the new coastal city was socially transformative: the friendships unavailable to Seth in New York multiplied quickly in his new environment. He connected with both local and international peers at the new college where he studied computer science. The afternoon and evenings were filled with leisure, such as playing sports on the beach or exploring the city with friends. In the new space, Seth experienced an unparalleled sense of satisfaction.

Seth believed that the warmer weather was the force behind all the new changes. He argued that the pleasant weather brought people outdoors, and from being accustomed to being out of their "comfort zones," people became more risk-taking and open to new experiences, which included meeting new people. Despite all this, Seth had also grown as a person in response to the circumstances before him in New York. Rarely did he identify his own agency—stemming from his accumulated life experience—as playing a role in the outcomes of his new experience. But his agentive behaviour was inextricably interweaved in his regained sense of being in control. Moreover, Seth had finally felt like himself again. He found his "place" in the new city as he felt appreciated by his new community of friends. The feeling of otherness had dissipated and been replaced by a strong sense of belonging.

The lively social life Seth experienced also filled some of the gap in his multilingual repertoire. Through informal conversation with local students, he was given the social space to learn language in context. However, his knowledge of academic forms of English remained underdeveloped as he prioritized social interaction over academic learning. Needless to say, the uneven proficiency in English impacted his academic journey, which was not limited to California only. As Seth reached the end of his college program, he decided to extend his academic career. His best friend, another student from China whom he had met in California, was doing the same, but leaving the United States to study at a university in Canada. That was precisely the motivation behind Seth's move to Ontario: he wished to stay close to his friend. With his United States student visa nearing expiration, Seth matriculated at Pond University. In the summer of 2018, Seth and his friend arrived in Ontario.

Upon reflecting on Seth's time in California, I learned about how important it was for him to be in a social environment where his hoped-for identity could be validated. Having felt othered in New York due to his language proficiency and foreign status, he now experienced a sense of acceptance that did not depend on such factors. Difference was not framed as a problem or deficit among his new peer group, which included both local and international students of multicultural

backgrounds. While Seth tended to describe his experiences modestly, I could not avoid seeing them from a perspective of agency. His agency manifested in how he not only desired, but also acted upon his desire, to move across the country to start over. His school in New York lacked institutional resources to render his continuous agentive attempts successful. His move to California, as a relatively significant form of agency, embodied his choice to resist marginalization.

### ***Part III: Canada as the Next Destination***

Living in Canada for university was a much more complex experience than what Seth had anticipated, based on his several years of experience in the United States. Firstly, Seth's best friend had moved to Kingston, which was almost 300km away from Seth's new city: Lake City. As a transfer student at Pond University with his only friend located at such a great distance, Seth felt as though he would have to completely rebuild his social circle. Secondly, and more saliently, the shift in sociocultural environment from a "relaxed" coastal city in California to "fast-paced" Lake City in Ontario—as he described them—gave rise to several acculturation challenges. The social and cultural configuration of his new experience led him to conclude that his move to Lake City "was a mistake," as I learned in one of the interviews. The mistake was invariably tied to one factor: living in Lake City took him back, psychologically, to his time in New York state.

Seth's first month at Pond University was overwhelming. He was taking a full load of five courses with most of these courses in linguistics, his newly declared major. The language demand was high, but Seth's proficiency in the academic register of English was low, considering academic reading and writing were a minor component of his previous experience in the computer science program. The electives in the social sciences were particularly challenging as they relied on heavy theoretical content and included long response papers for which Seth felt academically and linguistically unprepared. He began to feel increasingly anxious after his writing assignments were returned with an F grade. "My English is so bad," he justified. On a different language level, he had an impressive command of his oral language, thanks to his past socialization in California.

Nevertheless, the greatest impact on Seth's sense of satisfaction was not linked to troubling academic performance. Despite possessing the everyday kind of language to communicate effectively with peers, the most significant impact stemmed from how "closed off" Seth considered Canadian students to be. In the lecture halls, he attempted to engage in conversation with peers sitting next to him, but felt uninvited to do so following the brief and superficial responses he received. Furthermore, he could not connect with peers after the lectures as many of them left for home or had preexisting friendships. Unlike with his former social circle in California, Seth criticized the structured and schedule-oriented way through which his potential peers made plans. Gradually, he felt out of place and exposed to another iteration of his early days in New York state.

Seth participated in some events for international students in his first semester at Pond. However, he strongly felt as though he could not generally relate to the international students he met at Pond University. Additionally, he believed that his accumulated experience from the trying beginnings in the United States made his international student experience more authentic. He critically juxtaposed his journey with those of international students from China at Pond University and characterized his peers' as "easy" and "risk-free," contrary to his. In particular, he believed that younger Chinese students had better access to technology and language education in China, and as such, fewer challenges of adaptation. Simply put, intragroup interaction posed an identity conflict for Seth. He wished to be seen as different, considering all his experiences in the United States, but could not do so by joining the group.

When the long winter came, his sense of belonging saw its lowest point. For Seth, Lake City became even more “grey, depressing, and characterless.” He made sense of his experience by ending every story he told with “I miss Cali so much.” Since the first week of classes, he had been longing to find a new group with whom he could experience life and therefore feel included, comparably to his time at the small college on the west coast. Nevertheless, Seth ended up spending much more time by himself than he wished. The lack of consistent socialization with others also affected his identity. Social interaction had, in the past, afforded him, as an outgoing and convivial person, the space to feel more like himself, but the same opportunity remained unavailable at Pond University. While he managed to pass all of his courses, albeit with a very low average overall, the busy pace of Lake City and of Pond University, the long winter, and insufficient proficiency in the academic register contributed to making his time in Ontario socially and emotionally challenging.

For all of his time as an international student, Seth cultivated his family relationships via the internet given the physical distance. Seth enthusiastically anticipated the coming of spring for it was the first time when, after about two years, he was flying to Macao to see his parents and sisters again. The upcoming trip was envisioned as a moment spent within the comfort of familiar faces and away from the hardships he encountered in Canada. Despite the close relationships, family was not the only “place” in which his identity was rooted. A hoped-for return to California gained more shape as he navigated and dealt with the dissatisfaction of life in Canada. His ideal plan was to attend graduate school in California, but he identified the cost of tuition was an obstacle for now. Seth’s transnational journey took him to and through multiple places which he came to identify with at different emotional and social levels.

Viewing Seth as a whole individual, with unique needs and expectations, has illuminated my understanding of his experiences in Canada. At Pond University, Seth felt as though he did not have the “space” to enact his identity in the same way he did in California. The reticence he felt from the local students and a different kind of social engagement by the international students he met from China—which he characterized as more “relaxed” and “comfortable”—resulted in him having parts of his identity denied. Additionally, the cultural forms of English he had developed while living in California were mostly ineffective in the highly academic setting of Pond University. In fact, he could not differentiate himself from others socially or linguistically. The difficulty he faced in his attempts to establish a new community for himself evoked similar feelings to those he experienced in New York, when his agency to resist marginalization meant moving to a new place. This time, however, Seth could not do the same as easily.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study focused on understanding how Seth’s transnational journey impacted his sense of self and of belonging. Concerning the former, identity construction and enactment were tied primarily to social interaction. In this study, identity was considered something dynamic (Norton, 2013) and culturally influenced (Tavares, 2021d). As this narrative inquiry illustrated, for most of his time as a transnational student, social interaction was either unavailable or unproductive for Seth. Two particular aspects influenced this outcome: cultural difference and language proficiency. Cultural difference manifested both within and outside the classroom in the ways in which locals responded to Seth’s attempts towards conversational interaction and conceived of the importance of social interaction. When opportunities for social interaction were available, the outcomes of such opportunities rested on language proficiency, specifically around cultural forms of the English language on Seth’s part.

Seth's experiences reflect broader findings in the literature. In his new city in California, consistent socialization enabled him to be his inquisitive, gregarious, and conversational self. Contrastingly, when this facet of his identity was suppressed as a result of social isolation, he felt as though his "true" self had been denied. Xing and Bolden (2021) also documented instances in which disinterest on the part of local students led Chinese students to feel undervalued or unappreciated. In this sense, it is important for institutions of higher education to design and invest in better programming that can promote social interaction for international students. Many scholars have proposed that such interactions may be initiated within the classroom by instructors and teaching assistants (Zhou et al., 2017). Indeed, while local students also tend to see value in these interactions, it is not uncommon that they will expect *the university* to take the lead. More importantly, however, is that social interaction holds a multifaceted meaning for international students in its potential for language development, network building, and cross-cultural learning. Hence the impact its absence had on Seth's identity.

The significance of language proficiency cannot be underestimated. Seth's experiences upon arrival in the United States highlight a broader pattern of linguistic unpreparedness for social interaction, despite past learning in formal contexts of instruction (Cun & McVee, 2020; Leong, 2015; Liu, 2011; Tavares, 2022b). Moreover, unfamiliarity with the academic register of English intensified Seth's challenges in courses characterized by reading and writing activities, and by little oral engagement. While social interaction may carry more weight for some multilingual international students in terms of overall satisfaction, academic achievement is an area which the students cannot put aside. While instructors and support staff can work together to identify at-risk international students, it is important for support service providers to critically assess whether and how services replicate notions of an othered identity upon multilingual international students, particularly through labels such as ESL or remedial support. Seth felt conflicted upon his visit to the writing centre since he could not afford to lose his identity "work" from over the years.

Experiences of belonging were complex and context-dependent. Belonging was conceptually understood as a positive experience based on ongoing interaction and feelings of appreciation and care by others (Slaten et al., 2016). Indeed, the more Seth engaged in meaningful social interaction, the more he felt like a member of his immediate community, and by extension, like himself. Consequently, identity and belonging were not only generally experienced in conjunction, but also through social interaction. It was for this reason that Seth had decided to move to Canada—the friendship he had built with his best friend was so important for his sense of self that he decided to follow him to Canada. However, the lack of a stable social network at Pond University led Seth to feel dissatisfied. Arthur (2017) explained that strengthening international students' social networks in higher education contributes to their academic success and sense of belonging. While Seth attempted to form new friendships, the interest to do so was not mutual on the part of local students.

Seth's transnational journey illustrates the different connections he established and maintained across time and space. This aspect of his journey is consistent with research on transnationalism that stresses the dynamic and interconnected nature of geographical movement across borders. Of course, not all of his connections held the same value as he progressively experienced new opportunities along his journey. Their meaning changed particularly in relation to his identity development. Yet, such connections, specifically the ones characterized by feelings of marginalization and othering, could not simply be erased from his "transnational repertoire" either. His experiences therefore illustrate the essential role of the local sociocultural environment in providing opportunities for newcomers to develop a sense of belonging and acceptance (Slaten

et al., 2016). Seth demonstrated contextualized forms of agency throughout his journey, some of which were either supported or constrained by the sociocultural or institutional resources made available to him (Tran & Vu, 2018).

Discrimination can also manifest in the ways transnationals are expected to adopt and adapt to the local “standards.” These include the manner in which the transnational individual is expected to speak and behave (Lee, 2007), both of which can become a source of marginalization for those who construct their identities internationally and therefore navigate experiences which are not bound by the local language or culture. Seth’s insufficient language proficiency in his early days as well as his spontaneous interactional attempts towards Canadian students were treated as inferior and strange, respectively, because they did not reflect the local norms. These experiences reveal a conflict between transnational identities and neoliberal forms of multiculturalism that acknowledge, but do not value, diversity. Consequently, it is essential that institutions of higher education engage in ethical internationalization and reward experiences of multiculturalism (Tavares, 2021c).

Characteristic of Seth’s transnational journey was his active and agentive approach to try to insert himself into his new communities. Such an “investment” is a unique feature of transnational individuals (Castles, 2004; Trueba, 2004). Simultaneously, Seth’s transnational journey illustrates behaviours, feelings, and perspectives that confront dominant discourses that have positioned Chinese students as passive and disengaged in academic spaces. For instance, Chinese international students are often criticized for staying with conationals and supposedly failing to integrate. The risks which Seth took in his repeated attempts to get to know other students and develop social networks challenge such stereotypes of Chinese students. A perspective that critically examines the sociocultural environment in which international students are embedded can contribute to a better understanding of international student agency by considering the inseparable interaction between student and space (Xing & Bolden, 2021).

The institutional positioning of Pond University is also worth mentioning as the social and cultural context influencing Seth’s experiences. Unlike the college in California, Pond had a much larger campus and enrolled many domestic students who commuted to campus or began their studies with preexisting social networks from high school. For an incoming international student like Seth, such aspects contributed to making his social attempts less successful. Although the winter season is long and cold in Canada, Seth had moved from California. As such, the seasonal difference cannot be dismissed in its impact on social life. Seth was taking five courses as a full-time student, but such a course load was not a good fit for him given his needs and expectations. These and other factors reinforce the importance of adequate support for international students prior to and during academic study, including pre-departure preparation and continuous advising.

While Seth’s experiences should not be generalized to represent other Chinese or Macanese students’ experiences, they do provide insight for those working with multilingual international students who have navigated multiple communities and encountered adjustment challenges in their new sociocultural environments. Practitioners in support and counselling roles need to be aware of the importance of meaningful and consistent opportunities for social interaction for international students, for one’s sense of self and of belonging (Li et al., 2017). It is likely that this human need will become even more difficult to meet as universities return to “normal” with growing guidelines in place that aim to socially and physically distance students.



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