

## **Navigating between imaginary certainty and realistic uncertainty: An exploration of foreign-born students' intercultural learning experiences in Chinese higher education field**

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With the rapid development of higher education, China is becoming a promising host country that attracts an increasing number of international students to pursue higher education in Chinese universities. These students can bring many benefits to China, such as offering intellectual capital and workforce to the Chinese market and enriching the campus culture by providing diverse cultural backgrounds. However, very little research has investigated the intercultural learning experiences of a unique cohort: foreign-born international Chinese students who choose to return to China to study. To fill this research gap, we employed Bourdieu's thinking tools (capital, habitus, and field) as the theoretical framework to explore how these descendants of Chinese migrants experience intercultural learning in Chinese universities. We identify the "home" and "host" countries as different fields of students entering, cultural recognitions as capital that students can improve and the intercultural dispositions as habitus that students may form. To capture the intercultural learning experience of international students, we conducted a qualitative study to investigate 35 participants from different countries to study in Chinese universities. Then, we adopted the narrative method to illustrate the intercultural learning stories of these students who experienced cultural difficulties in the process of navigating between imaginary certainty and realistic uncertainty. The findings show that many students have established imaginary understandings about the Chinese context as they grew up in a "Chinese" context in their home countries. They felt that they are familiar with the Chinese cultural and social context. However, their so-called cultural capital did not support their adjustment in the "real" Chinese field. In this case, they still encountered various realistic cross-field challenges, including language barriers, hard to receiving help from local students and teachers, and limited communications with "pure" Chinese students. Many students strategically (re)shaped their understanding of the Chinese and home fields to adjust to the Chinese higher education field. In the process of adjustment to the new context, they acknowledged home country culture identity, accumulated cultural capital by expanding host country cultural acceptance and finally cultivated an intercultural in-between habitus through social interactions with locals. Therefore, instead of eliminating these intercultural contradictions, we argue that foreign-born students should reacquaint the differences amid fields by navigating themselves between "home" and "host" fields as "in-between" diaspora. This study could contribute to intercultural learning and adjustment, international education, and the sociology of higher education.