

A Project entitled

Acculturation stress and acculturation strategies: Mainland Chinese  
undergraduate students in the Education University of Hong Kong

Submitted by

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Submitted to the Education University of Hong Kong for the degree  
of Bachelor of Education (Honours) (English Language)

In May 2017

# Declaration

I, Wang Pengjin , declare that this research report represents my own work under the supervision of Dr. Qian Haiyan, and that it has not been submitted previously for examination to any tertiary institution.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Wang Pengjin

17/05/2017

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## Abstract

The Hong Kong government strikes to enhance Hong Kong's status as a regional education hub, where more and more non-local students are joining Hong Kong's tertiary institutions, and the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) is of no exception. Under the discourse of Hong Kong-mainland China conflicts, mainland Chinese undergraduate students as the largest proportion in non-local student population may need extra efforts integrating into EdUHK, which is the process of acculturation that may lead to students' acculturation stress. Students as sojourners may apply acculturation strategies to cope with the stress. This paper aims to find out, to what extent they are suffering from acculturation stress from different sources, and what their acculturation strategies are to cope with the acculturation stress.

A mixed-method approach is adopted to explore the research question. A survey of 95 mainland Chinese undergraduates in the EdUHK was conducted with the adapted Acculturation Stress Scale for Chinese, examining the sources of acculturation stress, including language insufficiency, social isolation, perceived discrimination, academic pressure and guilt towards family. The quantitative phase helped to identify three informants with high acculturation stress and three with low acculturation stress for that qualitative phase, to further explore what acculturation strategies they applied for different sources of stress.

It is found that students were suffering the acculturation stress in terms of Academic pressure, Language insufficiency and Social isolation, while Guilt toward family and Perceived discrimination might not be essential sources. To reduce the acculturation stress, varied acculturation strategies were applied to different sources of stress. They would apply Integration strategy towards Academic pressure, Separation strategy for Cantonese insufficiency, Assimilation strategy for English insufficiency and Separation for Social isolation. Although they might experience little discrimination, students still experienced conflicts in cross-cultural communication and a resilience model was established.

# 1. Background

In 2015, more than 4 million students were enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship, and China is the country with largest numbers of citizens enrolled abroad (OECD, 2015). Hong Kong has witnessed an increasing number of mainland Chinese students studying in its world-class universities in the past decade, with more convenient student visa policy and immigration policy for graduates (IANG) (Immigration Department, 2014). However, applications to Hong Kong universities by mainland Chinese students have fallen in 2015, which prompts heated discussion around what is responsible for the drop (ChinaDailyAsia, 2015).

With the increasing tension between Hong Kong and mainland China, the difference between these two regions, especially in terms of culture, politics and ideology, is more and more evident for the mainland Chinese students. The adaptation and adjustment of mainland Chinese students have become a great concern, which is the process of acculturation. Acculturation is defined as the process of change that occurs to a person in a cross-cultural situation, both by influence of contact with another culture and by the culture of original (Sam & Berry, 2006). Defined as sojourners (CPU, 2014), these students may suffer from acculturation stress (Bai, 2012) and they need acculturation strategies to cope with the stress. This study aims at investigating and understanding to what extent mainland Chinese undergraduate students acculturation stress in the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) and their acculturation strategies under the acculturation stress.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Mainland Chinese undergraduate students in Hong Kong universities

In the past decade and a half, Hong Kong has gradually become a heated destination for students from mainland China pursuing a post-graduate degree. With effect from 1999-2000 academic year, mainland students may be allowed to pursue full-time undergraduate study programmes in Hong Kong (Immigration Department, 2014). As shown in Figure 1, the number of mainland Chinese undergraduate enrolment soared dramatically, with 6630 students enrolled in all UGC funded programmes in 2014/15 (UGC, n.d.).

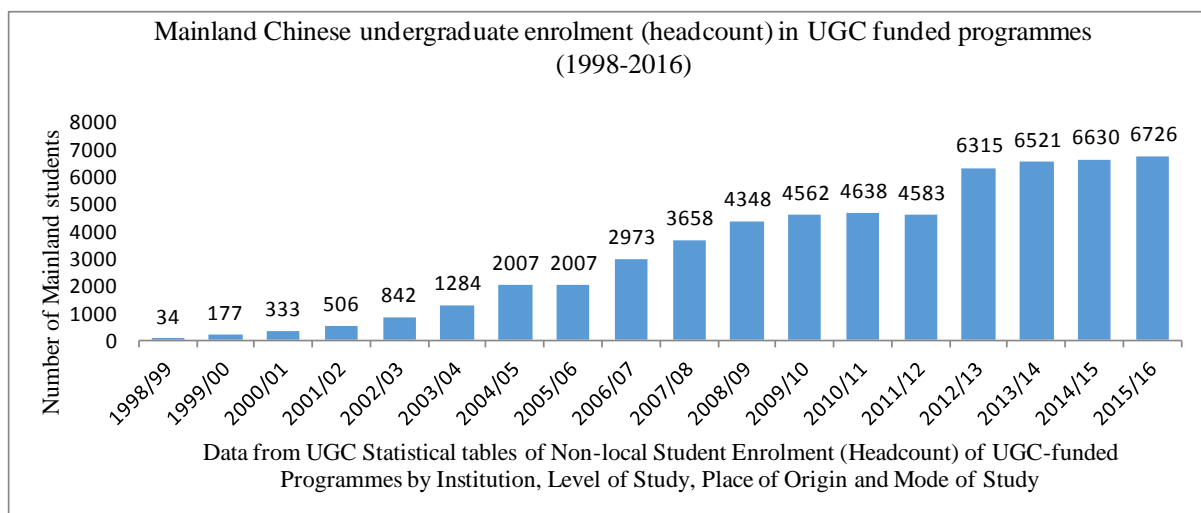


Figure 1 The number of mainland Chinese undergraduate students (1998-2016)

Although Hong Kong is only a special administrative region of People's Republic of China, students from mainland China are immersed in an exotic environment because of the unique relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China. Although there are similarities, Hong Kong and mainland China bear their own culture features, as Hong Kong has been westernized to a great extent socially, historically, politically and culturally through more than a century British colonization (Ding & Stapleton, 2015). The tertiary education system in Hong Kong is largely shaped by British models and practices and it has remained so even after its turnover to

the mainland China (Ding, Kuo, & Van Dyke, 2008, cited in Ding & Stapleton, 2015), which is also very different to the educational system in mainland China. The distinction of culture can be reflected from the mainland Chinese students' social network, which is largely to their fellow mainlanders, who may not share similar interests, value system, and life style with local students (CPU, 2014).

## 2.2 Acculturation stress for mainland Chinese students as sojourners

People in the acculturation process can be divided into five different categories according to their features in mobility, permanence, and voluntariness (Sam & Berry, 2006): ethnic groups, native peoples, immigrants, sojourners and refugees. These undergraduate students from mainland China shall be defined as sojourners (Tsang, 2001, Cheung, 2013, CPU, 2014), who reside outside homeland for a period of time, usually six months or above.

Additionally, the group of students shows a distinction from other sojourner groups, because international students are in the form of transition (Sun, & Chen, 1999). The case of Hong Kong is more special, as these undergraduate students are facing the choice of whether to become a permanent resident of Hong Kong in their future plan, which may influence their career choice, identity formation and mindset. If they decide to stay in Hong Kong for the foreseeable future, these students shall be defined as “immigrants”. Although students may acquire the status of permanent resident when they have ordinarily resided in Hong Kong for a continuous period of seven years (HKSAR Government, n.d.), which is a pulling factor for immigration, few of them plan to stay in Hong Kong a longer period of time according to many studies (e.g. Gao, 2014, CPU, 2014). Thus it is appropriate to define this group of students as sojourners.



Sojourners experience "culture shock" when their cultural beliefs clash with the host culture, and they can also be manifested in the form of acculturative stress (Same & Berry, 2006), which links to their psychological well-being. Acculturation stress is of the vulnerability factors for depression (Wei et al., 2007). When facing acculturative stress, Asian student may feel overwhelmed and doubtful of their ability because their culture tend to emphasize emotional self-control, and thus, these emotional disturbance shall be handled with their "inner power" (Wei et al., 2007).

### 2.3 Sources for Chinese students' acculturation stress

From a global perspective, there is more and more research studying acculturation problems of Chinese international students, for example, in the U.S. (Sun, & Chen, 1999, Wei et al., 2007, Bai, 2012), Singapore (Tsang, 2001) or Australia (Pan & Wong, 2011). Among the all the researches, there are five major sources that contribute to students' acculturation stress, including language insufficiency, social isolation, perceived discrimination, academic pressure, and other practical stressors (e.g. finance, guilt towards family) (e.g. Sun & Chen, 1999, Tsang, 2001, Wei at al., 2007, Smith & Khawaja, 2011, Bai, 2012). The detailed review of the sources are listed in Table 1.

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Language Insufficiency | Although English language proficiency among students in China has been improved significantly in the past decade and many international students pass international English language proficiency tests, the scores from Mainland Chinese students these tests do not always reflect their true abilities (Zeng, 2006, Cheung, 2013). |
| Social Isolation       | Mainland students usually limit their friend circle within other students from mainland China (CPU, 2014). They usually have moderate to little  |

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
|                            | contact with local Hong Kong friends and moderate to low ratings of “closeness” to these friends. However, research shows that sojourners who reported having more experiences in intercultural settings (i.e. international student friendships) reported less anxiety (Pan et al., 2008, Williams, & Johnson, 2011), which needs our attention. |
| Perceived discrimination   | In the context of the conflicts between Hong Kong and mainland China, whether the students are discriminated against is worth examined. Perceived discrimination would severely obstruct individuals’ acculturation process and increase their stress levels (Bai, 2012).   |
| Academic pressure          | Mainland Chinese students are very competent in academic performance but they may still suffer from academic pressure from two key factors, language proficiency and different teaching and learning styles (Cheung, 2013).   |
| Other practical stressors: | Financial as well as guilt towards families etc. are commonly expressed concern among international students. In addition to tuition cost, international students and their families also have to bear living costs, which is significantly more than attending a university domestically (Bai, 2012, Cheung, 2013).                              |

*Table 1 Five sources for Chinese students’ acculturation stress in Hong Kong*

The factors mentioned above are also explored by empirical studies in Hong Kong context among mainland Chinese students. Yue & Cheung (2011) identifies the students’ struggle in terms of language, academic, cultural difference and socialization. Cheung (2013) points out that students are facing the challenge to adjust in terms of language, academic, sociocultural and finance. CPU (2014) finds out that, language incapability, adapting to new learning

environment, developing new social network and the awareness of cultural difference are the barriers to overcome. These acculturative stressors have been consistently found to impede adjustment and well-being (Yin & Han, 2006), thus it is worth exploring to what extent are the students in the EdUHK suffering from similar sources for acculturation stress.

## 2.4 Acculturation strategies

Different acculturation models have been developed and debated to depict the strategies used by the sojourners. Berry's (1997) conceptual analysis of acculturation strategies, which is also referred to acculturation attitudes (Berry et al., 1989), are termed differently by other researchers, e.g. mode of acculturation by Zheng, Sang & Wang (2004), Wang & Mallinckrodt (2006). In this proposal, Berry's acculturation model (1997) is termed as acculturation strategies, which is also widely used by many researchers e.g. Zhou et al., (2008), Zagefka & Brown (2002), Tadmor, Tetlock & Peng (2009). According to Berry (1997), there are four acculturation strategies, namely Integration, Assimilation, Marginalization and Separation, which are developed from two dimensions: the first relates to the degree to which they maintain their own cultural distinctiveness, and the second is the extent to which they form relations with the host society, which is demonstrated in the Figure 2.

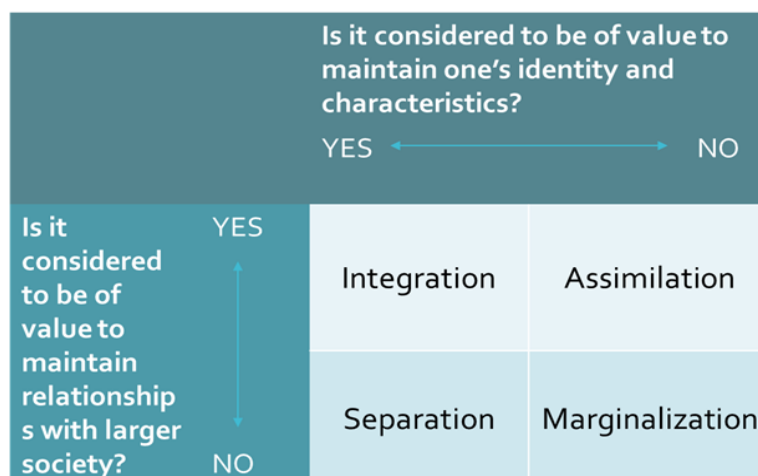


Figure 2 Acculturation Strategies (Berry, 1997)

The choice of acculturative strategies would relate to acculturative stress. As suggested by Smith & Khawaja (2011), when life changes are appraised as an acculturative stressor, coping strategies can determine whether the acculturative stressor results in acculturative stress, and the degree to which it is experienced. Studies have demonstrated that Integration is related to the lowest degree of acculturative stress; Assimilation is associated with a medium degree of acculturative stress; and Separation and Marginalization appear to lead to the highest perceived acculturative stress (Pan & Wong, 2011, Zagefka & Brown, 2002). Thus, Integration has been theorized and found to associate with the best mental health outcome and subjective well-being, as it may allow people to hold shared cultural norms and reconcile conflicts between cultural systems (Zheng, Sang & Wang, 2004, Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Although the studies mentioned above have provided possible sources for the acculturation stress of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in the EdUHK, their strategies to cope with the acculturation stress has been under-researched. Thus, the significance of this research is to combine these two conceptually distinct but empirically related areas.

### 3. Research Methodology

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods with the sequential explanatory design to explore: to what extent are mainland Chinese students suffering from acculturation stress in EdUHK? What are their acculturation strategies are to cope with the acculturation stress?

The aim of the quantitative phrase was to confirm whether the mainland Chinese undergraduate in EdUHK suffered from similar acculturation stress sources as reported in literature. With

individual acculturation stress scores, the quantitative phrase also yielded typical cases who were suffering from high and low levels of acculturation stress for qualitative phrase. Based on the analysis of quantitative data, the qualitative phrase further explored what strategies they applied to reduce acculturation stress.

In the quantitative stage, the questionnaire of the Acculturation Stress Scale for Chinese by Bai (2012) was adapted as the instrument of the quantitative phrase, which uses 5-point Likert scale that contains 32 questions in Chinese. The subscales were the acculturation stress sources reported in the literature, including language insufficiency, social isolation, perceived discrimination, academic pressure and guilt towards their family. To use in the Hong Kong's context, the questions are slightly revised.

The questionnaire was distributed online using Google Form through snowball sampling in the EdUHK, which is a convenient approach for both the participants and the researcher. A consent for the interview in second stage was attached at the end of the questionnaire. There were 95 mainland Chinese Undergraduate students participating in the survey through snowball sampling. The Demographic Characteristics of Participants are presented below (see Fig. 3). Most of the participants are female because of the highly unbalanced gender ratio in EdUHK.

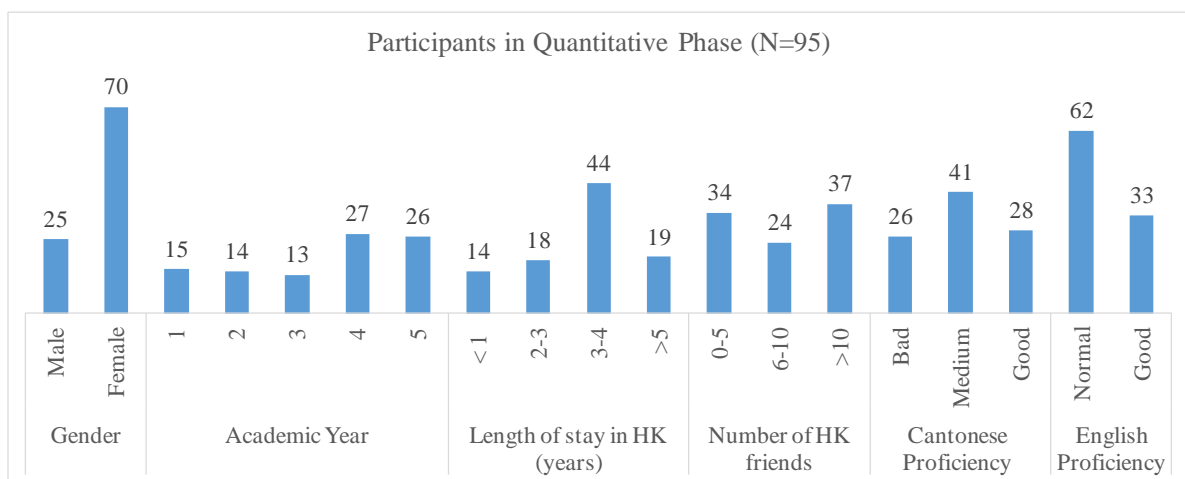


Figure 3 Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Quantitative Phase

The result from the quantitative phase also provided suggestions for the selection of interview participants. From the mean comparison, three informants with high acculturation stress scores and three with low acculturation scores were selected to explore the sources of acculturation stress and their acculturation strategies. Special attention is also paid to allow diversity in their backgrounds. The demographic information is presented in the chart below (Tab. 2).

| Name | Length of stay (Years) | Number of HK Friends | Cantonese Proficiency | Eng Proficiency | Pressure Score |
|------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Q    | 3-4                    | 1-5                  | Poor                  | Normal          | 99             |
| L    | 5+                     | 10+                  | Normal                | God             | 93             |
| B    | 1-2                    | 10+                  | Good                  | Normal          | 78             |
| S    | 3-4                    | 1-5                  | Poor                  | Good            | 57             |
| Z    | 5+                     | 10+                  | Good                  | Normal          | 51             |
| J    | 0-1                    | 6-10                 | Good                  | Good            | 47             |

*Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Qualitative Phase*

For qualitative interview, the tentative interview guide was adapted from the research by CPU (2014), which contains dozens of open-ended questions covering the major scenarios of mainland Chinese students' life in Hong Kong. Through the analysis of their daily life, the acculturation strategies were discussed. By interviewing the typical cases, insights about the features of the group, and the acculturation strategies they applied to cope with the stress were explored.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Findings - Quantitative Phase

In the quantitative phase, Correlation, One-way ANOVA and T-test were used to examine how participants' own characteristics may influence the acculturation stress. The overall score of the Acculturation Stress varied from 41 to 136 with a Mean of 75.56 (SD=17.62). Among the five subscales, the Academic Pressure ranks the highest (M=2.58, SD=0.72), follows by

Language Insufficiency (M=2.54, SD=0.61), Social Isolation (M=2.23, SD=0.57), Guilt toward Family (M=2.22, SD=0.82) and Perceived Discrimination (M=2.19, SD=0.62).

The correlation among the variables are presented in the below table (Tab. 3). The correlation between Academic Pressure and English Level was negatively medium ( $r=-0.440, p<.01$ ). Perceived Discrimination is medium negatively correlated to English Level ( $r=-0.472, p<.01$ ). For others, the correlation between the dependent variables and independent variables are negatively weak. Language Insufficiency pressure is negatively correlated with number of Hong Kong friends, Cantonese level and English Level ( $r=-0.290-0.394, -0.294, p<.01$ ). The Social Isolation and Guilt toward family are negatively correlated number of Hong Kong friends ( $r= -0.248, 0.253, p<0.05$ ) and Cantonese level ( $r=-0.340, -0.326, p<.01$ ). And the overall pressure is correlated with Number of Hong Kong friends ( $r=-0.222, p<.05$ ), Cantonese Level ( $r=-0.305, p<.01$ ) and English level ( $r=-0.357, p<.01$ ).

Among the dependent variables, only the correlation between Cantonese level and Number of Hong Kong friends is medium ( $r=0.435, r<.01$ ), while the other pairs are not significant. The correlation among the subscales, and between subscales with the overall scale are strong ( $r> 0.5, p<.01$ ). It is worth mentioning that the length of stay in Hong Kong has no correlation with any dependent variables and independent variables.

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Demographic data, five Acculturation Subscales and Overall Scale

|                             | Mean | SD   | Independent Variables |         |         |         | Dependent Variables |        |        |        |        |   |  |  |
|-----------------------------|------|------|-----------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|--|--|
|                             |      |      | 1                     | 2       | 3       | 4       | a                   | b      | c      | d      | e      | o |  |  |
| 1. Length of stay in HK     | -    | -    | 1                     |         |         |         |                     |        |        |        |        |   |  |  |
| 2. Number of HK friends     | -    | -    | .178                  | 1       |         |         |                     |        |        |        |        |   |  |  |
| 3. Cantonese Proficiency    | -    | -    | .097                  | .435**  | 1       |         |                     |        |        |        |        |   |  |  |
| 4. English Proficiency      | -    | -    | .009                  | -.052   | .126    | 1       |                     |        |        |        |        |   |  |  |
| a. Language Insufficiency   | 2.54 | 0.61 | -.082                 | -.290** | -.394** | -.294** | 1                   |        |        |        |        |   |  |  |
| b. Social Isolation         | 2.23 | 0.57 | .057                  | -.248*  | -.340** | -.187   | .823**              | 1      |        |        |        |   |  |  |
| c. Perceived Discrimination | 2.19 | 0.62 | .074                  | -.008   | -.063   | -.472** | .649**              | .616** | 1      |        |        |   |  |  |
| d. Academic Pressure        | 2.58 | 0.72 | -.131                 | -.127   | -.125   | -.440** | .668**              | .587** | .747** | 1      |        |   |  |  |
| e. Guilt toward Family      | 2.22 | 0.82 | .016                  | -.253*  | -.326** | -.131   | .723**              | .643** | .578** | .606** | 1      |   |  |  |
| o. Overall pressure         | 2.36 | 0.55 | -.015                 | -.222*  | -.305** | -.357** | .929**              | .880** | .835** | .816** | .798** | 1 |  |  |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Demographic data, five Acculturation Subscales and Overall Scale



## One-way ANOVA and T-test

One-way ANOVA reflects that there is no obvious influence of Length of stay in Hong Kong towards five subscales and overall scale. One-way ANOVA may suggest the negative impact of Cantonese proficiency on Language Insufficiency<sup>1</sup>, Social Isolation<sup>2</sup>, Guilt towards Family<sup>3</sup> and Overall Pressure<sup>4</sup>. There is no apparent impact of Cantonese proficiency on Perceived discrimination<sup>5</sup> and Academic pressure<sup>6</sup>.

One-way ANOVA may also suggest the negative association of the number of Hong Kong friends on Language Insufficiency<sup>7</sup>, Social Isolation<sup>8</sup>, Guilt towards family<sup>9</sup> and Overall pressure<sup>10</sup>. There is no apparent impact of Number of Hong Kong friends on Perceived discrimination<sup>11</sup> and Academic pressure<sup>12</sup>.

T-test illustrates that advanced English proficiency is negatively linked with Language insufficiency<sup>13</sup>, Perceived discrimination<sup>14</sup>, Academic pressure<sup>15</sup> and Overall pressure<sup>16</sup>. T-test may indicate that English proficiency has no significant influence on the Social isolation pressure<sup>17</sup> and Guilt towards family<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>  $F(2,92) = 10.30, p < .05$

<sup>2</sup>  $F(2,92) = 6.47, p < .05$

<sup>3</sup>  $F(2,92) = 5.48, p < .05$

<sup>4</sup>  $F(2,92) = 5.31, p < .0$

<sup>5</sup>  $F(2,92) = 0.18, p > .05$

<sup>6</sup>  $F(2,92) = 1.47, p > .05$

<sup>7</sup>  $F(2,92) = 5.942, p < .05$

<sup>8</sup>  $F(2,92) = 4.02, p < .05$

<sup>9</sup>  $F(2,92) = 4.72, p < .05$

<sup>10</sup>  $F(2,92) = 3.98, p < .05$

<sup>11</sup>  $F(2,92) = 1.51, p > .05$

<sup>12</sup>  $F(2,92) = 0.95, p > .05$

<sup>13</sup>  $t(93) = 3.14, p < .05, d = 0.68$

<sup>14</sup>  $t(93) = 5.80, p < .05, d = 1.25$

<sup>15</sup>  $t(93) = 4.72, p < .05, d = 1.02$

<sup>16</sup>  $t(93) = 3.70, p < .05, d = 0.80$

<sup>17</sup>  $t(93) = 1.84, p > .05$

<sup>18</sup>  $t(93) = 1.275, p > .05$

## 4.2 Findings - Qualitative Phase

### 4.2.1 Academic pressure and strategy of Integration

When talking about the academic pressure, the informants generally reported that they suffered from high level of academic stress, which is in line with the findings in Quantitative Phase. Informants adopted integration attitude towards academic pressure that they use both Chinese and English to deal with the academic challenges, and they adjust their goals while maintaining it at a high standard.

Informants reported that the difficulty of the course requirement had been upgrading throughout the years, but with their skills upgrading, senior students reported that the academic stress was not as high as it was in their junior years. The academic stress was generally linked to three aspects, one of them was insufficiency in English and the second was the high standard of their own performance.

For informants not majoring in Chinese Language, most of the courses were conducted in English. Informants reported that the biggest obstacles they faced in junior years was reading and writing in English, for the reason that they were not required to read and writing English articles at this length when they were in Secondary schools. English became especially challenging to the students when firstly, the academic content was too specialized in certain field (e.g. psychology for students major in Chinese Language education, as said by Z) and secondly, when the subject was not interesting to informants, which were some of the compulsory courses.

To deal with the academic pressure brought by English, informants reported that there were mainly two approaches, which reveal their choices of Integration strategy. Firstly, the

informants were trying to improve their proficiency in English, which will be discussed in the section of Language Insufficiency later on. Secondly, they would use Chinese materials, including Chinese books and academic discussion forum (zhihu.com), as supplements to help them get a fundamental idea of the subjects.

*“When I need to read too much literature in English, I will read something in Chinese to help. I go to Zhihu.com to learn some basic idea (in the discipline) and then I read things in depth.” (S)*

Students’ high standards on their academic performance may be the second source of pressure. Students’ choice of Integration is revealed through keeping their academic goals and adjusting it at the same time. The informants all strove for excellence in academic performance and they were setting higher goals to achieve, although these students reported that they were already at the medium or upper portion among their peers in their programme. Students might perform relatively weak at the beginning of their undergraduate studies, as they focused more on adjustment to Hong Kong life and socialization to establish their own friend circle. The center of life would shift back to academic performance when they were in senior years, for the purpose of scholarships and further studies. However, informants also adjust themselves when they know their goals are too high to achieve.

*“I hoped I could get 3.4 for my final grade (for First Class Honors), but now I am thinking about 3.3. I calculated it that I had to get six ‘A’ to get 3.4, and I could hardly achieved this goal because I did so poor when I was in Year One. I set my goal as 3.3 now. Yes, 3.3 is more practical” (Q)*

#### 4.2.2 Language insufficiency and strategy of Separation and Assimilation

Informants suffer from insufficiency in both Cantonese and English. Informants mainly used Assimilation strategy in coping with Cantonese and mainly used Separation for English, the inferred strategy is demonstrated in the table below (Tab. 4)

| Informant | Cantonese        | English     |
|-----------|------------------|-------------|
| Q         | Assimilation     | Separation  |
| L         | Assimilation     | Separation  |
| B         | Assimilation     | Separation  |
| S         | Separation       | Integration |
| Z         | Assimilation     | Separation  |
| J         | (native speaker) | Separation  |

Table 4 Strategies to deal with language insufficiencies

In terms of language insufficiency, Cantonese and English both commonly used in Hong Kong but in different contexts. English, as the lingua franca of the academic world, is the major medium in academic scenarios. While in everyday life, Cantonese is the major language among the Hong Kong population. Informants suggested that although Hong Kong was a bilingual city, the assimilation-oriented environment forced students to learn Cantonese in order to participate in social events with local students, especially when working in the societies (“上莊”) and during teaching practicums. When the majority of the population in a group were local students, it was reported that they usually would not cater for the language needs for the mainland students, so informants had to find a way out themselves, but both L and B suggested that this experience was a very efficient way to learn Cantonese.

*“LEAD programme greatly helped me improve my Cantonese. I was sitting among the local students, I could not understand but I did not want to interrupt and ask, so I just sat there and it was such a terrible experience. I would say the Hong Kong students were the source where I could learn the language, but no any help.” (B)*

There are two direction of strategies for insufficiency in Cantonese. Firstly, S reported that, when selecting courses, some students choose EMI lessons as a kind of ‘escape’ from Cantonese, which is a choice of Separation strategy. Secondly, the other informants directly confront the problem by actively or passively learning Cantonese and giving up using Putonghua to communicate with local students, which is an Assimilation strategy. Q and J reported that they were motivated to integrate into Hong Kong society so that they had great desire to learn Cantonese through watching Cantonese TV programme with subtitles, including news and TV dramas. J also had intrinsic motivation in learning Cantonese as they found the language itself “beautiful”.

Although they generally reported that their English should be improved, no informants had a concrete plan to improve English, which is a Separation strategy. They generally believed that, with more and more practice, their English would improve throughout the years.

#### 4.2.3 Social isolation and strategy of Separation

The informants mainly adopted the strategy of Separation in terms of social isolation. There is a very clear Hong Kong student circle and a mainland student circle and for most of the time, these two circles do not mix. Informants reported that they would participate in either of the circle at one time. Although all informants reported that they were “walking back and forth in two sides”, four of them indicates that they would mainly stick to their mainland friend circle while two of them were mainly in Hong Kong local friend circle.

*“At the beginning I try to make some Hong Kong friends, but our friendship did not last long. There is no overlap between two circles, and 80% of my friends are mainland students.” (S)*

Five informants, other than Z, pointed out that the mainland friend circle is their “comfort zone”. When they need to make friends or maintain friendship with local Hong Kong friends, they were “walking out of their comfort zone”. L also suggested that he came here as a “tourist” and he had no intention of integration, thus it was more comfortable staying with other mainland Chinese students who shares their cultural background. Y also reported that even though Hong Kong students were welcoming, he could still feel the alienation as that warmth and politeness was obviously for an outsider.

*“Local students treat us well when we are very close, but you can feel that their friendliness is not to their close friends, but to the strangers. Mainland students make you feel that, you are the same type of people as them. But you can feel that you are not the same type as Hong Kong students.” (Q)*

Strategies to make friends with Hong Kong or mainland background were similar. Students from both cultural background would meet in group projects, Orientation Camps, activities and in associations. However, extra efforts are required to maintain friendship with Hong Kong local peers, which also leads to students’ choice of the Separation strategy. Q suggested that the willingness to maintain friendship was lower and the skills of cross-cultural communication with Hong Kong local students were not adequate.

*“It was natural to form circles with mainland Chinese students. People with same background would gather and the friendship can be easily maintained. I meet Hong Kong students but I have to put efforts to strengthen the relationship. Both my willingness and skills are weaker to maintain contact with Hong Kong friends.” (Q)*

#### 4.2.4 Guilt toward Family

The guilt towards family might be at a rather low level that no acculturation strategy is required. The guilt is mainly caused by the absence of companion with family members. When talking about family, informants all suggested that they maintained constant contact with their family through instant message apps (WeChat) and phone calls. There were no barriers in communication but they all wished to communicate more with their family. The communication with family did not follow a particular pattern as they would chat when something interesting happened.

In terms of the financial burden, tuition fees and living expenses were partly covered by the scholarships and part-time jobs, however, it was not adequate for all the informants. They turned to parents for financial support and they all reported that parents could handle the financial issues since it was planned before they came. Q pointed out that they would not sacrifice their study time for part-time work, as they saw study as an “investment” for better future. B also pointed out that they would choose to gather with her family rather than finding a part-time job.

#### 4.2.5 Perceived discrimination and establishment of resilience

Although informants identified that the tension was very high between HK - mainland reported by the internet and the media, the informant seldom felt disturbed in daily lives, thus there might be no necessary acculturation strategy for this source. However, conflicts between cultures still occurs and resilience towards the cultural conflicts might be established.

One observation reported by the informants was that some Hong Kong students were radical on the internet, but in daily life, they were polite to mainland students, or they distinguished them from the other mainlanders who occupied limited resources in Hong Kong, for example,

those taking up posts in primary schools or buying milk powder as parallel traders. Most Hong Kong students were polite to the mainland students.

*“I have so many Keyboard Man ( “鍵盤俠” ) beside me, who criticize the mainland everyday on the Internet, but they would still chat with me frequently. They are criticizing those who come the occupied their resources like posts in schools. When they meet me in person, they are very polite and they say they want to learn from me.” (Z)*

The experience of conflicts and sometimes discrimination may facilitate their exploration in Hong Kong culture. Generalized from the informants, there were three stages of when students encounter discrimination or cross-cultural conflicts, from which they have developed resilience under the unavoidable conflicts (as shown in Fig. 4).



Figure 4 The establishment of resilience during acculturation

Informants reported that when they encountered challenges of discrimination or conflicts with local people when they were in junior years, the challenges ignited their interests in exploring the Hong Kong – China conflicts. Q reported that he wanted to contribute to the Hong Kong society by donating blood, but the nurse was rude to him when she knew Q was from mainland China. Q was stimulated by the incident and started to explore the issues under Hong Kong-China conflicts.



*“I was shocked, why she treated me so badly when I wanted to contribute to Hong Kong by donating blood? From then on, I started to explore why they would think in this way.”*

*(Q)*

Informants generally reported that they learned about Hong Kong through taking up social science courses and online news (e.g. Apple Daily). When Z fully understood the background of the conflicts, Z started to look at things from the Hong Kong people’s perspectives so that Z understood and felt for the Hong Kong citizens. Z also reported that she would now stay calm after experiencing too much conflicts with people holding radical views because she thought the conflicts could not be solved by her, but rather, she would avoid conflicts.

*“I argue with the radical people, but with more and more experiences, I stay calm now, because there must be conflicts, it is a lack of knowledge about each other and the media is portraying in a negative way.” (Z)*

Under the big picture of cross-cultural communication, some conflicts are caused by misunderstanding because of language and culture. Informants generally stated that using Cantonese can reduce the misunderstanding to a large extent. And thus the language capability is largely associated to the pressure of discrimination.

## 5. Discussion

This study examined the sources of acculturation stress and explored what acculturation strategies the mainland Chinese undergraduates applied to the acculturation stress. It reveals that students were suffering the acculturation stress in terms of Academic pressure, Language insufficiency and Social isolation, while Guilt toward family and Perceived discrimination may not be essential sources. Students applied strategies of Integration, Separation and Assimilation

to different acculturation stress sources. This study echoes with most of the literature that Integration and Separation are the two popular acculturation strategies, while Assimilation and Marginalization are less preferred by the sojourner mainland Chinese students. It is further explored that in Hong Kong, these students would apply Integration strategy towards Academic pressure, Separation strategy for Cantonese insufficiency, Assimilation strategy for English insufficiency and Separation for Social isolation. The application of varied strategy contributes to reduce their acculturation stress as a whole in specific Hong Kong context.

Although literature generally attests that Integration is the best strategy to reduce acculturation stress, the Assimilation strategy may be worth consideration. The quantitative phase emphasizes the negative correlation of language capability and acculturation stress. Good command of Cantonese may lead to reduced social isolation with local Hong Kong students and perceived discrimination that there would be less misunderstanding during interaction with local people. Advanced English capability also could reduce academic pressure which highly requires the use of English. However, the length of stay has no correlation with language proficiency, thus it cannot be predicted that the language proficiency would naturally improve across time. Choosing the Assimilation strategy to improve both Cantonese and English may increase the acculturation stress in a short time, but it might be the most efficient way to improve language proficiency. With acquisition of Cantonese and English, the stress in social isolation, perceived discrimination and academic pressure would decrease, which may be beneficial in the long run as students will stay in Hong Kong for at least four to five years.

Additionally, the Separation strategy in Social Isolation aspect may also be a good choice. Since the number of mainland Chinese students in the campus is high enough for the students to have social support only from their co-nationals. For sojourners, if they decide that they only

want to stay in the host culture for a short period, minimizing exposure to the local people may greatly reduce the chance of conflicts, which also leads to the reduction in overall acculturation pressure. S can be a very typical case who is not proficient in Cantonese with few Hong Kong friends, while her overall acculturation stress is relatively low.

The pressure source of guilt toward family is not presented in some literature, and in this study, it may not be an important factor to the students who maintain constant contact with their family. Compared with other destinations, Hong Kong's geographical location is close to China thus it is more convenient for students to maintain contact with family, and some of the students who live in Guangdong Province can visit their family from time to time. Financially, the families might already plan ahead so that the burden might not be significant, and relatively speaking, the cost of studying in Hong Kong is low than other popular choices like America, Australia and Europe.

Under the context of Hong Kong- China conflicts, these groups of students may not suffer too much from discrimination. However, conflicts in cross-cultural communication still occur as Hong Kong and mainland China are two distinct places with unique cultures. It is suggested that the university should provide relevant workshop or courses for both mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students to equip themselves with cross-cultural communication skills that can facilitate their communication in study and life to minimize conflicts.

## 6. Conclusion

For mainland Chinese students in EdUHK, they were suffering from the stress especially brought by academic pressure, language insufficiency in Cantonese and English, and social

isolation. Strategies of Integration, Separation and Assimilation are chosen for specific sources of stress. When interacting with the peers and citizens in Hong Kong, they were experiencing conflicts in cross-cultural communication, and they were gradually developing resilience in daily life. Integration of the non-local students in the campus is not a natural process, extra efforts from the mainland Chinese students as sojourners, local students as hosts and the university as the support provider are required.

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