Negotiating Identity in Intercultural Communication: Experiences of South Asian Students in Chinese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the dynamic process of cultural identity negotiation among South Asian students within Chinese higher education institutions, employing Identity Management Theory (IMT) as the primary theoretical framework. Based on qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 29 South Asian students across six Chinese universities, the research addresses three questions: (1) How do South Asian students perceive, express or suppress their cultural identity in China, (2) What communicative strategies do they employ to manage identity tensions and (3) How do institutional, interpersonal, and contextual dynamics shape identity negotiation in intercultural settings? Thematic analysis reveals five interrelated dimensions of identity negotiation: situational awareness and strategic expression of cultural identity, facework strategies to manage identity tensions, institutional barriers and peer solidarity, experiences of identity freezing and stereotyping, and the emergence of hybrid identity formation. Findings reveals that identity negotiation in this specific context is shaped by asymmetric power relations, experiences of cultural misrecognition and ongoing processes of communicative adaptation occurring within a predominantly Confucian-influenced educational environment. Participants engage in both preventive and corrective facework to navigate tensions between cultural maintenance and host-context conformity. Moreover, the emergence of hybrid identities reflects both cultural resilience and strategic adaptation. The study contributes to the field of intercultural communication studies by extending IMT to non-western academic settings such as China and critically foregrounding the intra-regional diversity within the South Asian student body. It offers practical implications for developing culturally responsive institutional practices and enhancing support systems within Chinese universities to foster more effective intercultural engagement.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, Identity negotiation, South Asian students, Identity Management Theory, Chinese higher education

Abbreviations

IMT – Identity Management Theory

INTRODUCTION

Identity in intercultural communication is best understood as a fluid and dynamic process that is perpetually negotiated and redefined through social interactions (Gudykunst,2005, Ting-Toomey,2005). Hall (1990) presents identity as a dynamic process rather than a fixed essence, emphasizing its performative and contextual characteristics. In international environments, individuals usually navigate among differing cultural norms and communicative expectations, requiring continuous modifications and negotiations of self-presentation. Therefore, identity emerges as a situated and relational construct shaped by institutional settings and demands. Within the context of global higher education, the negotiation of identity, particularly related to cultural identity, becomes especially salient for international students, who frequently encounter unfamiliar social traditions, linguistic barriers and symbolic boundaries. With the increase of international student mobility, international universities have become intercultural hubs where individuals are required to negotiate between their native cultural backgrounds and the prevailing norms of the host society. In most cases, the process not only involves contending with linguistic barriers, but also raises challenges related to their identity and emotions. Identity in such settings is often expressed selectively and strategically, depending on the context of the host culture

(Kim,2001; Ting-Toomey,2005).

This dynamic negotiation of cultural identity resembles unique dimensions within the Chinese higher education context, which has emerged as a major global destination for international students over the past two decades, especially as Asia's top study abroad destination (MOE,2019a). According to official statistics of Ministry of Education of China (MOE), Asians represent the majority of the international student population, accounting for 59.95%. Notably, 52.95% of these students are from BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)[1] countries. Among the top countries of origin of international students in China, Pakistan and India rank third and fourth respectively with 28,023 and 23,198 students (MOE,2019a). These figures indicate a significant representation of South Asian countries, both within and outside BRI countries, signaling their growing presence and relevance in the Chinese higher education context.

Despite a great emphasis on internationalization by Chinese higher education institutions, they continue to reflect Confucian educational traditions and collective social structures, with institutional practices predominantly conducted in Mandarin, which may influence the experience of international students (Marginson,2014; Wen & Hu, 2019). There appears to be an implicit expectation that international students adapt to dominant norms, rather than engage in reciprocal cultural exchange. Cultural identities of South Asian students in particular are quite visible given their diverse religious, social and linguistic backgrounds. These students frequently find themselves navigating how they are perceived, deciding which aspects of their identity to reveal or withhold and determining the extent to which they must assimilate or suppress their sense of self within the system. Consequently, negotiation of cultural identity goes beyond interpersonal elements, making it a significant and a critical point in the Chinese higher education context.

While many studies have addressed the negotiation of cultural identity and intercultural adaptation in Western contexts, less studies have addressed this issue within the Chinese setting (Kim,2001; Gudykunst & Kim,2003). One of the more comprehensive investigations into the experiences of international students of China is Yang's (2009) study on the daily lives of over 200 hundred students across six Chinese universities using questionnaires and follow up interviews. Her findings reveal that international students face several challenges when assimilating into Chinese society, particularly in terms of building relationships. These difficulties largely occurred due to the distinction between cultural values and social interaction styles of China and the countries of origin of international students. Another study conducted by Tian & Lowe (2014) on the intercultural identity and intercultural experiences of American students in China, gives strong empirical proof of Kim's model of 'Intercultural Identity and Development', particularly with regard to acculturation and deculturation. It further reveals how study abroad in China has reshaped the cultural identities of international students through transformative engagement despite the challenges they had to face in the host country. Similarly, Li Anshan (2018) contributes another comprehensive historical and socio-political investigation on African students in China, tracing their experiences from 1950 to 2010. His study reveals how African students often face challenges with their cultural identity, experiencing cultural shock, social isolation and language barriers in the host country. While a substantial body of research has examined intercultural negotiation among international students in China, much of it has focused on the students from African or Western contexts (Yang,2009; Li et al.,2024). Most recently, Li et al. (2024) conducted a longitudinal study of South Asian students, finding that while university support programs moderately improved socio-cultural adaption, structural barriers persistently hindered meaningful integration among the students. South Asian students, despite constituting one of the largest international student populations in China, whose cultural identities are often more visible due to the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of their origin countries, received limited attention in the field of intercultural communication studies.

South Asia is marked by intense intra-regional diversity encompassing Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and Iranic language families. Widely spoken languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali, Sinhalese, Nepali, and Dari reflect the complex socio-linguistic landscape of the region, which often shapes the identity negotiations in intercultural contexts (Simon & Fennig, 2022; Rahman,2010). Religious practices such as Diwali, Eid, Vesak, Thai-Pongal and Christmas further make for complex visibility within the Chinese socio-cultural landscape, where unfamiliarity can sometimes lead to stereotyping or cultural misrecognition. Furthermore, South Asian students often carry complex postcolonial identities, shaped by histories of British imperialism and current geopolitical affiliations, which influence their self-perception and their interactions with institutional structures

abroad.

By foregrounding these dimensions, the study seeks to fill a crucial gap in the literature focusing specifically on how South Asian students navigate their cultural identities in a context where dominant norms are shaped by implicit expectations of assimilation. With a specific focus on how South Asian international students negotiate their cultural identity in everyday academic and social interactions, the research addresses the following three questions; (1) How do South Asian students perceive, express or suppress their cultural identity in China, (2) What communicative strategies do they employ to manage identity tensions and (3) How do institutional, interpersonal, and contextual dynamics shape identity negotiation in intercultural settings? Building on Identity Management Theory (IMT), which posits identity as a negotiated performance shaped by cultural, relational, and situational factors, the study seeks to empirically contribute to an understanding of intercultural identity that is more sensitive to geographical and cultural diversity. It further offers perspectives that have been underrepresented in current literature while highlighting the complexity of identity negotiation in intercultural communication in Chinese higher education context.

Theoratical Insights

A. Identity Management Theory

Identity Management Theory (IMT), developed by Cupach and Imahori (1993;2005), conceptualizes identity as a communicative and relational construct negotiated in interaction, particularly within intercultural contexts. It challenges the static views of identity, proposing instead that identity is situational, performative and contextually managed. Drawing on Goffman's (1967) notion of face and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson,1987), IMT argues that intercultural relationships require the development of a shared relational identity through communication.

Merrigan (2017) argues that individuals belong to multiple cultural groups simultaneously, and that their identities emerge in response to both self-perception and ascriptions of others. In intercultural communication, this dynamic becomes particularly complex, as interlocutors must balance their own face needs with the face needs of distinct others. IMT starts with the assumption that all identities develop in interactions between people and relationships within multiple cultural groups, leading to the creation of multiple cultural and relational identities that are ever changing. These processes are deeply influenced by social context, power dynamics and perceived face needs.
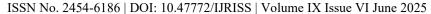
IMT highlights several dialectical tensions that occur in intercultural communication. The in-between space of assimilation into dominant norms and being engulfed in one's cultural roots can be identified as a tension which arises in intercultural communication. These tensions are highly salient in international education, where students often face struggles with their identity.

B. Identity Freezing in Intercultural Communication

Identity freezing is another aspect covered in IMT; when individuals are stereotyped or ascribed a single cultural label, their ability to express nuanced identity positions becomes limited. It usually occurs when multifaceted cultural identities are reduced to oversimplified representations (Cupach & Imahori,1993; Ting-Toomy,2005). It functions as both a defensive and strategic response to uncertainty or perceived threat during intercultural communication (ibid). Hence, identity freezing reflects a form of cultural essentialism whereby cultural identities are being treated homogenous, often disregarding intra-group diversity and personal identity agency.

The implications of identity freezing are particularly salient in intercultural contexts, where interlocutors may rely on cultural scripts to make sense of unfamiliar communicative behaviors. Such salience may lead to essentializing tendencies, in which individuals restrict the identity of others within convinced boundaries, impending mutual understanding and relational development (Collier,1998). As a result, the frozen identity prevails in the encounter by declining other significant personal or social identities that the individual may choose to emphasize.

From a theoretical perspective, identity freezing may be regarded as a breakdown in the process of reciprocal identity negotiation, which is fundamental to IMT. This negotiation involves a dynamic interaction among personal, cultural, and relational identities (Imahori & Cupach,2001). However, this may interrupt effective

communication frequently resulting in intercultural misinterpretation. It further leads to face-threatening behaviors and relational conflict (Ting-Toomey,2005; Gudykunst,2004). For example, Lee and Rice (2007) found that international students in American universities often face assumptions about their cultural competence or linguistic proficiency based solely on their country of origin, regardless of individual variation.

Zhu Hua and Kramsch (2016) highlights that international students are frequently subjected to identity freezing by host nationals, who may perceive them primarily through the lens of their ethnicity or nationality, thereby disregarding their multifaceted personal and professional identities. In international education, this phenomenon contributes to a heightened sense of alienation and identity conflict among minority or immigrant groups (Chen,2012; Kim,2001). Since identity freezing challenges effective intercultural communication, addressing identity through culturally responsive communicative practices and strategies has become imperative.

C. Facework in Intercultural Communication

A foundational component of IMT is the concept of facework- the communicative strategies individuals use to preserve face, defined as the public image or social value a person seeks to claim in interaction (Goffman,1967; Ting-Toomey,2005). Feelings are attached to self, and self is expressed through the face (Goffman,1967). Therefore, one's face is connected with their identity and manages in interpersonal relationships.

Ting-Toomy (2005) further emphasized the idea of face in intercultural communication, highlighting how individuals have predominant facework strategies, which are influenced by cultural factors. When an individual is threatened, facework is the essential action taken to restore one's desired identity (Merkin,2006).

According to Lim & Bowers (1992), humans have three distinct face needs as the following.

1. Autonomy face: the desire to be seen as independent and self-directed
2. Competence Face: the need to be perceived as capable and respected
3. Fellowship Face: the desire to be accepted and included by others

Different kinds of facework address different types of face needs (Lim,1998). Fellowship face is managed through solidarity strategies (Scollon & Scolon,1983; Lim & Bowers,1992). This aligns with positive politeness strategies aimed at reinforcing social inclusion. Competence face is managed by 'approbation' (Leech,1983), enhancing the other's sense of self-worth (Lim,1988). Autonomy is the face dealt with by 'tact' strategies (ibid).
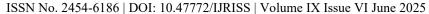
In intercultural communication, these faces often come into conflict, requiring individuals to engage in several facework strategies to avoid face threats. Hence, IMT distinguishes two key approaches such as preventive facework and corrective facework. Preventive facework includes proactive measures to avoid threats such as adapting to host culture behaviors or being polite. Corrective facework is the strategy employed after a threat (post-threat actions), such as apologies, humour or justifications. These strategies are critical in navigating unfamiliar academic norms, peer interactions and institutional expectations.

Through this lens, facework in intercultural communication is not merely a social but a critical evaluation of negotiating identity in environments where the norms of expression are not always culturally reciprocal. It provides a powerful tool for understanding how individuals communicate their identity in nuanced, context-sensitive ways, often under conditions of asymmetry or constraint.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, especially employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis in investigating the negotiation of cultural identities in intercultural contexts in Chinese universities. Considering that the study focuses on exploring lived experience and how individuals negotiate identity in intercultural settings, a qualitative approach is selected as the most appropriate for capturing the depth and complexity of the narratives of the participants. Qualitative analysis, particularly thematic analysis, serves as a structured way to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and construct meaning in

intercultural communication settings (Creswell,2013; Braun & Clarke,2021). The researcher believes quantitative methods would have obscured the richness of the lived experiences and the narratives of the participants.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 29 South Asian undergraduates and postgraduates enrolled in various Chinese universities were selected for this study using purposive sampling. The term South Asian in this study refers to students originating from eight SAARC member countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives. However, participants were drawn from five of these countries including Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal due to unavailability at the time of data collection. Students from Bhutan and Maldives were not included in the sample due to the unavailability of participants from these two countries at the time of data collection. This limitation was based purely on accessibility and does not reflect any form of exclusionary bias. Efforts were made to recruit a diverse representation from within the South Asian region, but the final participant pool was determined by both voluntary participation and the actual demographic presence of students on campus.

Table I – Number Of Participants From Each Country

Country	Number of Students
Sri Lanka	7
India	6
Pakistan	6
Bangladesh	5
Nepal	3
Afghanistan	2

The sampling strategy for participants were as follows in order to capture a wide range of intercultural and identity positions.

1. Enrollment as a South Asian international student at a higher education institute in China
2. Residence in China for a minimum of one academic year ensuring sufficient exposure to the cultural and academic environment.
3. Sufficient knowledge in both Chinese and English to facilitate meaningful intercultural interactions and reflections.

In order to avoid the bias arising from prior theoretical knowledge of intercultural communication, the sample included a broad range of participants from different academic disciplines, rather than being limited to the students who formally study Intercultural Communication and related fields.

Participants were selected from Various universities across China including Jiangsu University, Jiangsu Science and Technology University, University of International Business and Economics (UIBE), Shangdong University, Sichuan University and Dalian University. The participants were selected to highlight the broader cultural experiences in Chinese higher education rather than being confined to a single institutional setting, in order to enhance the generalizability and the diversity of the findings.

Data Collection Method

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to articulate their experiences openly while offering a deeper insight into their experience and maintaining the aims of the study. Interviews were conducted both in-person and online formats, adapting a mixed approach. Recognizing the potential for discrepancies in rapport and data richness between the two modes, measures were implemented to

ensure consistency and quality across both formats. In person interviews were held at Jiangsu University and Jiangsu University of Science and Technology in a peaceful environment, ensuring the comfort and privacy of the participants. For the participants from other institutions such as University of International Business and Economics, Shandong University, Sichuan University, Dalian University, and Tianjin University, interviews were conducted via online platforms including Zoom and WeChat. Additional efforts were made during online sessions to build connection and trust through warm-up questions, verbal affirmations and active listening. All the interviews were recorded with prior informed consent. The following areas were explored during the interviews.

1. Early experience of the participants when connecting with the students in academic settings and social settings.
2. Impact of their cultural identity in various contexts at the university
3. Their relationships with South Asian nationals and international students from other countries
4. Possible cultural misunderstandings at the university context
5. Their strategies to address or navigate those misunderstandings.

Data Analysis

The primary data collected through interviews were analyzed manually using the thematic analysis method, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

1. Familiarization: Recordings of interviews were listened to multiple times and then transcribed. Transcripts were read multiple times and initial notes taken on recurring ideas.
2. Initial Coding: Codes were generated based on the narratives of the participants and guided my IMT. For example, phrases such as "I avoid discussing politics to keep the atmosphere positive" were coded as "preventive facework"
3. Searching for Themes: Codes were categorized into preliminary themes such as strategic identity suppression and institutional barriers
4. Reviewing Themes: Themes were refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. For example: hybrid identity formation was divided into 'intentional hybridity' and 'adaptive hybridity' to capture the nuances of participants' narratives.
5. Defining Themes- Each theme was clearly introduced.
6. Producing the Report- Findings were contextualized within IMT, supporting with the quotes from the participants and later linking them to the key arguments.

Researcher Reflectivity: As a South Asian familiar with the cultural dynamics under study, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document assumptions and mitigate bias.
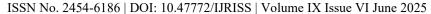
Ethical Considerations

Since the study is based on the sensitive information related to cultural identities in intercultural communication at a university setting, the study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the declaration of Helsinki World Medical Association (2013), ensuring informed consent, participant confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without consequence. All the participants received an interview guide containing the research purpose, methodology and their rights to withdraw from the study any moment or remove any data that they find uncomfortable with sharing. Informed consent was obtained in writing for in-person interviews, while participants who joined online provided digital consent through a signed PDF form.

Participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy and clarity after the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants and all the recordings were archived with the limited access only to the researcher.

Overview Of Research Findings

This section presents the main findings identified from the semi-structured interviews conducted with 28 South

Asian students from five Chinese universities. Drawing on Identity Management Theory, five major categories emerged from the data; Situational awareness and strategic expression of cultural identity, facework strategies to manage identity tensions, institutional barriers and peer solidarity, identity freezing and stereotyping, and hybrid identity formation. Under these themes, several sub themes were also identified. These findings align with the research questions by illustrating how South Asian students perceive and negotiate cultural identity through strategic communication and relational positioning across institutional and interpersonal contexts.

The following table provides a thematic overview of the findings, summarizing the main themes, subthemes and representative participant quotes, followed by a presentation of findings.

Table II - Findings

Theme and Subtheme	Subthemes	Illustrative Quote.
1.Situational awareness and strategic expression of cultural identity	Cultural identity salience	"I feel more Sri Lankan during Sinhala and Tamil New year" - Participant 1
	Adaptive suppression	"I tend to adapt more in formal academic settings" - Participant 16
2.Facework Strategies to manage tensions	Preventive facework	"I avoid discussing politics or religion…" -Participant 15
	Corrective Facework	"I explained my cultural perspective privately" - Participant 22
3.Institutuional barriers and peer solidarity	Structural challenges	"I had to wait for two weeks to get my student ID, so during that time, I survived only on fruits" -Participant 9
	Intercultural Solidarity	"We share similar struggles such as language barriers, homesickness…" -Participant 13
4.Identity freezing and stereotyping	Misidentification	"People assume I'm Indian…" -Participant 10
	Identity fatigue	"They think every Indian is vegetarian…" -Participant 4
5.Hybrid identity formation	Intentional Hybridity	"I feel more Sri Lankan than ever, but also like a global citizen…" -Participants 26
	Adaptive Hybridity	"I speak Nepali at home, but in class, I use English and Chinese…" -Participant 9

Situational Awareness and Strategic Expression of Cultural Identity

Participants frequently adjusted their cultural identity expression based on the context, highlighting a dynamic interplay between visibility and suppression.

Cultural Identity Salience

Participants reported an intensified salience of their cultural identities, particularly during significant cultural and religious festivals. These occasions served as powerful reminders of their cultural roots. For example;

"During Sinhala and Tamil New Year, I feel a strong urge to celebrate and share our customs… these moments remind me of who I am". (Participant 1, Participant 23)

"I feel more Pakistani during Eid. It's time when I miss home the most, and try to recreate those traditions here with friends" (Participant 12) Some students reported that cultural salience triggered in them and reflective engagement with their heritage. Participant 6, shared that, "Living in China has made me reflect on what truly

defines my Pakistani heritage', emphasizing that how distance from home prompted reassessment of identity. Some participants described a renewed engagement with cultural celebrations abroad that they had previously taken for granted. Participant 14 shared that "Sometimes when I was in India, I didn't participate in Holi. However, living in China has made me feel a stronger connection to my cultural roots. I now feel that I should take part in the celebration because it represents my heritage". This pattern suggests that the experience of living in a foreign cultural context often triggers a reflexive engagement with one's own cultural identity.

Cultural marginalization is also another significant point in cultural identity salient. As the only Nepali student in her university, Participant 9 finds herself culturally marginalized, stating, "As I am only Nepali student in the university, I find it difficult here to make friends as everyone is in the group with their countrymates…". Her cultural identity has become more salient through contrast of her Nepali background and invisibility in intercultural settings.

Adaptive Suppression

However, identity expression was not uniformly enacted across all contexts. Some participants described context-dependent modulation or strategic suppression of cultural identity, particularly within formal academic environments. Participant 16 explained that "I tend to adapt more in formal academic settings, where I'm more reserved and careful with how I express opinions" demonstrating identity performance is strategically negotiated in response to situational norms and perceived power dynamics.

Facework Strategies to Manage Tension

Both preventive and corrective strategies were employed by students both consciously and unconsciously, to navigate identity tensions, with social harmony being prioritized over self-expression.

Preventive Facework

Students employed indirect communication and soft language as a most common strategy, which can be identified under preventive facework. Participant 2 explained that. "I try to use more qualifiers such as 'perhaps', 'may be' when I want to object to an idea and maintain the respect". This illustrates the use of hedging to avoid direct conflicts. Similarly, Participant 15 shared her deliberate avoidance of sensitive subjects that "I avoid discussing politics or religion to keep the atmosphere positive".

Corrective Facework

Participants adopted a corrective framework when cultural misunderstandings and tensions occurred. This involved apologies, clarifications or changing the topics. Participant 21 shared that "I apologized and discussed my thoughts more privately after a public disagreement". Participant 22 expressed a similar instance 'Once, a classmate misunderstood my comment about gender roles. Later, I explained my cultural perspective privately, and we were able to understand each other better". Participant 11 also shared that "During a WeChat group discussion, a topic became quite heated, and many people including myself, expressed strong opinions. Later I realized that some comments, including mine, might have come across as insensitive or offensive. I decided to apologize in the group and also encouraged others to do the same if they felt they had said something inappropriate". These responses highlight the preference for resolving conflicts through private conversations, and apologies without creating tensions.

Humour also emerged as a corrective framework among participants to mitigate potential intercultural misunderstandings. Participant 24, shared that, "Sometimes I feel lazy to argue, I just say something humorously or joke about it" illustrating humour as a tool to deflect confrontation. Similarly, Participant 17, stated that "If I feel that what I told created tension, I just try to calm them down by saying it was a joke" highlighting the use of humour as a strategy to negotiate between cultures.

Overall, these facework strategies suggest how South Asian students in China often employ culturally adopted

communication strategies to protect their identity and the social relationships.

Institutional Barriers and Peer Solidarity

Structural challenges such as language barriers and academic pressure, were mitigated through intercultural peer support.

Structural Challenges

Participants consistently reported encountering barriers that impeded their academic and social integration such as language difficulties, intensified academic expectations, and lack of foreigner- friendly institutional instructions.

Language limitations hinder classroom participation, constrain informal social interaction, and loss of opportunities, getting misinformation. As participant 7 and Participant 18 stated, "Even though I enrolled in the university to study in English medium, some of my teaching staff including the supervisor, are not proficient in English. We mainly communicate through WeChat and use only a few English words. Especially during lab experiments, I have to rely on the advice of my seniors"

Similarly, Participant 29, explained that, "Most of the instructions in the school are presented in Mandarin Chinese. I have passed HSK 2[2], and am currently reading for level 3, but still my level is not enough to understand complex Chinese characters. This makes many students feel uncomfortable and excluded"

Participant 9 articulated that the lack of linguistic and cultural familiarity led to a sense of isolation.

"Being the only Nepali student, I cannot speak my language with anyone".

She further described the institutional delays and the resulting hardship.

"I had to wait for two weeks to get my student ID, so during that time, I survived only on fruits"

In addition to linguistic challenges, academic pressures were reported to be disproportionately high. Participant 8 shared his experience on publication requirements:

"We need to publish five papers in Q1 journals… It's stressful compared to other students who study in other countries"
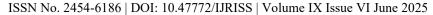
These insights reflect the cumulative weight of structural challenges that South Asian students face in the academic environment.

Intercultural Solidarity

Despite the structural impediments, students cultivated resilient forms of intercultural solidarity that served as psychological coping mechanisms. Emotional bonds were strong among international students who share similar struggles in adapting to the environment. Participant 13 and Participant 28 emphasized that "we share similar struggles such as language barriers, homesickness. So, it creates a family bond"

Participant 5 shared a similar idea that emotional bonds were especially strong among South Asian peers who shared similar cultural backgrounds. "I feel at ease when I am with international students, especially with South Asians. I have good friends from Sri Lanka and Pakistan, with whom I share most of my struggles and thoughts. I feel comfortable being with them because we share similar challenges compared to other international students. We can understand each other better, because we all are South Asians."

This sense of intercultural solidarity emerged as a significant source of emotional support, allowing students to create meaningful communities despite the challenges they encountered in their academic and social lives.

Identity Freezing and Stereotyping

A recurring theme in the narratives of the participants was the experience of identity freezing, where their complex identities were reduced to oversimplified stereotypes imposed by others, reflecting essentialized cultural perceptions.

Several participants reported that they were to be misidentified under broader regional labels, despite the distinctions of their cultural backgrounds. Participant 10 shared "People assume I'm Indian and ask about Indian festivals…I often have to tell that I am not an Indian, but Sri Lankan"

Participant 19 also shared the same concern that "Some teachers think we're all the same. When I say I'm from Bangladesh, they still talk about Hindi customs, which I do not follow"

Such identity misrecognition not only trivializes the backgrounds of the individuals but also reflects broader systematic ignorance regarding South Asian diversity.

Participant 23 also recalled that "It's funny when people identify me as Indian. Even Indian people think that I am Indian and try to speak to me in Hindi". She added an insightful reflection that complicates the typical frustration linked to identity freezing: "I don't really get offended when people identify me as an Indian. Instead, it made me realize how close South Asians are from appearance and culture, which makes me think we are all from the same region, like one family".

The emotional impact of identity freezing can cause identity fatigue. Participant 4 reflected on the psychological toll of persistent misidentification. "Even when I introduce myself as Indian, they assume that I am Hindu and Vegetarian. I'm neither, but they can't understand. They think every Indian is Hindu and they all are vegetarian". Such encounters created the feeling of invisibility, where individual identity markers are consistently overridden by dominant cultural assumptions. Overtime, this led to identity fatigue, and students found themselves in a constant state of negotiation and self-explanation.

Hybrid Identity Formation

Hybrid identity formation, which is a dynamic synthesis of the ethnic and cultural heritage, was identified as another form of identity negotiation among South Asian international students.

Intentional Hybridity

Several participants reported an intensification of cultural pride along with global adaptability.

"I feel more Sri Lankan than ever, but also like a global citizen who belongs to more than one place" (Participant 26)

"Wherever I go, I identify myself as Indian. I carry my roots, but it does not mean that I cannot see myself as a global citizen. I can maintain both my identities" (Participant 27)

"I do not find it difficult to adopt to one place. I never abandon my heritage, but I feel I belong myself int two countries" (Participant 25)

"A blend of Pakistani, Chinese and global elements. I've adopted and it has changed how I dress, think and interact. Now I feel like I'm more easy-going person who can adapt accordingly" (Participant 12)

Adaptive Hybridity

Participants showed adaptive hybridity, in which identity becomes a site of transformation shaped by both cultural inheritance and experiential learning, which can be seen as an expansion of identity boundaries.

Notably, participants articulated that their hybrid identities were often intentional constructions or adaptive

hybridity. Participant 9 shared that "I am proud to speak Nepali at home, but in class or public, I use Chinese and English. It's not about giving up-it's about being effective in different spaces"

Participant 3 shared a fascinating insight on his hybrid identity formation through his intercultural relationships and everyday communication practices. "My girlfriend is Chinese. We communicate in English because my Chinese is not fluent. But when I'm with her family and or friends at the university, I switch to basic Chinese even if it's broken in order to connect with them. I've also adapted to Chinese food and dining habits. Things slowly become part of me". His willingness to engage with local customs and linguistic practices suggests a deep intercultural openness that facilitates the formation of hybrid identity.

The thematic analysis identified five key themes as the findings: situational awareness and strategic identity performance, facework and self-presentation, institutional and linguistic barriers, identity freezing and stereotyping, and hybrid identity formation through intercultural adaptation. These themes suggest the multifaceted nature of identity construction in intercultural academic environments.

The first theme revealed that students consistently adjusted their cultural expression based on contextual cues, selectively emphasizing or supporting aspects of their identity to navigate intercultural acceptance. The second theme reveals that the participants employed discursive tactics such as humour, politeness or avoidance in sensitive interactions. The third theme suggests that systematic challenges such as language barriers and culturally insensitive academic practices marginalized students, fostering exclusion in the classroom and social setting. The fourth theme revealed essentialized labels led to internalized suppression of cultural identity to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. The fifth theme suggests that students dynamically blend native and host cultural elements to cultivate a fluid, context-responsive sense of belonging across academic and social spaces.

DISCUSSION

The study illustrates how South Asian International students in China navigate cultural identity through strategic adaptation, peer solidarity and resistance to essentialization. In this section, key findings will be discussed and interpreted through the perspective of Identity Management Theory (IMT) and posit them within the broader context of intercultural communication.

A. Theoretical Implications

The findings of the study contribute to Identity Management Theory (IMT), by Cupach and Imahori (1993), which place identity as relational and performative, emerging through interaction and shaped through context-dependent choices in self-presentation. The frequent engagement of the participants in strategic identity performance illustrates the core assumption of IMT—individuals manage their identities to achieve relational goals, such as inclusion, acceptance, or mutual understanding in intercultural communication.

Participants demonstrated a high degree of strategic modulation of cultural expression based on contextual cues, particularly within formal academic settings. For example, participant 16 articulated 'I tend to adapt more in formal academic settings, where I'm more reserved" suggest the deliberate choice to foreground behavioral conformity in environments governed by institutional expectations. Such behavior is deeply influenced by Confucian cultural norms that prioritize collective well-being.

In contrast to the western-dominated academic settings, where autonomy-face and self-assertion are often valorized (Ting-Toomey,2005), South Asian students in Chinese universities navigated a social environment shaped by Confucian values emphasizing harmony, deference to authority, and collective well-being. Their intentional suppression or expression of cultural practices such as minimizing religious rituals in academic settings and emphasizing them during cultural events, reveals a delicate balance between adherence to rooted culture and institutional literacy. In such context, relational identity becomes context-dependent and strategically managed to maintain academic harmony. This supports IMT's view that identity is not individually fixed but co-constructed within interactions (Cupach & Imahori,1993).

The second theme of facework strategies, provide empirical reinforcement of the preventive and corrective

facework in IMT. The following table includes the Intentional and unintentional strategies followed by South Asian students during interactions.
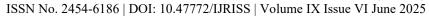
Table III – Facework Strategies Employed By Students

Type of Strategy	Specific Tactic	Participant Example	Function
Preventive	Hedging	"I use qualifiers like perhaps" (Participant 15)	Softens potential disagreement
	Topic avoidance	"I avoid political or religious discussions" (Participant 15)	Prevents conflict
	Code switching	"Switching to Mandarin when the presence of Chinese" Participant 9	Avoids exclusion, Signals adaption
	Private explanation	"I explained my perspective privately" (participant 22)	Repairs relationship without public embarrassment
	Humour or self-deprecation	Joking after misunderstandings (Observed in several narratives	Defuses tension
	Apology	"Apologizing for language mistakes…" (Participant 20)	Reaffirms competence face

Preventive strategies such as topic avoidance and hedging were occasionally employed by participants to reduce face-threatening acts. These acts do not only reduce the perceived imposition on the interlocutor but also protect the speaker's fellowship face (Lim & Bowers, 1992). Confucian values, such as hierarchical reciprocity and relational harmony, precondition identity negotiations in Chinese contexts. For instance, "I avoid discussing politics or religion…" (Participant 15) highlights the Confucian emphasis on preserving social order. This aligns the concept of fellowship face proposed by Lim and Bower (1992), which emphasizes fostering relational harmony through self-restraint and social attunement.

Corrective strategies were also salient in the data as stated in the above table. Strategies such as private explanations restore healthy dialogues without escalating public discord. This demonstrates the collectivist preference for indirect conflict resolution and resonates with Goffman's (1967) dramaturgical perspective on face maintenance in social interactions. This tendency may be influenced by the broader context of socialization patterns common among South Asian families, where cultural values such as interconnectedness, collective cohesion, and respect for elders are often emphasized (Triandis,1995). These norms are sharply distinct from Western individualism, where direct self-expression is often framed as a right (Ting-Toomey,2005). This expands IMT by demonstrating how collectivist face concerns, such as preserving group cohesion and avoiding institutional discord, guide identity performances in Confucian-influenced contexts (Gao,1996), by the South Asian international students. In comparison with Western studies by Lee & Rice, 2007, where autonomy-face often guides conflict engagement through direct articulation, this study reveals a context in which the avoidance of embarrassment and maintenance of rational harmony supersede individual assertiveness.

Table IV – Contrasting Cultural Norms In Identity Negotiation: Confucian Vs. Western Contexts

Aspect	Confucian Context (China)	Western Context
Guiding value	Relational harmony, hierarchy	Individual autonomy, self-expression
Facework priority	Fellowship face (Lim & Bowers,1992)	Autonomy face (Ting-Toomey-2005)
Conflict resolution	Indirect, private (Participant 22)	Direct, public (Lee & Rice,2007)
Identity expression	Contextual suppression (Participant 16)	Assertive advocacy (Kim,2001)

The concept of identity freezing, as experienced by participants who were consistently misrecognized or reduced to essentialist labels, aligns with critique of cultural essentialism of IMT and externally imposed identity constraint (Cupach & Imahori,1993). Participant 4's observation that 'they think every Indian is Hindu and vegetarian' highlights how host culture interlocutors frequently relied on reductive cultural schemes, leading to misrecognition and communicative fatigue. This experience resonates with Zhu and Kramsch's (2016) idea that host nationals often engage in symbolic violence by essentializing the cultural identities of international students, thereby inhibiting fluid identity negotiation.

The psychological burden of identity fatigue —the need to repetitively explain or defend one's cultural practices —illustrates the diminution of competence face (Lim,1998), where participants felt unable to fully exercise their communicative agency. Furthermore, the internalization of these frozen identities reflects a defensive form of identity management in response to a socially unaccommodating environment. This phenomenon underscores the core assertion of IMT that effective intercultural communication depends on mutual recognition and the reciprocal co-construction of identity (Cupach & imahori,1993), conditions which were often absent in participants' experiences.

Emergence of hybrid identities in the participants aligns with the IMT's assertion that effective intercultural communication facilitates the development of a third, negotiated identity space (Imahori & Cupach,2001). Statements such as "I feel Sri Lankan as well as global" (Participant 26) and "observed behaviors such as code-switching between Nepali and Mandarin" (Participant 9) indicate a conscious blending of cultural repertoires and further supports the notion of relational identity in IMT-as fluid and contextually adaptable. This form of adaptive hybridity illustrates what Bhabha (1994) terms 'third space- a liminal zone wherein identity becomes fluid and emergent rather than fixed'. It further aligns with Kim's (2001) integrative acculturation model, which posits that hybrid identities are not a result of unidirectional assimilation, but reflected fluctuation between cultural pride and contextual adaptation. This suggests the need for a more dynamic framework of intercultural identity development, one that captures the flow of identity performance across shifting social terrains. Capacity of the participants to selectively emphasize or withhold cultural elements, suggests the performative flexibility emphasized in IMT and underscores the agency of international students in shaping their intercultural trajectories.
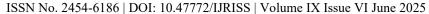
Structural implements such as linguistic marginalization and administrative exclusion emerged as critical barriers to identity expression. According to the reflection of Participant 9, "Being the only Nepali student is kind of isolating" underscores the compounding effect of linguistic and cultural invisibility. These individual constraints, though external to the theoretical domain of IMT, point to an underexplored dimension in identity negotiation literature: the intersection of structural power and individual agency. While IMT emphasizes relational dynamics, this study suggests the need for its expansion to include institutional variables that precondition communicative interactions.

However, the formation of peer solidarity networks served as a compensatory mechanism. According to the statement of participant 13, "we share struggles and become a family" shows the role of communal identity in countering marginalization. Such peer-based affiliations resonate with the relational focus of IMT, where identity co-construction fosters a sense of belonging and psychological resilience. These findings extend Li et al.'s (2024) focus on structural challenges by revealing how relational agency among peers can mitigate institutional exclusions and restore autonomy face (Lim,1998). In this context, peer solidarity becomes both a coping strategy and a site of cultural empowerment, enabling students to reassert complex identities in a constraining environment.

B. Empirical Contributions

The study offers three significant empirical contributions to the literature on intercultural identity negotiation. First it extends the Western-centric framework of IMT by demonstrating how Confusion cultural norms, particularly the prioritization of fellowship face and indirect communication reshape identity negotiation in Asian contexts. While prior research emphasized autonomy-face in individualistic societies, this research reveals that South Asian students in China strategically suppress autonomy of facework strategies.

Second, the findings challenge homogenizing narratives about Asian international students by foregrounding the

intra-regional diversity of South Asia. The experience of the participants with identity freezing (e.g. being mislabeled as 'Indian' despite distinct national identities) highlight how linguistic, religious, and postcolonial complexities shape identity dynamics in ways absent from studies of African or Western contexts (Yang,2009; Li et al., 2024).

Third, the study advances understanding of hybrid identity formation as a non-linear, context-dependent process. In contrast to Kim's (2001) acculturation model, which presumes progressive assimilation, the data reveal a shift between cultural preservation and adaptation. This supports the fluidity theorized in IMT but rarely documented in empirical studies conducted in East Asian contexts.

C. Practical Implications

The findings offer significant insights for the policy makers of Chinese higher education in several ways.

1. Cultural Sensitivity Training: Mandate workshops for faculty and local students to address identity freezing (e.g.; misleading South Asian nationalities) and promote awareness of regional diversity. This could reduce stereotyping.
2. Peer Mentorship Networks: Implement formal mentorship programs introducing new international students with seniors from similar cultural backgrounds. Participant 9's isolation ("being the only Nepali student, I find it difficult to make friends") underscores the need for structured support to mitigate marginalization.
3. Multilingual Resources: According to the experience of Participant 29 that "Most of the instructions in the school are presented in Mandarin Chinese…this feels most students uncomfortable and excluded", translated academic guidelines and multilingual academic service should be provided.

D. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the study offering critical insights into the identity negotiation experiences of South Asian international students in China, certain areas remain open for further scholarly explorations.
First, the demographic composition of the participant group was limited to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan, suggesting broader inclusion of underrepresented South Asian nationalities such as Bhutanese and Maldivian students. Future research could benefit from the inclusion of a larger number of participants encompassing the South Asia region. Second, since the present study captures identity dynamics at a particular moment, longitudinal research could benefit deeper insights into how hybrid identities evolve over time. Moreover, Identity negotiation influenced by overlapping factors such as gender, religion, and socio-economic background would further enrich the analysis through an intersectional lens.

CONCLUSIONS

This study presents the dynamic and multifaceted process of cultural identity negotiation among South Asian international students in Chinese universities, grounded in Identity Management theory (IMT). The findings reveal that students strategically modulate their identity expression across contexts, consciously and unconsciously employing preventive and corrective facework to navigate tensions between cultural preservation and assimilation. Institutional barriers, such as linguistic marginalization and administrative inefficiencies, compounded feelings of isolation, while peer solidarity emerged as a vital coping mechanism. Identity freezing-manifested through stereotyping and misrecognition-highlighted the challenges of resisting essentialized labels in a Confucian-influenced environment. Conversely, hybrid identity formation underscored the agency of students in blending cultural repertoires to cultivate a fluid, context responsive sense of belonging.

The research expands the theoretical horizons of IMT, by demonstrating how collectivist norms in China reshape identity negotiation, prioritizing fellowship-face over autonomy-face. It contributes to the empirical data of homogenizing narratives about Asian students by foregrounding inter-relational diversity and postcolonial complexities in South Asia. The findings contribute to institutional reforms including cultural sensitivity training, multilingual resources and peer mentorship programs, in order to foster an effective identity negotiation of international students in the Chinese context.

NOTES

1. BRI countries- Belt and Road Initiative countries- Refers to the group of countries participating in China's global development strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to enhance regional connectivity and economic cooperation through infrastructure, trade, and cultural exchanges.
2. SAARC countries- South Asian association for Regional Cooperation countries- Comprises eight South Asian nations: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
3. HSK exam – *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* – The official standardized Chinese Proficiency Test for non-native speakers across reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is often required for academic admissions and employment in China.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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