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# Acculturation in a multicultural classroom: perspectives within the yin-yang metaphor framework

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the acculturation characteristics of Chinese students in the context of a multicultural classroom. The Chinese yin-yang philosophy is used to provide another dimension of interpretation and analysis in addition to Berry's acculturation strategy framework. Qualitative data over a five-year period reveal their changing psychological states in a multicultural classroom. Four stages of acculturation were identified: initial, contact, reflection, and change. At each stage, Chinese students dynamically react and change in the acculturation process, which is similar to the intertwining process of *yin* and *yang*, a metaphorical image seen in the Chinese yin-yang philosophy.

本文探讨中国学生在多元文化课堂上的濡化特征。研究数据持续5年，展现中国学生心理变化的4个阶段：开启、接触、反思、变化。每一个阶段，学生们心理变化就像中国哲学的阴阳图，阴与阳相交织，但又不不停地相互改变。

## KEYWORDS

Acculturation; yin-yang philosophy; international students; Chinese students; multicultural classroom

## Introduction

With the rapid economic development in contemporary China, the desire to have international students pursue higher education in the country has risen (Mok et al., 2021). China is a coveted destination for international students pursuing higher education and has growing strength and influence in this area; it has gradually become a preferred choice for students from developing countries (Ahmad & Shah, 2018). According to the 2019 annual report for international students in China, which is the most recent at the time of writing, the number of international students in the country reached 492,185; this large number deserves global attention. With more international students coming to China, both Chinese and international students face intercultural problems while interacting with foreign cultures. Therefore, examining the acculturation and intercultural adaptation of students is urgent and necessary.

The acculturation process comprises the changes experienced by either or both of the cultural groups through contact and communication (Redfield et al., 1936). It generally entails two or more cultural groups interacting with and adapting to each other (Berry, 2006). Several seminal acculturation studies have stressed the significant role cultural adaptation plays for people (including but not limited to immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, sojourners, expatriates, and indigenous

and ethnic minorities) entering new cultural environments (Berry, 2003; Sam & Berry, 2010; Ward, 2020). A large number of these studies focus on international students (e.g. Li, 2015b; Safdar & Berno, 2016), investigating different dimensions of personal adaptation (Gui et al., 2016), adaptation problems (An, 2017; An & Chiang, 2015; Yu, 2010), and various coping strategies (Ward & Kennedy, 2001). However, much less attention has been paid to the students from the host country who interact with newcomers. That is, in the specific context of multicultural classrooms comprising international and Chinese students, little research has been conducted to demonstrate the value of the acculturation process for Chinese students, and relatively little is known about how they adapt to specific intercultural contexts.

Apart from the dearth of investigation of the host culture group, the process of acculturation also necessitates further explanations given to the dynamic nature of the interactions that drive it. The traditional Chinese philosophical concept of yin-yang may provide a metaphorical structure to demonstrate the dynamic changes people go through under acculturation processes. According to the yin-yang perspective, a dynamic balance is reached between the relatively positive, dominant, and aggressive side of *yang*, and the rather weak, negative, and non-dominant side of *yin* (Fang & Faure, 2011; Li, 2012). Furthermore, the variety of acculturation strategies must be taken into account. Based on Berry's (2003) framework of acculturation strategies, people choose different acculturation strategies which lead to diverse adaptation outcomes. Therefore, they have different experiences when they are exposed to a new cultural milieu.

Based on observations and data collected from Chinese students in a multicultural classroom, we reveal how they dynamically adapt to the class under both internal and external factors, which lead to different choices of acculturation strategies. By delving into these issues, this study provides a new approach to analysing the dynamic changes comprising acculturation and aims to provide insights into method to promote satisfying adaptation experiences, as well as establishing a dialogue between the yin-yang metaphor and the acculturation strategy framework.

## Literature review

### Acculturation

Redfield et al.'s (1936) definition of acculturation, highlighting mutual or reciprocal group influence, remains the most cited: 'acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups' (p. 149). Subsequently, Berry (1997) proposed that 'acculturation refers to the general processes and both cultural and psychological outcomes of intercultural contact' (p. 8). He further noted that 'acculturation is a dual process affecting the members of two or more cultural groups as each adapts to the presence of the other' (Berry, 2006, p. 8). Developing the basic concept of acculturation, recent research has focused on conceptualisation (Berry, 2003, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010), measurement (Ward, 1996), and its application in research related to migration (Berry & Hou, 2017; Georgas & Papastylianou, 2021), health (Schwartz & Unger, 2017), consumption behaviour (Kizgin et al., 2018), education (Sharif, 2019), and social development (Erten et al., 2018).

Berry's (2003) acculturation framework laid the groundwork for further investigation. It demonstrates how cultural- and individual-level factors come together to initiate the process of acculturation, leading to various forms of adaptation. At the cultural level, one needs to understand the cultural changes within different cultural groups, ranging from those rather easily accomplished (such as evolving a new economic base) to those that can be a source of major cultural disruption (such as becoming colonised and enslaved). These changes also set the stage for the acculturation of individuals (Berry, 2003). At the individual level, people may undergo through experiences of culture shock caused by various forms of changes when encountering new intercultural situations. These include symptoms of anxiety, stress, loneliness, and

other related negative reactions (Oberg, 1960), or a period of U-curve shaped acculturation comprising honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and bicultural phases (Lysgaard, 1955) individuals do not acculturate in the same way; they have different strategies to seek different acculturative goals (Berry, 1980; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). These variations are termed ‘acculturation strategies’ and are based on individuals’ orientations towards changes, which frame two types of identification. The first is the maintenance of one’s own heritage, culture, and identity; and the second is the preference for establishing relationships with other cultural groups through contact (Berry, 2003; Kim, 2000). Acculturation strategies include assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalisation (Berry, 1980, 2003). The assimilation strategy is employed by individuals who do not wish to maintain their cultural heritage and seek daily participation with other cultures in a larger society (Berry & Hou, 2017). In contrast, the separation strategy is used to define ethnocultural group members who value holding on to their original cultures and identities, and wish to avoid interaction with others in larger society (Berry, 2003). The integration strategy is employed when there is an interest in both maintaining one’s original culture and interacting with other groups (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018); this is preferred by most people as it benefits psychological well-being (Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Miao & Xiao, 2020). Finally, marginalisation refers to people who indicate no interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss) and little interest in having relations with other groups (often for reasons of discrimination). This results in low levels of both cultural maintenance and adoption (Lefringhausen et al., 2021). The choice of different strategies represents possible reactions to intercultural circumstances and may lead to various acculturation outcomes (Berry & Hou, 2017). Social support could also assist and accelerate the acculturation (He et al., 2019).

Acculturation and intercultural adaptation are distinct: acculturation focuses on the process of adjustment, while intercultural adaptation often emphasises outcomes. For instance, many scholars (e.g. Sam & Berry, 2010; Ward, 2020) have argued that adaptation is not synonymous with acculturation but follows from the changes induced by the process of acculturation. Adaptation can either further the ‘fit’ with the environment (a positive adaptation), or increase ‘conflict’ with it (a negative adaptation). This differs from the idea of culture shock, which only refers to negative reactions. Furthermore, intercultural adaptation has been categorised into two specific dimensions, psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990). The former is an adaptation that is primarily internal or psychological (e.g. sense of well-being and self-esteem, sometimes called ‘feeling well’). The latter is external or social, linking the individual to others in the new society (sometimes called ‘doing well’). Therefore, individuals’ intercultural adaptation capabilities result from their choice of different acculturation strategies.

Despite the claim that acculturation is a dynamic process (Berry, 2017; Ward & Geeraert, 2016) and that the choice of acculturation strategies varies over time as people explore how to adapt effectively, according to their own criteria (Sam & Berry, 2010), few attempts have been made to explain and demonstrate how people choose and change acculturation strategies, based on psychological changes and actual situations. The factors that influence acculturation states when experiencing intercultural difficulties remain unclear. This procedural ‘black box’ warrants further investigation.

### *Yin-yang: a Chinese philosophy*

The yin-yang philosophy, originally derived from *Yijing* or *I-Ching* (the Book of Changes), is the origin and basis of the traditional Chinese philosophy. Yin-yang is a way of life that embraces paradox, dynamics, and change (Fang, 2012; Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2019). With unique insights into paradox and change, yin-yang offers a micro-based perspective on the dynamic features of intercultural interaction, to reach a more detailed understanding of cultural exchange (Fang, 2012). This approach also holds potential for exploring highly complex phenomena (Li, 2012).

Yin-yang emphasises the dynamic equilibrium between two opposing sides (Fang, 2012; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Li, 2014), with *yang* representing what was traditionally recognised as ‘masculine’

forces, such as the sun, light, optimism, expansion, and rationality. Meanwhile, *yin* demonstrates the ‘feminine’ forces, such as the moon, water, darkness, passivity, softness, and yielding (Fang & Faure, 2011; Li, 2012; Liu & An, 2021). However, there is no explicit boundary between *yin* (black) and *yang* (white); there is a dot of *yin* in *yang*, and vice versa (Fang, 2012; Li, 2012). Together, they potentially compose a full map (see Figure 1), or a meta-frame of thinking that accommodates mutual negations and affirmations between the two opposites as a duality (Chen, 2008; Li, 2015a). Yin-yang is thus an open system that embraces the balance between ‘either/or’ and ‘both/and’. Thus, it differs from both Aristotle’s metaphysics, which claimed that the two sides of a contradiction are completely independent with a permanent ‘either/or’ but never ‘both/and’ (Li, 2012), and Hegel’s dialectical logic, which simply stressed the unity of opposites and eliminated the contradiction with a temporary ‘both/and’ (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). It is also distinct from Bohr’s complementation principle, which highlights that opposite poles are exclusive and may not be integrated as an ‘either/or’ (Liu & An, 2021). Therefore, yin-yang regards all contradictions as contrary yet complementary (Li, 2014), and emphasises the dynamic change from one side to another to reach a dynamic equilibrium between two poles, that is, the state of being balanced (Chen, 2018).

Among other fields, scholars have applied the yin-yang philosophy to management (Li, 2012, 2014), higher education (Chin et al., 2018), mixed methods research (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2019), computer science (Jiang & Lu, 2012), and advertising (Ertz et al., 2021). We argue that it is also of growing theoretical and practical importance to understand intercultural communication from a yin-yang perspective. Culture inherently possesses paradoxical value orientations and gradually changes over time, rather than being static (Fang, 2012). From a yin-yang perspective, all cultures hold dynamic meanings while sharing the same potential for opposing, paradoxical, contradictory, and even incompatible cultural values (Fang & Faure, 2011). *Shaoyin* (lesser yin, 少阴) and *shaoyang* (lesser yang, 少阳) refer to the stable state when *yin* and *yang* begin to be opposite, but they are transferable (Wang, 2012). *Shaoyin* indicates there is lesser *yin* and *shaoyang* indicates there is lesser *yang* in the yin-yang image.

The dynamic features of the acculturation process may be elucidated by relating it to the yin-yang philosophy. Yin-yang emphasises that the two sides mutually reinforce and neutralise, contradict and unify, and coexist and transform each other through ceaseless changes, separation, and unification (Li, 2014; Liu & An, 2021). It allows us to understand the shared commonalities and differences across cultures and individuals by identifying them as parts of a whole without fixed boundaries (Chen, 2008). In intercultural settings, yin-yang demonstrates a way of reconciling apparent opposites by presenting them as a part of a whole, in which one cannot exist without the other and each contains some aspects of the other. Such features are also echoed in acculturation, which highlights the totality, oneness, and interfusion in human interactions (Chen, 2008).

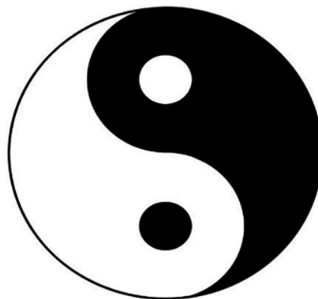


Figure 1. Traditional Chinese yin-yang philosophy.

## **Multicultural classrooms in China**

Multicultural classroom research has mainly focused on international students' cross-cultural interaction (Li, 2015b), acculturative stress (Yu et al., 2014), adaptation (An & Chiang, 2015; Yu, 2010), motivation to study in China (Ahmad & Shah, 2018), and online learning (Demuyakor, 2020). However, relatively little is known about whether host country students (Chinese students in this study) experience the process of acculturation and how they adapt to multicultural classrooms while interacting with students from foreign cultures. As more attention has been directed to the pattern of mutual or two-way adaptation for different cultural groups (e.g. Akhtar, 2010), it is prudent to examine whether local people in their home country also need to adapt to people entering their cultural contexts from diverse cultural backgrounds.

To investigate the acculturation process for Chinese students in a multicultural class, more details are required to understand this specific cultural context. In such a multicultural class, students jointly compose a micro-multicultural context as a group of people from diverse cultural backgrounds gathering together and communicating equally, under the course design and syllabus directed and initiated by the teacher. The teaching approach aims to create a 'cultural comfort zone', which aims for students to get to know not only 'themselves' and 'others', but also 'themselves in the eyes of others' and 'others in our own eyes' through mutual communications and interactions (An & Chiang, 2015; Hale, 1997).

Multicultural classrooms also adhere to the values of openness and respect. Students are encouraged to freely express their opinions. Through this, a strong self-identity is recognised and self-confidence is gradually established by means of introducing their own cultures to their classmates (An & Chiang, 2015; Li, 2015b). By acquiring knowledge of different cultures in the multicultural classroom, students understand that multiple cultures coexist in the real world (Banks & Banks, 2019). Meanwhile, in the class, students may also encounter intercultural problems, including culture shock, intercultural misunderstanding, and even intercultural conflicts.

In summary, there is scant research on how Chinese students in multicultural classrooms dynamically acculturate and choose acculturation strategies from the perspective of yin-yang. As a 'site' for intercultural communication and interaction with people from various cultural backgrounds, the multicultural classroom promotes cultural diversity, advocates openness, and calls for mutual respect. Against this background, we address three main research questions: (i) What are the acculturative characteristics of Chinese students in the multicultural classroom? (ii) What are the factors influencing their acculturation process? (iii) How do they experience psychological acculturation in the multicultural classroom?

## **Background of the case**

The 'Intercultural Communication' course has been conducted for over 10 years by the first author of this paper in the south of China. It is a compulsory course taught in English for all international students and Chinese students majoring in intercultural communication. Usually, students in a single class come from approximately 15 different countries. Due to the impact of COVID-19, the course shifted from an offline to an online one since 2020, but its focus on cultural diversity did not change.

With the aim of establishing intercultural awareness and strengthening mutual cultural understanding and communication, the course combines knowledge of intercultural communication with guided practical projects for intercultural interaction and group cooperation. Students are encouraged to interact with each other and comment on what they hear or see both inside and outside the classroom. The teacher also encourages students to write down their observations and reflections of intercultural contact and present them in class. This optional activity is designed to provide examples of intercultural adaptation to the class and constitutes teaching materials for future classes. This activity aims to build students' enthusiasm to express their own intercultural experiences. Consequently, some students

confidently and vividly describe their cultural characteristics and the reason for their behaviours. Apart from textbooks, teaching materials such as films, videos, stories, research articles, and students' observations and reflective comments, are provided. These items provided rich data for the present study.

In this study, we focus on the dynamic changes made by Chinese students in a multicultural classroom to investigate how they adapt to intercultural conditions through choosing different acculturation strategies. Using the principles of *yin* and *yang*, we regard the factors that hinder change in Chinese students as *yin* and the factors that promote change as *yang*, to depict the dynamic changes in the whole acculturation process with yin-yang variations and transformations. When we say 'dynamic change', it indicates that changes are not always unidirectional. Students' feelings can go vacillate as they go through their intercultural experiences.

## Method

A case-based qualitative research study was designed (Creswell, 2007; Silverman, 2005) for Chinese students attending the 'Intercultural Communication' course. The coding technique of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was adopted, using Nvivo 12.0 as an auxiliary tool for data processing. This approach mainly focuses on coding to provide an abstract and detailed analytical schema of a process. It demonstrates the process under investigation and generates new insights grounded in coded and categorised data (Gibbs, 2007). The first-hand data enabled us to observe and comprehend novel feelings and intercultural experiences among Chinese students, as well as obtain an in-depth interpretative understanding of their changing psychological states, factors influencing their acculturation, and alternations in acculturation strategies in the multicultural classroom.

## Participants

Among the 187 students from 39 countries enrolled in the 'Intercultural Communication' course over the past five years (2017 to 2021), 44 Chinese students submitted their optional assignments. Table 1 presents their details.

**Table 1.** Participating Chinese students.

Year	Form of teaching	Number of Chinese students	Percentage of all students
2017	Offline	7	15.6%
2018	Offline	9	15.8%
2019	Offline	9	37.5%
2020	Online	9	31.0%
2021	Online	10	31.3%
Total	–	44	23.5%

## Data collection

The course duration was 8 weeks (4 h for 1 session each week), with different topics related to intercultural communication covered in each session. Data were collected from the 44 Chinese students, including their class observations and reflections, individual assignments, and cooperation experiences. The reflections of cooperation experience from international students and class observation records of different periods from teaching assistants (TA), who were also researchers of this study, were used as supplementary materials for triangulation (Denzin, 2012; Hussein, 2009). Consequently, we obtained 140 documents (in English or Chinese) with 163,833 words in total (Table 2) for further investigation and analysis.

**Table 2.** Data collected from Chinese students.

Data Type	Documents	English (words)	Chinese (words)	Total (words)
Class observations and reflections	54	32,189	65,528	97,717
Optional assignments	73	35,083	17,966	53,049
Cooperation experiences	13	8,099	4,968	13,067
Total	140	75,371	88,462	163,833

### Procedure

Based on the eight-week syllabus design, with each topic closely related to intercultural knowledge and experience, it was preliminarily found that as the course progressed, the assignments submitted by students presented the process of their intercultural adaptation. This finding provided guidance and basic coding rules for the following procedure.

Three levels of coding principles were developed for the data collected. The first level represented the year of collected data (with A = 2017 and E = 2021), the second level referred to specific students (A–Z), and the third level was annotations (01–99), which were collected in an orderly manner from the original data. We utilised Nvivo 12.0 for coding and categorising, multiple-inductive work, and the generation of data results. First, all the collected textual data were uploaded into the software. Second, we identified quotes reflecting the process of intercultural adaption using codes. Third, categories displaying the prominent features of acculturation were condensed and created for further abstraction. Finally, by associating representative categories generated by the software, we further detected four basic stages in Chinese students' intercultural adaptation process (Table 3).

Using the coding principles and procedures, we obtained 428 coded segments and 10 categories. Three of the research team members, who were also TAs for the course, had a better understanding of the data materials and participated in coding and categorising. During data processing, reliability and consistency were ensured through discussions and cross-checks (Denzin, 2012; Hussein, 2009; Silverman, 2005). Our detailed analyses presented below provide a thorough understanding of Chinese students' attitudes.

**Table 3.** The basic procedure of coding and categorising.

Representative quotes	Codes	Categories	Stage
A-A12: The first class is like attending the opening ceremony, the atmosphere is great here and I feel excited and refreshed, meanwhile because it is the first class, I am also a little nervous.	Excited and looking forward to the intercultural communication course, but a little bit nervous.	Refreshed; excited; nervous	Initial stage
D-D09: Before attending the class, I was so excited and expectant in that I could have classes with international students from different countries, but I was also a little nervous: my English is not good enough, will there be a communication problem?	Students feel both expectant and nervous before attending the class.		
E-F05: I soon found out that I was out of place with the classroom, always being a bystander rather than a participant. When the teachers asked questions in class, the international students always respond positively and enthusiastically. On the contrary, even if the teacher encouraged Chinese students to speak more, I was still afraid that I would mess it up. I wanted to try but lack of confidence made me more anxious and difficult to take the step.	Chinese students felt psychological insecurity during the class.	Depressed; frustration; lack of confidence	Contact stage

(Continued)



Table 3. Continued.

Representative quotes	Codes	Categories	Stage
E-B17: Being afraid of speaking English made me feel depressed, and I was more confused when I couldn't understand the accent of international students in class. Sometimes, I had the impulse to answer questions, but I couldn't organise the sentences so well that I always hesitated and missed the chance.	Chinese students are afraid to speak up because of language barrier.		
C-D02: In front of the professor's desk, a group of international students crowded around the professor after the class, happily expressing their opinions and comments.	Feeling the atmosphere of the class from the performance of international students.	Encouragement; feelings of support; positive atmosphere of class	
E-B18: Under the guidance and encouragement of our teacher, I try to gradually adjust myself and tried to participate the class with a positive attitude.	Teacher offers students guidance and encouragement.		
A-A14: I know I should express myself more actively, but I'm still worried that I'll answer incorrectly and losing face. I always have no confidence in my ability.	Chinese students are lack of confidence and worried about speaking up in class.	Hesitation; refuse to change	Reflection stage
A-F06: In an unfamiliar environment, being an invisible person who doesn't speak is to protect myself.	Feel unsafe in the unfamiliar environment.		
C-A13: I am not very confident in my English expression. So reading the textbook in advance can avoid the tension caused by having nothing to say when speaking, and can also increase the frequency of speaking.	Accumulation of intercultural knowledge and establishment of self-confidence.	Take the stride; embrace changes	
B-A04: The professor encouraged us to answer international students' questions actively. Gradually, the communication extends from in-class to after-class, so we are getting closer and closer.	Teacher encourages Chinese students to interact with international students.		
C-J65: Intercultural cooperation takes time to overcome the teething problem. You can't expect there would be no issues at all at the very beginning.	Change of attitudes towards the emergence of intercultural conflicts.	Intercultural conflicts; maladjustment	Change stage
E-B35: After several sessions, I felt progress. Because I overcame some obstacles and tried to answer questions actively, this is a big step for me. But now I am in a new round of anxiety: how can I improve the quality of my answers?	Chinese students still need to face up to new rounds of anxiety.		
C-F02: From international students' presentation, I knew some of them did went though some terrible days. That was not easy. I was grateful for their sharing and happy for their successful cultural adaption, because there are so many exciting new things for you to explore once you got through the tough phase.	Through the contact with international students, Chinese students learn to take others' perspectives and be open-minded.	Improved intercultural competence; better performance; open mind, inclusiveness, perspective taking	
D-F21: In the last few classes, the participation of Chinese students increased significantly, although sometimes they are a little silent. Generally speaking, they are more active than before.	Chinese students' desire for class participation has been improved.		

Note: The coding process of data involves a large number of analytical tables, and due to space constraints, only some of them are shown as examples.

## Analysis and findings

Data analysis revealed a pattern of four stages of intercultural acculturation for Chinese students, namely the initial, contact, reflection, and change stages. The main features presented through the four stages are slices of students' varying psychological acculturation in different time periods. The yin-yang metaphor framework that we adopted helps reveal more details about the entire acculturation process.

### Initial stage

The first stage of Chinese students' intercultural adaptation included 23 codes, which mainly depicted their psychological states as intertwined excitement and anxiety.

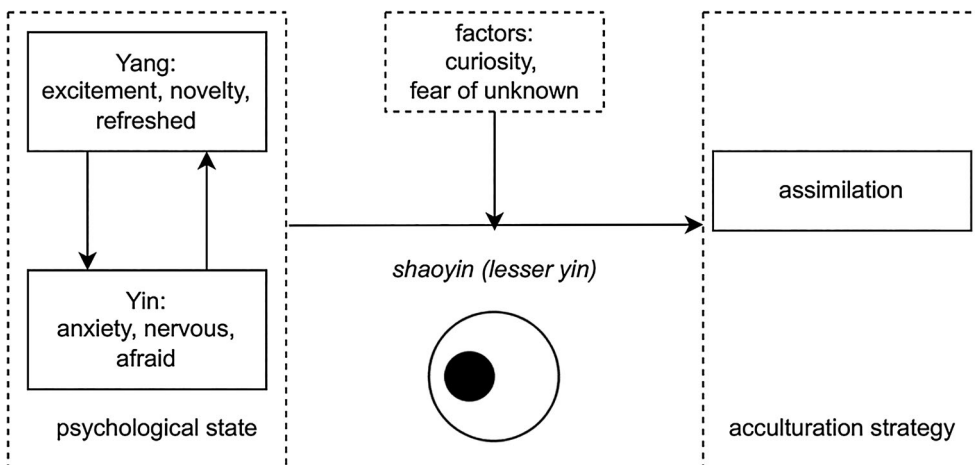
### Excitement and anxiety

Before the first multicultural class, students mainly found it exciting to get to know people from diverse cultural backgrounds and expected a mixing of cultures. Chinese students also experienced anxiety and nervousness, due to the uncertainty and unknown elements of meeting unfamiliar cultures.

**A-A12:** The first class is like attending the opening ceremony, the atmosphere is great here and I feel excited and refreshed, meanwhile because it is the first class, I am also a little nervous.

**D01-J03:** In the first class, the international students were very active. They often answer the questions positively and said, 'That's funny!' I admire their courage, and I hope I can express myself freely in class like them.

The initial stage presents the state of *shaoyin* (lesser yin, 少阴), which indicates that *yang* occupies the main part while a dot of *yin* remains (Wang, 2012). Chinese students primarily feel excited and curious about the novelty of different cultures in the multicultural classroom, while also being anxious about the unknown circumstances. Their psychological states appear to be *yang* (white), dominated by excitement for the upcoming challenge. At this stage, their feelings are somewhat similar to the 'honeymoon' phase in the U-curve pattern of acculturation (Lysgaard, 1955). However, their psychological states do not exclusively comprise positive feelings. Given the impact of curiosity and fear of the unknown, they also experience nervousness and anxiety to some extent, which lie in the *yin* (black) dot. The *shaoyin* (少阴) psychological state moved towards *yang*, which reflected a preference for the assimilation acculturation strategy. Therefore, as simultaneously generated contrary emotions, the dominant feelings of *yang* and non-dominant ones of *yin* jointly constitute the initial psychological states of Chinese students in the acculturation process (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Initial stage of Chinese students' acculturation: with good imagination and high expectation.

### Contact stage

Contact is the most important stage in acculturation (Berry, 2005; Ward & Geeraert, 2016) through which individuals encounter varied intercultural situations (Berry, 2003). In the second stage, Chinese students made contact with international students in the multicultural classroom. They gradually formed a preliminary understanding of intercultural communication through experiencing inner shock and outer encouragement. We obtained 127 coded segments for the contact stage.

### Frustration despite encouragement

After entering the class, Chinese students immediately suffered from a culture shock and found it difficult to integrate into the class, which produced feelings of frustration. Some were hindered by a lack of confidence to speak up in class, while language problems set further barriers to their adaptation. However, they were encouraged by external factors, including the teacher's encouragement, international students' contact, and atmosphere of the class, to make positive changes. Nevertheless, Chinese students still experienced a big shift in their psychological state at this stage compared to the initial stage, in which their acculturation strategy tended towards assimilation.

**E-F05:** I soon found out that I was out of place with the classroom, always being a bystander rather than a participant. When the teacher asked questions in class, international students always respond positively and enthusiastically. On the contrary, even if the teacher encouraged Chinese students to speak more, I was still afraid that I would mess it up. I wanted to try but lack of confidence made me more anxious and reluctant to take the step.

**E-B17:** Being afraid of speaking English made me feel depressed, and I was more confused when I couldn't understand the accent of international students in class. Sometimes, I had the impulse to answer questions, but I couldn't organise the sentences so well that I always hesitated and missed the chance. Under the guidance and encouragement of our teacher, I tried to gradually adjust myself and tried to participate in the class with a positive attitude.

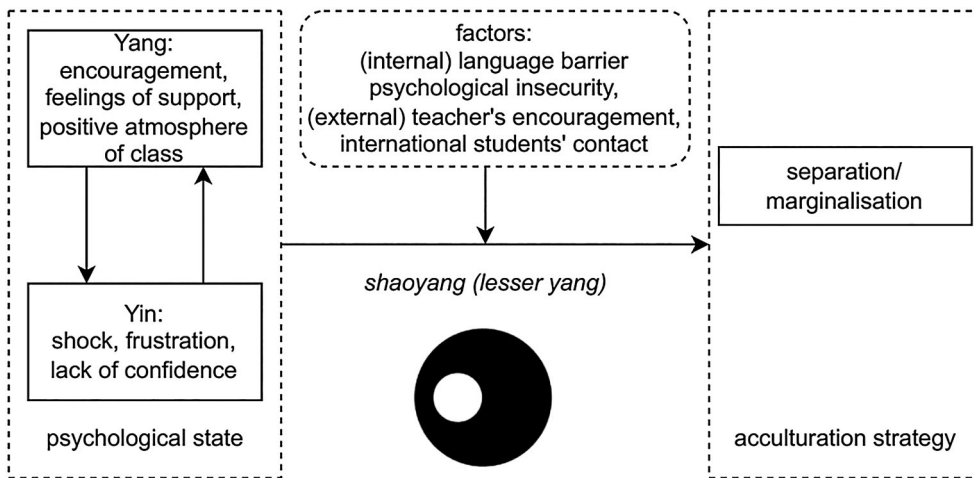
**TA's observation:** The teacher said that 'Intercultural Communication is not a language course, but a cultural zone that enables you to learn communication skills and accumulate intercultural experience. So do not worry about your English proficiency, it is what you say that shows the speciality of your culture that matters.' After that, some Chinese students had the courage to speak up and participate in class discussions.

The contact stage presents the state of *shaoyang* (lesser yang, 少阳). It refers to the fact that *yin* occupies the main part while a dot of *yang* remains (Wang, 2012). Chinese students were mostly frightened by encountering different cultures. This was reflected in their feelings of frustration and lack of self-confidence. The main reason for such reactions lay in the language barriers, lack of cognition of multiculturalism, perception and value differences, and psychological insecurity. These barriers made it harder for the Chinese students to adapt and overwhelmed potential external encouragement. In class, their silent behaviour indicated that they adopted a half separation strategy. That is, they attended the class but kept silent. They set a distance with other international students at this stage and were in a marginalisation state. External support and encouragement did not push Chinese students to a positive state but prevented them from completely getting lost and losing their self-confidence.

The dominant feelings of excitement and novelty (*yang* side) in the initial stage were instantly disrupted and overtaken by feelings of frustration (*yin* side) instead.

That is how *yang* (inclination for assimilation) began to shrink and *yin* (negative feelings towards acculturation) started expanding for the stage which displays an 'asymmetrical balancing' state, with one of the opposite elements being the dominant and the other being the subordinate (Li, 2014).

In other words, Chinese students' choice of acculturation strategies dynamically shifted from assimilation towards separation or marginalisation at this stage (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Contact stage of Chinese students' acculturation: with factors of inner frustration which overwhelm external encouragement.

### Reflection stage

Individuals do not acculturate in the same way (Berry, 1980; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020); people need to consider different acculturative goals and their desire to maintain their cultural identity (Berry, 2003). The reflection stage is an important period which involves constant changes and struggles faced by students in stepping out of their personal comfort zones as well as taking corresponding actions. We obtained 138 codes depicting dynamic changes in Chinese students' psychological states for this stage.

### Dilemma leads to strategy

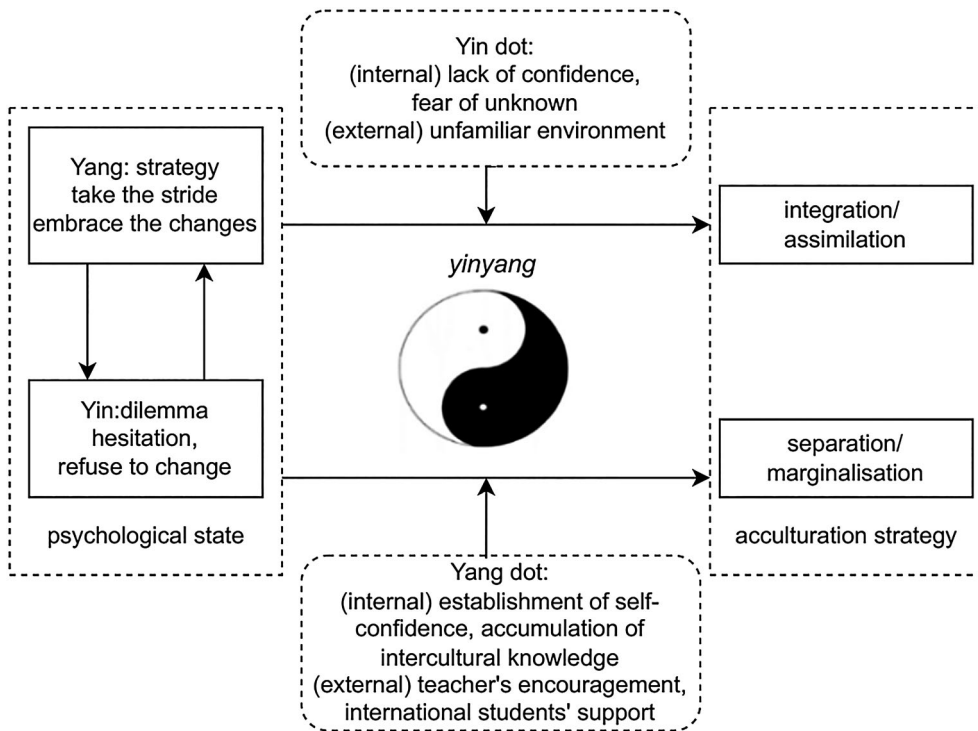
During this phase, Chinese students began to reflect on their attitudes and performance in the previous stages. They felt it was necessary to make changes, but it was difficult to step out of their comfort zone. Acculturation strategies are adopted through confirming the orientations of cultural identification (Berry, 2003). After reflecting and struggling internally, as well as accepting external support provided by the teacher and international students, feasible solutions including coping skills and acculturation strategies were gradually formed at this stage. Most Chinese students pushed themselves to integrate into the class and faced difficulties. However, changes did not occur overnight; it was a dynamic process with repeated alternation between failure and success.

**C-A14:** Positive psychological hints may motivate you to raise your hand to answer the question but also break your psychological boundaries and force you to get out of your comfort zone. The professor encourages us to actively answer international students' questions. Gradually, the communication has extended from in-class to after-class, so we are getting closer and closer.

**E-B35:** After two sessions, I felt progress. Because I overcame some obstacles and tried to answer questions actively, this is a big step for me. But now I am in a new round of anxiety: how can I improve the quality of my answers?

**E-G18:** Later in the class, I did not feel that anxious and pressure unless the teacher asked me to answer the question. Because the assignments are optional, I did not feel the stress and did not want to interact with international students.

**TA's observation:** When an international student asked questions with a strong accent, the professor would clearly repeat the question which enabled Chinese students to understand better and actively respond to the question.



**Figure 4.** Reflection stage of Chinese students' acculturation: with both reflection and courage to embrace changes with the external support.

A 'transitional balancing' state of *yin* and *yang* is reached in this stage, which refers to both opponent elements shifting from dominant or subordinate roles towards their opposite side over a period of time (Li, 2014). That is, *yin* dynamically changed into *yang*, with a dot of *yang* entering *yin*, and vice versa (see Figure 4). On the one hand, it shows that when Chinese students are hesitant and refuse to step out of their comfort zones (black), showing an inclination towards marginalisation or separation acculturation strategies, they are simultaneously motivated by the teacher's encouragement to 'speak up more and interact with other students'. Support of international student's is also conceived through more in-class and after-class communication, and the accumulation of intercultural knowledge taught in class, which constantly contributes to the establishment of self-confidence (white dot). Conversely, when Chinese students are taking strides and embracing changes (white), which shows a preference for integration and assimilation strategies, they may also be hindered by lack of confidence, fear of the unknown, and unfamiliarity with the environment (black dot). Therefore, this stage highlights the fluctuating psychological states of Chinese students experiencing different dilemmas and how this produces constant and dynamic alternations in the acculturation strategies.

### Change stage

#### Improvement with reflection

The choice of the acculturation strategies may lead to different acculturative results (Sam & Berry, 2010). Although integration is the preferred strategy that most benefits psychological well-being (Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Miao & Xiao, 2020), Chinese students tend to choose their acculturation strategy according to specific circumstances in this stage. The last stage presented an improvement

in intercultural competence and better performance of Chinese students in class, which nonetheless brought new experiences of sufferings. We obtained 140 coded segments demonstrating how Chinese students adjusted themselves to ensure a better adaptation to the multicultural classroom, including TA's observation and communication with international students.

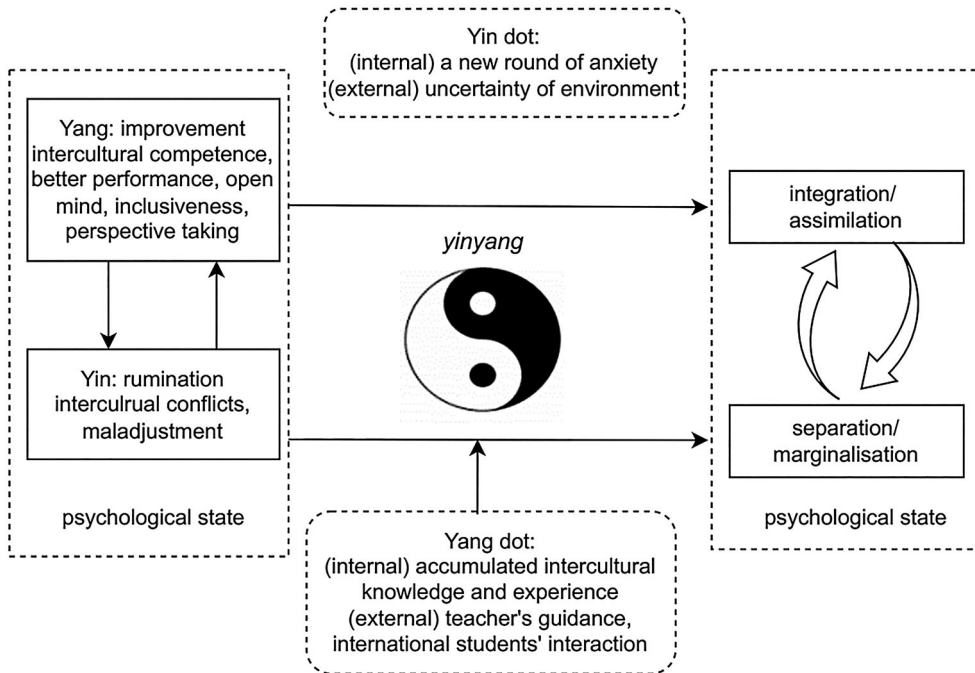
**C-F02:** From international students' presentations, I got to know that they went through some terrible days on first coming here. I appreciate them for sharing the intercultural adaptation experience and I am happy for them for getting through it.

**E-H34:** In this class, more Chinese students participated in class discussions and interacted with international students. We used to be quiet, but those days are gone now; we are more active.

**TA's observation:** The professor designed the last class as a free discussion on 'globalisation and localisation'. She encouraged all students to share their opinions and communicate with each other. More than half of the students volunteered to give a presentation, among which Chinese students accounted for two thirds. At this time, the motivation of Chinese students for participating in class was fully mobilised.





**International students' comments to TA:** Chinese students tend to be quiet in the beginning, but as we gradually get closer to each other through communication and interaction, they are more active in the class. They also shared more opinions in group cooperation assignments, which surprised me a lot.

At this stage, a dynamic cultivation and transformation between *yin* and *yang* is noted: the dot of *yin* starts in the part of *yang*, and vice versa (see Figure 5). As for the *yang* side, the research team witnessed several prominent improvements among Chinese students (white). For example, they were able to understand others' perspectives and understand other cultures with an open mind and inclusiveness, which rendered more active participation and better class performance. However, alongside these positive manifestations, a new round of psychological ill-effects is also growing (black dot), which nonetheless motivates further positive changes. As for the *yin* side, a new round of culture shock might appear which leads to maladjustment



**Figure 5.** Change stage of Chinese students' acculturation: with competence to keep dynamic balance.

**Table 4.** A summary of Chinese students' acculturation process.

Acculturation process	Main characteristics of acculturation	Yin-yang Status	Assimilation Acculturation strategy
Initial stage	Feel excited, have a high expectation, and be a little nervous before the class, like the honeymoon period.		
Contact stage	Encounter a culture shock when contacting with international students, such as language barriers, lack of cognition of multiculturalism, perception and value differences, and psychological insecurity. These factors overwhelm external encouragement.		Separation/ marginalisation
Reflection stage	Reflect themselves when falling into a dilemma. Reflecting and struggling internally, as well as accepting external support provided by the teacher and international students. To embrace changes (with external support) and hesitate to take astride (with internal struggle).		Separation/ marginalisation Integration/ assimilation
Change stage	Gain accumulated intercultural knowledge (taught by the teacher) and competence (from interaction with international students). Will face a new round of shock and change.		According to specific circumstances

and intercultural conflicts when a deeper cultural understanding and cognition have been established and accumulated (black). However, through jointly accomplishing teamwork with international students in class, Chinese students gradually had faith in their intercultural ability which gave rise to more positive changes. Meanwhile, guidance and encouragement from the teacher, might bring about more support for them, as well as accumulated intercultural experience and knowledge, to face new challenges and goals (white dot), facilitating better adaptation.

From these circumstances, we can detect that individuals' choice of acculturation strategies did not happen instantly but was based on a process of rumination and psychological struggles, as yin-yang dynamically shifted towards each other. This transformation signifies the paradoxical but unified characteristics of yin-yang (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2019), reaching a dynamic balance of coexistence (Chin et al., 2018).

By demonstrating the psychological states, influencing factors, and flexible choices of the acculturation strategies, the four stages described above depict an integrated map of dynamic acculturation processes among Chinese students in the multicultural classroom, from a yin-yang perspective (Table 4).

## Discussion and conclusion

In the age of globalisation, intercultural communication is thriving and has a large influence in various cultures (Baker, 2022). Any party involved in such intercultural contexts will experience acculturation, making it a topic worthy of research (An & Chiang, 2015; Berry, 2017; Chin et al., 2018). Based on the specific case of a multicultural classroom, this study shows that people from the host country also go through a process of adaptation. We attempt to establish a dialogue between the yin-yang metaphor and acculturation strategy framework, to supplement the acculturation theory. A dynamic acculturation process based on yin-yang is provided as a theoretical foundation and interpretive schema, to deal with the qualitative data collected in this study.

Lefringhausen et al. (2022) have provided the first longitudinal insights on majoritymembers' acculturation. Accordingly, this study contributes to the field of intercultural communication, especially from the yin-yang metaphor framework. It applies the yin-yang metaphor to a multicultural classroom by offering insights into acquiring effective and appropriate intercultural interaction skills. The yin-yang metaphor framework shows how the Chinese students

change through a process of making contact, communicating, and cooperating with international students in a multicultural classroom. Through this approach, a better understanding of students' dynamic choices of the acculturation strategies can be attained. Students have to make a decision, either 'I want to keep my own culture' or 'I want to change'. To maintain psychological balance, these two options must be kept clearly arranged in their minds and actions. Maintaining such balance is a slow cyclic transformation of the two sides of yin-yang to constantly reach a state of dynamic equilibrium. The focus on Chinese students reflects the necessity of calling for more active participation, proactive communication, and flexible transformation.

This study also has some limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, the yin-yang perspective can only explain a pair of contradictory relations. Therefore, future studies may utilise the yin-yang metaphor framework in contexts where such a limited interpretive scope may be effective. If we classify students in this multicultural classroom by culture, there are so many background cultures (and associated perspectives) in a classroom, that it is impossible to treat them as a yin-yang 'pair'. Second, in this study we identified several factors based on yin-yang metaphor framework, which clearly show the dynamics in a multicultural classroom by adopting different acculturation strategies. Future studies may pay attention to these factors in a wider research context. Third, the current study focused on the acculturation process of Chinese students in a host cultural context; however, it would be interesting to compare the acculturation processes of both Chinese students and international students in a multicultural classroom. Future studies may also investigate and compare individual acculturation modes in online and offline classes under the impact of COVID-19. Fourth, although we examined the phenomena over five years, the participants changed from year to year and class to class. The results might be different if the data tracked the same group of participants throughout the time period studied.

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