

Evaluating the Impact of a Sino-Portuguese Exchange Programme on Portuguese-major Students' Personal Development in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract: This dissertation investigates the impact of a Sino-Portuguese exchange program on the personal development of Chinese undergraduate students majoring in Portuguese who have participated in the programme for a semester or a year. Generally, students aim to enhance language proficiency, expand cultural perspectives, and establish new social networks during exchange study. However, the topic of what specific activities during exchange study made the students more competent was less discussed. Therefore, to better understand the role of exchange experiences, the research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in interpretivism, utilizing semi-structured voice interviews with seven participants. and the thematic analysis is adopted to process the interview transcripts, the findings demonstrate overall positive attitudes toward the program. Notably, socio-cultural immersion significantly improved exchange students' oral expression, increased social resilience, enhanced independence, and greater cultural awareness. This study offers insights into Chinese students' international exchange experiences in higher education and it can probably contribute to improving the design, operation, and management of exchange programs.

Keywords: higher education, internationalization, exchange programme, personal capability, language proficiency

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and rationale

The internationalization of education in China has developed rapidly. Initially, only selected top talents were sent abroad for education by the Chinese Ministry of Education. However, the current forms are highly diverse which encompass short-term exchange programs, "3+1" and "2+2"² collaborate education programme, overseas degree pursuits, and even international students' programs in China. Studying abroad offers Chinese students fascinating chance to interact with students and teachers from various nations, which may boost their confidence [1]. Additionally, as

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² "3+1" "2+2" means that students study at their home university for the first 2 or 3 years and then undertake the final 1 or 2 years of their degree programme overseas at the partner institution.

students lead a life individually abroad, they establish their independence as thinkers, and become agents of change, their viewpoints are often challenged [2].

During my undergraduate studies as a Portuguese major, participation in a semester-long exchange program between the college and a Portuguese university was undertaken. Subsequently, notable improvements were observed in language skills, cultural awareness, societal understanding, and personal competence, reflecting significant growth during the exchange period. Therefore, this article will primarily focus on the impact of short-term Sino-Portuguese exchange programs on personal growth, instead of only on language advancement.

1.2. Research Aims and Research Questions

The study's goal is to present a "unique example of a real-life setting" [3] to acquire insight into the significance of a Sino-Portuguese exchange initiative based on students' perceptions.

Three research questions were formulated to guide this research:

- 1) What are students' expectation on the exchange programme before departure?
- 2) To what extent do they perceive the exchange experience influenced on their language skills?
- 3) To what extent do they perceive the exchange experience developed other personal capabilities?

This dissertation comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 sets the context by outlining the study's focus. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature on internationalization of HE and socio-cultural exposure's impact on individual competence. Chapter 3 explains the research methodology. Chapter 4 presents findings and analyzes the data in light of the literature. The final chapter summarizes the research, discusses implications, strengths, limitations, and concludes with suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

In the field of higher education, institutions undertake cross-border education in a highly competitive environment [4]. To gain a deeper understanding of the theme of international exchange programs, the literature review is 1) to conceptualize and discuss the idea of internationalization in higher education and to put it into context in China. and 2) to analyze international students' development during social interaction.

2.1. Internationalization of higher education

Internationalization is the most revolutionary development in HE in the 21st century [5]. This is driven by processes of economic, social, and cultural globalization (Rizvi, 2008). Globalization has made it easier for people to move around, and as a result, study abroad programs for foreign language acquisition and intercultural education have become very popular [6].

China has been devoted to developing world-class colleges since its economic reform and opening up in 1978. The internationalization is widely seen as a key indicator for developing world-class institutions and boosting China's national competitiveness and worldwide impact [7]. the internationalization of HE typically takes three forms: study abroad, integration of international dimensions into university teaching and learning, and the provision of transnational programmes in Chinese universities in collaboration with overseas institutional partners [8]. To internationalize Chinese HE, the Chinese government has encouraged universities to build transnational articulation programs with foreign partners [9].

From national policy perspective, in 2013, China proposed the "The Belt and Road Initiative", in which require large number of language talents. Importantly, in 2010, the Party Central Committee and the State Council promulgated the Outline of the National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020), in which stresses the importance of multi-level and wide-ranging educational exchanges, as well as training language talents with international vision,

knowledge of international rules, and the ability to participate in international affairs and international competitiveness.

In conjunction with China's social environment and policy drive, the aim of training Portuguese speaker in Chinese HE should include good language skills, strong intercultural communication, and practical skills, familiar with the sociocultural knowledge of Portuguese-speaking countries [10]. International cooperation and collaborative training are crucial methods for building learners' linguistic foundations, enhancing their intercultural competence, and enlarging one's global perspective.

2.2. Effects of studying abroad

The experience of studying abroad is an important way to acquire intercultural communicative competence [11], broaden students' minds and bring in-depth personal and professional growth [12]. generally, the effective learning environment consists of two components, on-campus experience, and the extracurricular interaction [13]. Therefore, to determine whether international exchange programs are effective, it is necessary to investigate a plethora of factors, aside from curriculum design, teaching strategies and assessment techniques, the living conditions of students while they are studying abroad, interactions between international students and locals, and travel experiences are necessary to be considered. this dissertation emphasize on the latter, value of off-campus experience.

Studying abroad places international students in multiple language communities and exposes them to a variety of speakers [14]. The everyday settings are crucial places to learn and use a target language [15]. Students would participate in and navigate a variety of social networks and events like homestays and volunteer opportunities [14]. Further, Isabelli-Garca [16] studied Anglophone Spanish learners in Argentina and discovered that students who established extensive social networks developed more proficiency than those who did not. However, there is another possibility. Both domestic and foreign students in Taiwan believed that language was a barrier to social integration [17]. Thus, it is "psychologically intense" and comes with several risk factors, such as the risk of failure and embarrassment while speaking [18]. Besides, students who socialized outside of their cultural group felt that their own group discussed and disapproved of them [19].

A wide variety of personal and practical challenges that students must adjust to include day-to-day living, such as housing accommodations [20], social norms [21] and unfamiliar social activities and lifestyles. Furthermore, safety risks are also present for international students [22]. Unfamiliar social and cultural environments have an impact on the well-being of international students [23]. Because most students were not used to living alone in their home countries, sociocultural barriers exacerbate sojourners' general living problems [24].

While adjusting to life in the host country, international students may experience cultural shock, as well as other challenges such as being away from family and a lack of social support [25]. Adapting to a new culture is thought to necessitate a dynamic shift in personal identity [26]. The process involves both cultural and psychological change. Further, loneliness, exclusion, and isolation among international students have become significant issues due to cultural differences and preexisting biases among local students in many Western countries [27]. Several studies, such as Hanassab [28] have discovered that skin color may be the source of significant discrimination against international students, especially during outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump and others' use of terms like "Chinese virus" feeds the perception that (coronavirus-carrying) people from China are directly threatening America's well-being [29]. However, Kosic et al. [30] stated that international students who have more local and international ties seem to adapt to the new culture more readily than those who have more co-national ties but fewer international ties.

Intercultural experience can be a transformative learning process that leads to a personal growth and development journey [31]. As they undergo personal growth, develop as independent thinkers,

and become agents of change, international students' perceptions change [2]. Individuals may develop a 'proficiency in self-expression and in meeting their various social needs' in the host culture while maintaining a sense of boundary or 'otherness' when confronted with conflicting values and beliefs [32].

3. Methodology and methods

The chapter begins with the philosophical perspective and research design that guided this study.

The qualitative research follows the interpretivist paradigm. The primary focus is on how an individual understands the social environment and social phenomena, allowing for the exploration of multiple perspectives [33].

Online survey and semi-structured interviews are adopted to analyze students' perspectives of the exchange project. Thirty questionnaire responses were acquired, strictly serving as a foundation for data screening and remaining untouched in the realm of data analysis. 7 participants were selected to attend interview to guarantee background diversity and meaning richness. For the online interviews, this study used a qualitative research approach and therefore employed thematic analysis to process the interview transcripts. Inductive strategy is employed to analyze data, working with the data as it is observed, heard, and recorded [33]. This approach facilitated access and examination of the fundamental themes inherent in the raw data. [34].

Braun and Clarke [35]'s view on thematic analysis was referred in this study. Prior to categorizing the raw data and developing early themes, an index was constructed, containing initial codes derived from the design of the study questions, the choice of participants, and the data collection procedure [33]. The data needed to be interpreted after going over each piece of raw data in the index and made a note of how the researcher interpreted it. Then, after identifying the conceptualized categories that encompassed researcher's interpretations, adjustments were made as needed. The third phase was to ascertain how the initial themes connected to and related to the themes of this research project after all the early themes had been established.

4. Findings and Discussion

The first section of this chapter will present the findings, aiming to answer research questions formulated for this research.

The findings were obtained through one-hour semi-structured interviews with seven undergraduate Chinese students who major in Portuguese and attended Sino-Portugal exchange programme from 2017-2020 for one semester or one year. The main findings include their development gained from sociocultural experience in Portugal, including language mastery, and advancement of social resilience, independence, cultural awareness.

4.1. Findings

This section will begin by introducing the participants' backgrounds. Then, the analysis of themes within responses will be conducted to assess the extent to which extracurricular interactions enhance students' competence, as indicated by the input from the seven interviewees.

4.1.1. Background of the participants

The 7 interviewees' university majors were all Portuguese, and the schools corresponding to the exchange were the University of Lisbon and the University of Minho. During the exchange period, students take courses of the corresponding level of difficulty, both on-campus and immersive course.

Besides, they are required to make their own accommodation and living arrangements during their stay abroad (Table 1).

Table 1: The background of the interview participants

Name	Gender	Home university	Exchange university	Exchange period	Accommodation in Portugal
Cristina	Female	Harbin Normal University	University of Lisbon	2019.10 to 2020.3	Rental house sharing with Chinese classmate
Juliana	Female	MUST	University of Minho	2019.10 to 2020.1	Rental house sharing with Chinese classmate
Qing	Female	MUST	University of Lisbon	2019.10 to 2020.1	Portuguese homestay
Sandra	Female	MUST	University of Minho	2019.10 to 2020.1	Rental house sharing with Chinese classmate
Sisi	Female	MUST	University of Minho	2019.10 to 2020.1	Rental house sharing with Chinese classmate; moved out later
Vasco	Male	MUST	University of Minho	2018.2 to 2018.7	Rental house sharing with international students
Xica	Female	Tianjin Foreign Studies University	University of Lisbon	2019.10 to 2020.6	Rental house sharing with Chinese classmate

*The names of the participants are pseudonyms.

4.1.2. Expectation on the exchange programme on study

Participants were asked to talk about their expectations on the exchange program before departure. The thematic analysis resulted in three themes on perspective (Table 2).

Table 2: Themes for the expectation on exchange programme

	Themes	Codes
Prospective	Academic advancement	-take compulsory credits -overall language proficiency
	Acquirement of global perspective	-cross-cultural communicative skill -experience different pedagogy -discover a diverse world
	Expanding social circle	-make foreign friend -make friends whose major is also Portuguese

The seven respondents' expectations of the exchange programme fall into three main categories: language skills enhancement, global perspective growth and social circle expansion. Vasco, Sandra, and Cristina are very dedicated to their studies and hope to advance their language abilities through classroom instruction and social interaction. During their participation in the exchange programme, they anticipate making more friends from around the world and in their respective fields. Cristina responded that:

“Before the exchange, I was looking forward to exploring the world, improving my language skills and making richer and more diverse friends through the exchange programme.” (Interview, Aug 11, 2022)

Sandra added that:

“Making friends with people from other countries seems like a wonderful thing. I can converse with them about a range of subjects to broaden my cultural knowledge and perspective as well as naturally develop my language abilities.” (Interview August 12, 2022)

4.1.3. Impact of extracurricular interactions on students' competence

The benefits of attending international exchange programme not only results from on-campus programme, but more importantly the social interaction with Portuguese society and other countries. Therefore, all participants are invited to share their social life experience and their perception on them. There is one theme identified belonging to language proficiency, foreign language oral expression, and three themes are found within personal capability development, which is social resilience, independence, and cultural awareness.

Table 3: themes of extracurricular interactions raising students' competence

	Themes	Codes
Language proficiency	Oral expression	-Daily life immersive Portuguese atmosphere
Personal capability development	Social resilience	-Dealing relationship with landlord, roommates, and neighbors -Responding to emergencies
	Independence	-handling household chores
	Cultural awareness	-familiar with local cultural customs -Discussing cultural and political topics -Tackling racial discrimination

4.1.3.1. Oral expression

During the interviews, all participants indicated that it is an inevitable consequence that oral expression in Portuguese advance owing to the daily life immersive Portuguese atmosphere. For example, dealing with landlords and flat mates and going out to buy daily necessities. Vasco pointed out that:

"We have four Portuguese-speaking students living in the same house. We might eat together in the common area after class. There is a lot of communication." (Interview August 11, 2022)

Meanwhile, Cristina and Sandra both indicated that:

"There are many occasions for Portuguese communication. For example, how to tell supermarket staff about how much meat I want. So, it will probably be a big exercise for my language skills." (Interview August 11 and 12, 2022)

As long as students are willing to improve their Portuguese, they can practice the language by approaching anyone around them. For instance, Sandra picked up an elderly Portuguese couple to practice her Portuguese and she also asked them to take a picture of her by the fountain.

Conversely, going out with peers or using body language is equally possible to live normally in Portugal without verbal communication. In this case, the ability to communicate expressively in Portuguese cannot be improved. Juliana mentioned that:

"There is not much need to communicate when ordering, we usually show the waiter the picture on the menu and that's it." (Interview August 10, 2022)

Thus, the Portuguese-speaking social environment provides a hotbed of language enhancement for exchange students, but the opportunity to take advantage of it depends on the individual's wishes.

4.1.3.2. Social resilience

The participants agreed that their social adaptability increased due to that they need encounter property issue, neighborhood, roommates sharing and outing. The problems of renting a property include finding a property, signing a rental contract, furnishing the house, and repairing it during use. The complexity of searching a house can be seen in Xica's statement:

"We take the initiative to find suitable properties through many media, seniors, sisters, public websites, APPs." (Interview August 13, 2022)

Sisi stressed the importance of noticing the contract details, as she claimed:

"We should always ask for all the details before signing the contract. It is best to take pictures of all the facilities when people first arrive at the room. Any problems should be brought up on the spot, otherwise the landlord may think it's my damage afterwards." (Interview August 12, 2022)

Cristina encountered a mistake when renting a room, but it was good that she negotiated with her landlord in time. She stated that:

"There were 10 people sharing three bathrooms. Two of bathroom were broken, and then all three were broken. But Portugal is relatively inefficient in solving these things. So, we negotiated with the landlord, and we moved to another house." (Interview August 11, 2022)

Further, landlords are invaluable social support and can help students to adapt to unfamiliar surroundings, as statements by Qing:

"When I went to Switzerland it was them who lent me thick clothes." (Interview August 11, 2022)

Vasco added that:

"I also contacted my Brazilian landlord for help. On the day I returned China, landlord arranged for a taxi driver to take me to the airport. The landlord was very helpful." (Interview August 11, 2022)

During the rental period it is inevitable that conflicts between neighbors and roommates will be involved, so students can learn to be considerate of those around them and develop the ability to resolve conflicts. Xica mentioned that:

"Living in a shared room makes me learn how to get along with someone for a long time. I need to consider about whether I'm bothering her or not." (Interview August 13, 2022)

Sisi added her conflict experience with roommates that:

"We have different personality and different attitude towards socializing. They didn't really like to socialize, while I wanted to get along with more people. So, we had a conflict about accommodation, and I decided to move out finally." (Interview August 12, 2022)

Sisi also highlighted her elder neighborhood:

"I don't want to disturb them. Because the old go to bed early, but the houses are older and prone to noise, and I was worried about their nervous breakdown." (Interview August 12, 2022)

travelling during exchange study means that exchange students challenges themselves to adapt to another new environment. Participants not only have to book location for meals and accommodation, but also fit in a completely new social environment. The trip requires coordination in deciding on the trip arrangements, then students can improve both their planning and coordination skills, according to Juliana:

"We do more detailed and thorough preparation, airline tickets, accommodation, restaurants, attractions, even to buy the tickets well in advance, restaurant reservations." (Interview August 10, 2022)

Sandra added her experience with another classmate:

"It was a test of our life skills during travel, including the ability to deal with emergencies, time planning, all sorts of details. For example, when we arrive at a station, how can I get access to buy tickets and get on the train at the right time." (Interview August 12, 2022)

Temporary changes are unpredictable, whether it is a conflict among fellow trainees or a special reason why the itinerary needs to be adjusted. Then, the student's approach and mindset in dealing with the problem can be developed. Vasco shared his experience that:

"Once I was about to Aveiro with a classmate, but suddenly his hostess aunt needed to check his bed. At that moment, although I was bummed, I was optimistic about travelling alone." (Interview August 11, 2022)

Xica added that:

"Once there was disagreement about schedule of attractions. Then we decided to visit in groups for saving time, although the initial view was that we would go together." (Interview August 13, 2022)

As a result, students gain social experience and proficiency in dealing with their landlords and flat mates. At the same time, the landlord can provide the necessary support to facilitate integration into society. Travelling during exchange period is also a challenge to adapt to a new environment and enhances students' social adaptability.

4.1.3.3.Independence

All seven respondents reported that their self-care skills had improved. Regardless of their previous cooking experience, they were forced to learn cooking skills in Portugal. Xica claimed that:

"I am completely inept to being proficient in terms of taking care of myself. The progression is quite fast, like cooking. I followed the recipes on the internet step by step." (Interview August 13, 2022)

Although some students do not know how to cook, they are required to share household chores with their roommates, such as buying groceries, washing dishes and doing the dishes. As Cristina said:

"I need brush the dishes because my roommate cooked for me every day. Even when I just returned to China, I became more diligent." (Interview August 11, 2022)

In addition, the cleaning of the accommodation and the washing of clothes needs to be done regularly. Sisi mentioned that:

"I didn't know how to do housework at home in China, but I was used to it there. At first it was annoying, but later I got used to it, and I even tried to lead quality life. I've gained a lot of small life experiences." (Interview August 12, 2022)

After the exchange, they found that they became much more industrious and would focus more on the quality of life.

4.1.3.4.Cultural awareness

When discussing cultural issues, all the participants indicated that they felt that had become more inclusive. The society always has good or bad aspects. It is one-sided to only view it on bad or good. In their daily lives, exchange students could talk about cultural topics and even celebrate cultural events with their foreign roommates, landlords and neighbors. Vasco mentioned his landlord:

"My landlord is interested in Chinese culture. But their understanding of China is still rather superficial and rough. They only know kung fu. Perhaps it is because they get so little information about China." (Interview August 11, 2022)

Sandra and Qing have the same experience chatting with landlord about diverse culture, especially Qing. She added that:

"On important Portuguese festivals, such as the Chestnut Festival, landlord would crack chestnuts himself and invite me to eat. Also, I had a good chance to get deep into the traditional customs." (Interview August 11, 2022)

However, not all of Portuguese society accepts exchange students as a group. Then, when they encounter such situations, students can gain a fuller understanding of Portuguese society and to develop an attitude of calmness in dealing with situations. Juliana posted two occasions:

"Once we were eating on the terrace, a neighbor thought we were making too much noise and knocked on the wall. I think it was quite scary. Also, the unknown neighbor came knocking on our door topless, which I found very scary." (Interview August 10, 2022)

What's even more terrifying is that Qing met with a straight onslaught. She was verbally intimidated by a young Portuguese man. She said there was nothing she could do but try to avoid going home at night and to tell her landlord in advance when she would be home to ensure safety. Vasco, Cristina, and Xica all encounter similar situations, especially the latter two during the outbreak.

They have experienced a dramatic change in the attitude of foreigners towards them. When the outbreak occurred, they were insulted, abused, and treated unequally by rude people. Cristina and Xica took a calm and objective approach and did not lose sight of Portugal but saw it as a human difference. They have a strong sense of cultural tolerance. According to Xica:

“After the epidemic, people became a bit hostile to us. They would stare at us and call us virus. In the situation, I am aggrieved.” (Interview August 13, 2022)

Cristina added that:

“Our teacher happened to mention the word “bats” and he need explain the meaning. He then had a very mysterious look on face. Our class was mostly Chinese students, we felt uncomfortable.” (Interview August 11, 2022)

I began the exchange programme at the same time as Cristina and Xica. However, my exchange was only for one semester, and I returned to China just as the epidemic began. As a result, I was not subjected to the same discrimination as the Portuguese and other nationalities. In this study, I learned about their discrimination experiences for the first time.

In addition, travelling is not only about seeing landscapes and physical buildings, but also about meeting local people and observing the life patterns of different local people. In this way, students can gain a deep sense of local humanism and thus cultural insight and tolerance. Juliana shared experience in Denmark:

“I was very impressed by Denmark. It is the home of fairy tales. The festive atmosphere is particularly good. When we walked through the streets, we saw families, adults, and children in the streets, and it made me feel happy and warm.” (Interview August 10, 2022)

Cristina indicated that Spanish gave her a very warm feeling, as she explained:

“When I was riding the metro with my classmates in Barcelona, we met an aunt who said to us in Spanish to watch your purse, the zip of your school bag was open. It was probably someone trying to steal my classmate's purse and she warned us.” (Interview August 11, 2022)

However, unfriendly encounters and unexpected events can also be encountered during travel. Students can gain a multi-faceted understanding of the world, increase cultural awareness and tolerance, and at the same time enhance their coping skills. Juliana, Cristina, and Vasco all encountered experiences of unequal treatment and being offended. Juliana pointed out that:

“When we were travelling in Spain, my friend was robbed by the local there just for money. The policeman was standing right next to us, but the police did not help. So, I realize how they discriminate against people.” (Interview August 10, 2022)

Cristina added that:

“When I travel in a European country, people there treat Chinese people worse than those non-Asian faces, I don't know if I'm being overly sensitive.” (Interview August 11, 2022)

All in all, the spoken language is invariably enhanced in a purely Portuguese speaking social environment. Moreover, the students' ability to adapt to society is increased because they must solve the unexpected things in their lives. Self-care is of course a necessity as students need to cope with life independently. In addition, the participants felt that their increased cultural tolerance was due to greater exposure to a multicultural society.

4.2. Discussion

This research studied the issue of exchange experience and its influences on personal development from the perspective of Chinese Portuguese major students in higher education. In this section, the findings will be discussed in relation to the previous literatures.

All participants in this study felt that participation in the Sino-Portuguese exchange programme enhanced their Portuguese language mastery and other overall developmental potential, including level of intercultural communication, social adaptability, independence, and cultural tolerance.

The foreign language environment is a natural enabling factor for language improvement. This is because exchange students need to use Portuguese to participate in any social activity. This finding is in line with Kinginger et al. [15] and Isabelli-Garca's [16] research, where the everyday environment is a key site for learning and using the target language. Also, Lau and Lin [17] and Paige's [18] concerns about exchange students were reflected in the responses of this study's respondents. Students wasted many opportunities to exercise oral communication because they were shy to express themselves. In addition, students' social adaptability and self-care skills are greatly enhanced in unfamiliar environments. The findings of many studies are similar to those found in this study [20-22].

Cultural knowledge intersections and experiences of discrimination are ways of growing students' cultural inclusion, particularly in the context of the epidemic. Being exposed to culture shock is an inevitable stage of adjustment to a new social environment [26], and cultural background may be a significant source of discrimination against international students [28]. However, connecting with locals can alleviate some of the socio-cultural exclusion experienced. This is consistent with the findings in this study.

4.3. Summary

This chapter presents the findings of this study and discusses them in the light of the literatures. Overall, the results of this study show that the students perceived that daily foreign language communication skills, social adjustment, self-reliance, and cultural tolerance were improved in the non-school exposure. As with any research, this study possesses its limitations, which will be elaborated upon in the concluding chapter, along with recommendations for future research.

5. Conclusion

This section will begin with a summary of the key findings of this study, together with a sequence of research questions. Based on these findings, implications for the future management policy and practice of offering exchange programs will be discussed. The chapter will be concluded by an identification of the strengths and limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

5.1. Summary of Findings

5.1.1. Students' expectation on the exchange programme

This research shows that Chinese undergraduate Portuguese students participate in exchange programmes to improve their language skills, to strengthen their global perspective and to make international friends.

5.1.2. Influence of the exchange experience on students' language skills

Immersion in Portuguese society provides countless opportunities to practice oral expression on a daily basis. Absolutely, the extent of language practice opportunities also relies on individual initiative. Those who are willing to actively practice can significantly enhance their language skills at a faster rate, while individuals who are hesitant to speak may find themselves relatively constrained in this regard.

5.1.3. Influence of the exchange experience on students' personal capabilities

In terms of other personal skills, participants felt that independently coping with new environments, exchange students' social coping skills, self-care skills and cultural tolerance all improved. In a

completely unfamiliar environment, anything is possible. It is through problem-solving in such situations that students learn valuable lessons and gradually grow. Despite experiencing moments of shock, it can also foster greater tolerance for adversity and cultural acceptance within oneself.

5.2. Implications

With regard to the normative and practical implications of this study, the focus is on the current status and future development of Sino-Portuguese exchange programmes.

Portuguese language education is still at an experimental stage in many Chinese universities, although some Chinese universities have been offering international short-term exchange programmes for many years. It is worth noting that there is a need to pay attention to the level of cultural adaptation of students. Otherwise, students would feel excluded and isolated in unfamiliar environments, hindering their academic performance and psychologically healthy development. Furthermore, students studying abroad may face harassment or discrimination, so Chinese universities should provide safety education and guidance on self-protection and seeking help before their departure. Besides, living in a Portuguese-speaking family could be an excellent suggestion for students. This not only significantly increases opportunities to use Portuguese but also provides basic security. These above practices can all help improve the efficiency and quality of international exchange programmes.

5.3. Strengths and limitations of the research

The advantages of the study are evident. A comprehensive and in-depth analysis of international educational exchange programs was conducted due to the inclusion of a firsthand perspective as one of the participants. Furthermore, the flexibility of the interviews allowed for a broader data collection [36]. Nevertheless, all interviews were translated from Chinese to English upon completion. While efforts were made to ensure translation accuracy and alignment of interpretations between the participants and the researcher, the potential for some inaccuracies and conflicts remains [33].

Another drawback of this study is the limited population base, which could not represent generally for the impact of exchange experience on students. All participants in this study came from the same four Chinese colleges, which corresponded to the two Portuguese universities that hosted the exchange programme. As a result, the information generated by these students does not present a complete picture of the general situation of the Sino-Portuguese exchange programme.

5.4. Recommendations for further research

There is still plenty of area for suggestions for additional study. To have a more thorough knowledge of understanding of Sino-Portuguese international exchange programmes, future study may therefore involve more Chinese universities and corresponding cooperative Portuguese universities. Future studies could further focus on professors in Chinese higher education or Portuguese professors who participate in foreign exchange programmes. Combining more stakeholders' viewpoints could aid in the continued growth of Sino-Portuguese exchange programmes at Chinese universities.

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