Recognition and Misrecognition: experiences of UK Chinese postgraduates after their return home

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Abstract

The number of Chinese students returning home to China following study in the UK has increased significantly over the past ten years. However, there remains a paucity of research on the social encounters and life experiences of returnees after they return. Furthermore, there is little information about how they are perceived and recognised by their home society and the people around them as returning international students.

This qualitative study draws on interviews with twenty-four students who returned to China after completing their master's degrees in the UK. It employs a specially developed recognition framework to delve into the life experiences of these returnees. This framework integrates the nuanced aspects of Chinese cultural recognition, including concepts like loyalty, filial piety, integrity/chastity, and righteousness. These elements are framed within Axel Honneth's three modes of recognition and Georg Hegel's delineation of three spaces of recognition, providing a comprehensive lens through which to view these experiences.

The study further enriches its analysis by engaging with the work of Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser, which helps in deciphering the impact of recognition, misrecognition, and unexpected judgments on these individuals in their roles as family members, workers, and citizens. Through this approach, it offers an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted challenges and dynamics encountered by the returnees, highlighting the interplay between cultural values and societal norms.
The study finds resettling back at home after studying abroad constitutes a dynamic journey characterised by identity change and culture transformation. Participants experience contradictory feelings of strong self-esteem and sense of achievement as returnees from who graduated from elite overseas institutions, juxtaposed with the reality of struggling to be recognised at home, at work and in wider society. My analysis further illustrated that the tensions raised from students’ transnational experiences (China to the UK and back to China), moving between the Western individualistic and the Chinese collectivistic cultures, contributes to their struggle for recognition as returnees.

While the focus on Chinese students in the UK is not new, there have been far fewer studies on the experiences of those who have returned. Drawing on the thinking of Honneth, Taylor, and Fraser but with due regard to Chinese concepts, ethics and frameworks as part of its analysis, this thesis adopts a decolonial approach to conceptual frameworks and in doing so offers a new theoretical perspective to explore students’ experiences. It thus contributes new knowledge for those interested in study overseas and also for education practitioners, policy makers – both in China and the UK.
Lay Summary

The number of Chinese students returning home to China following their UK studies has increased significantly since 2010. However, there is limited research on the social experiences and challenges these returnees face upon returning home. Indeed, it is not well-understood how they are perceived and recognized by their home society and peers as returning international students.

To investigate the life experiences of Chinese returnees who obtained their master's degrees in the UK, I developed a framework that integrates aspects of Chinese cultural recognition, such as loyalty, filial piety, integrity/chastity, and righteousness, with Georg Hegel, Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser's western recognition theories to examine the impact of recognition, misrecognition, and unexpected judgments on these individuals in their roles as workers, family members, and citizens after their return to China.

Based on interviews with 24 returnees, this research found that re-adjusting to life in China after studying abroad involves a complex journey of identity change and cultural transformation. These returnees experience a strong sense of accomplishment as internationally educated elites but face challenges to obtaining the recognition they hope for in their home country. This study highlights how meeting parental expectations is a key factor shaping returnee experiences. Other challenges include tensions that students face when moving from the individualistic Western culture they have experienced during their time overseas, to being back in collectivistic Chinese society.
This thesis is unique as it combines western understanding of recognition through the work of Hegel, Honneth, Taylor and Fraser with Chinese ethics and frameworks. It offers valuable insights for prospective students, higher education providers, and policymakers in both China and the UK, while contributing to a better understanding of returnees' experiences and challenges.
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Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis explores how Chinese students' returning from studies in the UK, experience and understand issues of recognition. More precisely, it examines how gaining experiences of international study and returning to their home country with an international degree, impacted on how they experienced issues of recognition.

This focus was chosen in part because I was also a returnee to China following studies in the UK. I arrived in Scotland from China in the year 2000 as an international student, and studied both my under and postgraduate degrees. After graduating in 2008, I settled in Scotland and began my career in international students’ support in both Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) sectors.

In 2016, I returned to China to settle. As a returnee, I faced challenges arising from the differences in my acquired westernised perspectives and habits, and what I saw as an eastern mindset shared by my family, colleagues, and the broader community. Such encounters at times made me feel like I did not receive the kind of recognition I expected. I had anticipated that my family would appreciate and respect the independence and personal agency I fostered while living and studying abroad. Furthermore, I had hoped they would recognise my transformation, and respect the new values and habits I had acquired overseas. In the professional arena, I expected my colleagues to value my global competencies, diverse experiences, and unique insights. I had expected that they would perceive them as assets that could bring fresh perspectives and stimulate innovation within our shared workplace.
Unfortunately, these expectations were often unmet. As a result, my self-esteem plummeted and my self-doubt increased, creating a sense of detachment from myself, and, most surprisingly, a sense of alienation from what I was once familiar with.

Such lived experiences sparked my curiosity towards understanding how other Chinese returnees felt about issues of recognition upon their return home. Specifically, I was interested in their emotional and psychological states, investigated through the lens of recognition and recognition theories. However, doing so was not without challenges as these concepts were not immediately transferable to the Chinese context in which my study took place. Therefore, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, I grapple with conceptual notions coming from the West, but concurrently attempt to engage Eastern concepts such as those introduced in Section 1.3 and Chapter Three. This blend of cultural perspectives has assisted me in devising a unique theoretical framework for my thesis. Ultimately, by interweaving Western theories of recognition with Chinese ethical principles, I have created a lens through which to study the experiences of Chinese international returnees, particularly in terms of recognition (or indeed misrecognition).

1.1 Significance of This Study

While focusing on Chinese students in the UK is not in itself novel, there have been fewer studies on the lived experiences of those who have returned. This is
particularly the case with regards to Chinese returnees’ emotional and psychological states, with significant gaps in our knowledge specifically around how international students returning to China are perceived and recognised by their family, their peers, their work colleagues, and their home society.

As far as I am aware, this study represents the first qualitative investigation of how international student returnees experience issues of recognition (non- and misrecognition) within social and cultural contexts. Drawing on the thinking of Axel Honneth (1995), Charles Taylor (1992), and Nancy Fraser (2000) but with due regard to Chinese concepts, ethics and frameworks as part of its analysis, this thesis adopts a decolonial approach to conceptual frameworks and offers a new theoretical perspective to explore students' experiences. By ‘decolonial’, I refer to an approach that challenges the universalising assumptions of Western-centric knowledge and instead validates and recognises the plurality of knowledges and perspectives. This includes those developed and understood within diverse cultural and historical contexts, such as those found in China. In so doing, it rebalances the narrative and repositions non-Western ways of knowing as equally valid.

Drawing from my own lived experience as a Chinese returnee, this thesis’s engagement with recognition theories is significant, as it facilitates a deeper understanding of how international students interpret and construct their identities in response to various experiences of acknowledgment or validation – as well as situations where they feel unrecognised or invalidated. By examining these encounters within their immediate social environments and the broader society of
their home countries upon return, this study can better comprehend the complex process of identity formation among returning international students.

Thus, this study aims to make a distinctive empirical and theoretical contribution to the existing literature in the field of international education and to add a diversity of perspectives within the arena of the politics of recognition.

1.2 My Research Focus

Considering the above, I have formulated the following two research questions:

- Which factors have most contributed to Chinese students’ different experiences of being recognised as returning international graduates?

- How are Chinese graduate returnees perceived or recognised by their family, work colleagues, and peers in their home society?

1.3 Terms and Concepts

This section covers some of the Chinese ethical and conceptual terms which are necessary to inform the context of my study. I have included it in the introduction to
set the tone and premise of my study and subsequent theoretical framing in Chapter Three.

1.3.1 Confucian Moral Standards: Loyalty, Filial piety, Chastity and Righteousness

In interpreting and managing intimate relationships with families, social relationships with the wider community, and relationships with the state as a citizen, different cultures ingrain and pursue norms and practices differently. In Chinese culture where my participants were born and raised, the traditional quartet of moral standards – loyalty (忠), filial piety (孝), integrity/chastity (节/洁), and righteousness (义) – are recognised by Chinese society as the basic code of ethics, moral requirements, and value guidelines that should be possessed and practiced by everyone in all interpersonal communications, and within political and social spheres, familial and public relations (Guo, 2015).

The quartet moral concept was originally developed in feudal China to guide and regulate people’s ethical and behavioural norms. It also acted as a guide to understanding social relationships, and has been utilised as one of the main criterions for the recognition of a person of noble character in Chinese communities (Cheng, 2020). Within the concept, loyalty and filial piety are seen as the basic ethics that person must possess in their relationship between ruler and subjects in political life, and father-son relationships in family life, respectively. Integrity/chastity and
righteousness are the basic conscientious and moral virtues that a person needs to participate successfully in any social interactions (Wang, 2010).

In practice over the centuries, however, the quartet moral concept mainly served as a tool wielded by monarchs to consolidate political power and maintain a stable regime. Confucius teaches us that the philosophies underpinning the relationship between rulers and their subjects, fathers and their children encompass filial piety and loyalty that serve as the basis for governing (Zhang, 2007). He suggests that a country’s prosperity comes from a society where the one governing must be a true ruler who takes care of their subjects, and that a subject must be obedient and loyal to their ruler. Within a family context, this translates to the fact that a father must be a responsible for providing for his children, and his children must in turn display filial piety towards him (Zhang, 2007; Huo, 2016). Under such a socio-ethical framework, Confucianism espouses that the world we live in operates based on bidirectional obligations between these two relationships. It further argues that in order to maintain functional and healthy dialogues in any of life’s settings, the parties with more power should shoulder more responsibilities; meaning that in the macro world, the ruler demonstrate wisdom before asking their subjects for their loyalty, and at the micro household-level, the father should be kind to his son and treat him fairly before him to demonstrate filial piety. In other words, the authorities in a society should provide more benefits to the general public (Huo, 2016).

However, in reality, this has proven to be based on an overly romantic understanding of patriarchal relational dynamics, especially in a feudal society where power and
oppression enacted by rulers on their subjects was rife. Therefore, a new interpretation of the moral value system – the ‘Three-domination (三纲)’ framework – which favours the ruling class, was initiated and promoted by the Chinese authorities (Zhang, 2007; Wang, 2010).

The three-domination framework was linked to the Chinese ‘yin’/‘yang’ philosophy, which saw the rulers, the fathers and the husbands as ‘yang’, positive in nature, and always occupying the position of dominance and honour. On the other hand, the subjects, the children, and the wife were cast as ‘yin’, negative in nature, and always in a position of subordination, obedience and humiliation (Huo, 2016). The ‘three-domination’ concept legitimised the feudal hierarchy and political order into the ‘fundamental law of the universe’, and established the dominance of hegemonism and patriarchy in feudal China (Zhang, 2007). For thousands of years, it nourished disparity in moral relationships between the noble and the ‘baseborn’, the father and his children, the husband and his wife; and even in contemporary China, it enforces inequalities in power between genders, ages, and social classes.

1.3.2 Guanxi

Guanxi is a fundamental concept in Chinese culture that refers to the complex network of personal relationships that individuals build and maintain over time. It is often translated as ‘connections’, ‘relationships’ or ‘networks’, and according to
Barbalet (2018, p.936), ‘Guanxi can be understood as a form of asymmetrical exchange of favours between persons on the basis of enduring sentimental ties’.

Guanxi emphasises the importance of personal relationships. It is based on the belief that success and goal achievement depend on strong connections and social networks. Typically, guanxi networks form within a social class, but they can also extend across various classes. As such, people often build connections with others from diverse social backgrounds to expand their influence and access resources or opportunities.

Trust and mutual trustworthiness are essential for a quality guanxi network. In Chinese communities around the world, guanxi networking influences hiring, contract awards and negotiation outcomes, and plays a vital role in people’s everyday lives. Therefore, businesses and individuals with influential guanxi networks tend to be more successful than those without.

In this context, it is not surprising to see that some people exploit their guanxi connections for unfair advantages, bribery, illegal activities, or biased business decisions (Tian, 2020). Such corruption and abuse of power has created situations where those with strong guanxi networks prosper, while others without such networks struggle. However, it is important to understand that guanxi as a uniquely Chinese conceptualisation of friendship is not inherently corrupt or unethical; rather, it is people’s misuse and abuse of power that lead to negative consequences (Tian, 2020).
In recent years, the Chinese government has implemented measures to combat corruption and abuse of power, including preventing guanxi misuse for illegal activities. Although guanxi remains a significant aspect of Chinese culture and society, it is increasingly seen as a tool to encourage ethical behaviour and good governance.

1.3.3 Hukou

The Hukou system in China, established in the 1950s, serves as a household registration method through which the government manages and controls domestic population movement and residence. Under this system, every Chinese citizen is assigned a Hukou registration based on their birthplace or their parents' Hukou location. A person's Hukou restricts their access to social welfare, healthcare, education, and other public services within their registered area. As a result, it impacts people’s ability to relocate, work and live in other parts of China (Zhang et al., 2019).

Owing to unbalanced development across China’s regions, Hukous for major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou are highly coveted. Possessing a Hukou for one of these cities provides better access to public services, education and job opportunities. However, obtaining a developed city Hukou is both challenging and competitive, as there are often strict requirements and quotas for Hukou registration in major urban areas. To secure a ‘big city Hukou’, citizens must typically meet
certain criteria, such as holding a university degree or reaching a specific income level, and compete with other applicants in a complex and often lengthy registration process (Qian et al., 2020).

The high demand for big city Hukou has led to a phenomenon known as ‘Hukou trading’, in which individuals pay large sums of money to obtain a Hukou registration in a major city. Hukou trading is generally illegal but is widespread in China, particularly in major cities where the demand for Hukou registration is high. Despite the challenges and controversies surrounding big city Hukou, it remains a highly valued status symbol for many Chinese and is often seen as key to achieving social respect and esteemed recognition in urban areas (Peopledaily, 2013, 2021).

1.3.4 The Concept of Family

Defining the concept of ‘family’ is essential when discussing the impact of family influences on Chinese returnees. It is important to note that understanding the concept of family in Chinese society requires looking at the cultural context, which cannot be viewed as an abstract or general concept. Wong (2021) highlights that the Chinese word for ‘family’ encompasses four distinct kinship concepts that are arranged in a macro to micro-order, ranging from ‘Zong’ to ‘Jia Zu’, ‘Fang’, and ending at ‘Jia’. Understanding the nuances of each concept and their cultural significance, is crucial to fully comprehend the impact of family influences on Chinese returnees.
From a returnee’s perspective:

- ‘Zong’ relates to where the returnee’s family name was founded, with the returnee’s ancestor being the first male or head of the household. Within ‘Zong’, everybody worships this same male ancestor, who they are all related to by blood.

- ‘Jia Zu’ is a subordinate concept to ‘Zong’, where ‘Zong’ is a whole consisting of many ‘Jia Zus’. To the returnees, the head of their ‘Jia Zu’ is normally their great-grandfather. Essentially, ‘Jia Zu’ refers to individual sub-branches or families within the broader ‘Zong’.

- The relationship between ‘Fang’ and ‘Jia-zu’ is based on the father-son relationship, where the father’s ‘Jia-zu’ consists of all his sons’ ‘Fang’. The grandfather of the returnees is the head of this level of kinship.

- ‘Jia’ is the last order of kinship, and is typically constituted by the returnee’s closest kin, i.e., their father, mother and siblings.

In this study, the family influences discussed mainly refer to the influences from returnees’ ‘Jia’; when the study discusses participants who are married, the term
‘small family’ is used to indicate their relationships with their spouse and child/children.

1.4 Structure of The Thesis

In addition to this Introduction chapter, this study comprises seven further chapters. Chapter Two presents a review of the existing literature on Chinese international students’ experiences upon returning home, as well as their psychological and educational adjustments while studying abroad. Here, I identify gaps in the research regarding the lived transnational experiences of Chinese students after their engagements in the UK. Specifically, the chapter highlights limited information available on the social encounters of Chinese returnees, and how they are perceived and recognised by their home society and the people around them – particularly in the context of their return as international students.

Chapter Three includes a literature review and reflection on the concepts of recognition and misrecognition. In this chapter, I examine the theories of recognition as proposed by Axel Honneth (1995), Charles Taylor (1992), and Nancy Fraser (2000), applying their perspectives to better understand how recognition, misrecognition, and unexpected judgments/expectations impact on Chinese returnees in their roles as workers, family members and citizens. Furthermore, I explore how traditional Chinese moral standards can be adapted and applied to provide deeper insight into the experiences of these returnees. This exploration is
pivotal for understanding how culturally specific values and norms influence recognition within the Chinese context. In addition to these established theories, I introduce a new theoretical framework that informs my study. This framework integrates Chinese perspectives on recognition, positioning Eastern and Western thought on an equal, horizontal plane. This approach is deliberate, aiming to avoid the traditional hierarchy that often places Western frameworks in a predominant position, while relegating non-Western perspectives.

Chapter Four outlines my epistemological influences and how they have shaped the methodology and qualitative methods I adopted. Here, I draw on interviews as my primary data collection method and the chapter also reflects on my positionality as well as ethical considerations.

Chapter Five reports on my data findings. I synthesise the individual biographies of the twenty-four participants I interviewed for my study into four composite narratives, in order to explore the interconnectedness and shared experiences of these Chinese returnees. By using this approach, I am able to identify patterns, themes and shared experiences that helped to shape the discussion of complexities around recognition faced by the participants. The use of composite biographies and a storytelling approach has allowed for a more holistic understanding of the participants’ experiences before, during and after their UK studies – and helps to highlight the diversity and complexity of their individual stories, as well as helped me to reveal the commonalities and connections between them.
In chapter Six and Seven, I explore the experiences of returnees in China through the lens of recognition in respect to their interactions with family, co-workers and the wider community. While analysing this data through Honneth's recognition framework, I encountered difficulties and limitations, as the framework does not directly align with the cultural context of China. However, I explain my reasoning for using an alternative approach, which involves utilising Honneth's concept of the three modes of recognition as a background concept while examining the participant's experiences. This approach enables me to gain insight into how different factors can affect the nature of how individual participants experiences of recognition, and how such factors influence the construction of returnee identities within Chinese culture. Additionally, I analyse the impact that their recognition encounters have on returnees' sense of self-worth, sense of belonging and overall well-being within the Chinese context. By exploring these experiences, I seek to gain a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that returnees encounter in their pursuit of recognition, and how this affects their reintegration into their home society.

Chapter Eight is my concluding chapter. Here, I provide a review of the main findings from my qualitative research and reflect on their contributions to the fields of international student mobility and recognition studies. I analyse study limitations and identify new questions that require further research. Additionally, I outline potential routes for future research in the area of recognition in education, focusing particularly on international students from China.
Chapter Two: Literature Review of the Experiences of Chinese Students Who Have Studied Abroad

2.1 Introduction

The study abroad experiences of Chinese students have attracted many scholars’ attention, significant studies have focused on the unique challenges these students face in their host countries, and their crucial role in shaping the global landscape of student mobility, such as the work of Xiang and Shen (2009), Gu (2015), Waters and Brooks (2021) and Xu (2021). Despite the significant amount of research focused on Chinese international students’ journeys overseas, studies exploring their experiences upon returning home are far less prevalent. This chapter begins with exploring existing research which focusses on Chinese international students as returnees. From there, the chapter identifies gaps within the existing literature, particularly regarding the reintegration encounters of these returnees into their home society.

This Chapter also take a brief look at the existing studies on the experiences of Chinese students abroad. The review of such studies is critical because experiences in the students’ host countries can significantly impact the lived experiences of students once they return to China (Crossman and Clarke, 2010; Gu, 2015; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; O'Leary, 2017; Huang and Turner, 2018; Fakunle, 2021). The discussion of these literatures is structured around two main themes: the psychological and educational challenges faced by Chinese students during their study abroad, and the quality of services provided by host universities.
Although the experiences during study abroad and those upon return may seem disparate, they are inherently interconnected (Gu, 2015). Understanding these students' overseas experiences, especially the difficulties they face and the quality of institutional support they receive, is fundamental for comprehending their experiences post-return as the overseas study period often represents a transformative phase in these students' lives (Ibid). The psychological challenges and educational obstacles they face during this time are not only significant in their own right but also have crucial impacts that shape their readjustment process upon returning home. For example, students who experience 'cultural shock' abroad due to different educational methods or social norms often face a 'reverse culture shock' when they return. They might feel caught between the collective norms of China and the individualistic values learned overseas, leading to a sense of not fully belonging anywhere (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). This adds to the complexity of their reintegration into Chinese society and the job market. Similarly, the quality of services provided by host universities has a critical bearing on these students' overseas experience and subsequent return. These services can range from academic support, mental health resources to career services, the level of host institutions involvement in international students 'study abroad can significantly influence students' wellbeing and future success (Fakunle, 2021), which in turn affects their reintegration process when they return to China.

Moreover, it is my intention to have a holistic view of Chinese international students' experiences from the existing literature, looking at their journey from the moment they started their study abroad to their eventual return, so that this chapter can serve
as a springboard for identifying and illuminating the gap in existing research on the emotional and psychological aspects of Chinese returnees’ experiences. With the help of such approach, this chapter illuminates the dynamic nature of Chinese student mobility and readjustment experiences, it enriched my understanding of this critical and rapidly growing demographic, and provided invaluable context to guide my research.

2.2 Research on Chinese Returnees and Their Readjustment Experiences After Returning Home

China has seen a significant increase in the number of its students who have had studied overseas, since the introduction of its economic reform and an open-door policy in 1978. According to the statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education (CCG, 2022), from 1978 to 2019, there were a total of 6.56 million Chinese students have studied abroad, 4.23 millions of them having returned to China, accounting for 86.28% of all graduates. In 2020 alone, there were 777,000 students have returned to China, this number continue to grow in 2021, with an unprecedented number of 1.049 million Chinese returnees, representing a 35.01% increase from the previous year.

Chinese students who have returned from studying abroad have had played critical roles in advancing China's developments and globalisation efforts (Wang, 2022). This rapid rise in the number of returnees and their significant contribution to China
and the world have attracted many researchers to study their readjustment experiences after their return home. The current trend of literature in this area can be categorised into two main aspects: motivations to return, and their post-return status and their impacts in China (Hao et al., 2017, Tran and Vu, 2018).

2.2.1 Motivations to Return

In addition to their social connections, the family roots of Chinese student returnees is a significant personal factor that influences their decision to return (Qin, 2011). Many returning jobseekers are attracted by China’s thriving economy and tend to have higher salary expectations, believing that their foreign education or work experience provide them with a competitive advantage (Zweig et al., 2004; Gill, 2010). Another noticeable factor is guanxi, as previously mentioned a type of personal connection that forms part of Chinese social capital. According to Chen (2017), unlike in the Western world, guanxi in China plays an important role in people’s everyday life. It is a cultural tradition which involves using personal connections to bypass normal social orders to gain personal advantage. For most returnees, it is often their biggest motivation to return, particularly if their family’s personal connections can find or arrange employment for them. Moreover, the lack of social networking support for Chinese students in the UK, which places them in a disadvantaged position in the labour market, has also become a factor that pushes many to return to China to take advantage of their guanxi networks (Gill, 2010).
Culture shock, alienation, political and immigration restrictions, and economic development in destination countries, are also driving Chinese international graduates to return home (Zweig, 2006). For instance, at the political and policy level, tensions between US and China since 2017 have made it even more difficult for Chinese students to remain in the US after completing their studies. In the UK, Chinese students typically do not view migration as their primary reason for studying there, since obtaining a skilled work visa is the only path to permanent residency (Tu, 2019). Even with points-based immigration pathways available such as in Australia and Canada, these countries’ sluggish economic growth compared to China has influenced Chinese graduates’ preferences to stay in China (Li et al., 2019). Recent studies have also revealed that the returnee numbers are likely to reach a new peak in China in the near future in the current post-pandemic climate, due to China’s strict and successful Covid controls and speedy economic and social security recovery (Ahmad et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2021).

The Chinese government’s policies and initiatives for attracting international students back to China play another crucial role in driving their return. Xiang and Shen (2009) explored the government’s approach to these returnees using Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capital, illustrating how those with Western academic backgrounds become valuable assets in China’s multifaceted capital structure. According to their observation, through offering substantial financial incentives and infrastructural enticements to graduates from selected fields, China has been strategically working to harness the economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital embedded in these individuals. Their education abroad is not just seen as a means to further the
country’s economic development, but also as a conduit for infusing China’s global perspectives, enriching its cultural understanding, forming international connections, and enhancing the societal value of Western education. Thus, the state’s policies are both a reflection of tradition and a gateway to modernity, designed to optimise the diverse capital that these returnees bring, aligning them with China's long-term goals (Xiang and Shen, 2009).

However, not all experiences for returnees who were attracted by Chinese government’s preferential international recruitment policies to resettle in China, are seamless. For example, Zweig et al.’s (2004) 2001 survey of 106 academic returnees who were attracted by such policies specifically designed for professionals returning with international qualifications, revealed that some of the enticements or proffered promises, such as higher salaries and privileged wraparound staff benefits, were not in reality always honoured. Many of the scholars in the study returned to Chinese major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou after accepting job offers that included promised housing packages. However, upon arrival, due to bureaucratic hurdles such as cumbersome application procedures and the varying interpretations and implementations of government policies by different administrative units, many universities failed to honour these agreements. Despite having given up their overseas lives, the scholars found it challenging to leave China again and had to accept devalued packages.

Moreover, in terms of supporting returnees’ entrepreneurship, with the Chinese government prioritising science, technology and economy development, a significant
portion of the country's talent recruitment programmes aimed at attracting Chinese international graduates to return home with grants, were focused on entrepreneurs in these fields (Jie and Anthony, 2012; Zhang and Sonobe, 2011; Hao et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2022). As a result, start-up companies specialising in social science disciplines often faced a challenging business environment, and were considered less attractive to investors compared to those pursuing technology and commercial entrepreneurship.

Unexpected challenges faced by returnees, such as illuminated in the studies mentioned above, have stimulated growing research interest into the post-return experiences and status of Chinese returnees.

### 2.2.2 Post-return Status

Literature on Chinese international returnees’ post-return adaptations can be further categorised into four sub-topics: acculturation and interaction; pressures and challenges; employment competences; and comparison with local talents (Hao et al., 2017).

Chinese returnees’ home readaptation journeys usually begin with congratulatory reunions and celebrations with family and friends (Gill, 2010). However, studying abroad leads to qualitative changes in the returnees' sense of self, and their perceptions of the world, values, and ethics (Gill, 2010). Shortly after their return,
most returnees notice the cultural difference between themselves and others who have never stayed abroad for a period of time. Gu and Schweisfurth's (2015) work on exploring Chinese returnees' transnational connections, competences and identities is a significant contribution to studies on Chinese international students’ experiences upon their return home. It represents the closest published work to my research focus. They have examined the experiences of Chinese returnees and argued that these individuals possess a clear reflexive understanding of their identity transformation. This transformation includes a sense of being permanently and distinctly different from their families, peers, colleagues, and local networks upon returning home. Wang (2020) understands that this is because of returnees’ variegated living habits and social etiquettes, which they have accumulated over the years when they were overseas, symbolising a trend towards a more individualistic form of personality compared to their peers who never studied overseas. Those who stayed abroad for longer periods, such as undergraduates or research students, reported more ‘individualistic’ habits than Masters students, for example, who had only shorter overseas experience (Wang, 2020).

For most returnees, this awareness of being different motivates them to connect closely with individuals who share their consciousness and have had similar international educational experiences, as their ‘individualistic’ preferences and dispositions may overlap as ‘symbolic capital’ (Xiang and Shen, 2009). This shared understanding and empathy received during the students' re-adaptation periods, have helped them in establishing their transnational guanxi back home (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2020; Wang, 2020).
Returnees however also faced several challenges when attempting to readapt to their home environment, including ‘re-learning to interact with people while acknowledging social hierarchies; coping with the overall instrumentalism and commercialism embedded in the new Chinese culture; and re-adjusting to a fast developing homeland’ (Gill, 2010, p. 366). However, under the influence of the government’s single-child policy, most of the returnees are considered their family’s only hope. In addition to that, investments in one’s overseas education usually costs whole families their life savings, resulting in the greatest challenge facing returnees being the necessity to confront the enormous pressure of family’s expectations. This has meant that for many, there is a need to establish their status and credibility with a well-paid job so the investment in an ‘expensive’ education abroad is viewed as having been ‘worthwhile’ (Zweig and Han, 2010; Gill, 2010; Tu and Nehring, 2020).

Those who are competent and fortunate enough to find a suitable job, have demonstrated strong awareness of the cosmopolitan competences they have gained during their overseas studies (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). For example, by drawing on their understanding of diverse cultures and their proficiency in multiple languages, returnees are able to leverage their transnational cultural awareness and bilingual skills to facilitate business collaborations and partnerships between Chinese and foreign companies.

Compared to indigenous talent, returnees' broadened worldview, international awareness, confident professionalism, effective communication skills, and intercultural empathy are perceived as potential assets in the workplace and are
preferred by most employers (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). As one returnee noted in Gill's (2010) study, their intercultural identity sets them apart from local graduates, and it is precisely this attribute that employers prefer to hire for their workforce. Returnees 'human capital' is further highlighted by Du et al. (2021), suggesting that the unique knowledge and skills returnees acquire from overseas education enhances their productivity. When benchmarked against domestic graduates of comparable age, educational background, geographic location and gender, Du et al. (2021) suggest that returnees with foreign graduate degrees tend to earn approximately 20% more annually. Furthermore, as they accumulate more professional experience, this income disparity grows, reinforcing the potential benefits of an international education (Zweig and Han, 2010; Du et al., 2021).

In spite of this, the continuing significant increase in the number of graduates returning has served to dilute the value of international degrees, ‘precipitating the process of credential inflation’ (Waters, 2005, p. 366). Qualifications obtained from overseas that were once considered to be ‘rare’ and hence highly sought after in the Chinese job market, are now being scrutinised and reinterpreted, raising doubts about their worth (Tu and Nehring, 2020). It is becoming clearer that the advantage held by Chinese returnees in their home job market stems more from the skills and knowledge they acquired abroad, rather than merely the prestige associated with an international degree (Du et al., 2021).

Highlighting this shift, a survey by Zhaopin.com, one of China’s most influential job-seeking website’s, showed that by 2018, Twenty-seven (27) per cent of those who
returned and worked in China expressed disappointment in their salary, and this figure jumped dramatically to Forty-five (45) and Forty-four (44) in 2019 and 2020, respectively (Zhaopin.com, 2019, 2020). Such disappointment reflects the intensity of the competitiveness and stress returnees have to face. Consequently, since the convertibility of knowledge and skills acquired determines the value of capital (Xiang and Shen, 2009), the qualifications and cosmopolitan competences that many returnees gained as social and cultural capital from overseas, are increasingly less valued by their family, society and the state since ‘they cannot be converted to other types of capital, particularly economic capital’ (Tu and Nehring, 2020, p. 513-514).

What is more, studies such as Gill’s (2010), Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) and Tu and Nehring (2020) have revealed that many returnees were highly critical of how Chinese sceptics portrayed the value of foreign degrees on local social media. These sceptics, often including media commentators, social media influencers, and a portion of the general public, have expressed scepticism about the credibility of foreign education, especially in the wake of media reports questioning the integrity of some foreign educational institutions. For instance, in 2012 during tightening UK immigration policy reforms, the UK Borders Agency revealed that many unqualified private institutions were ‘selling’ degrees to international students, including those who came from China. Such incidents were reported by news outlets around the world and damaged the reputation of British higher education. However, a few Chinese media outlets (e.g., Sohunews, 2008; SinaNews, 2011; Sinanews, 2013) exaggerated the situation by misleading their audience into generalisations that UK degrees are no longer valuable, as they can just be purchased. Although this has
attracted heavy criticism from various sectors including government officials and the mainstream media, it has also led to emerging prejudice and misrecognition in Chinese society of British-graduated returnees, creating a challenging living and employment environment for them.

In the context described above, for many young, newly graduated Chinese international students, their return to a traditionally money-oriented Chinese society, where success is frequently measured by income earned, can be very stressful and challenging. Particularly when they face their parents, who live under the cultural legacy of ‘Wang zi cheng long, wang nu cheng feng’ (meaning ‘parents hope their sons and daughters to become successful like dragons and phoenixes’). These parents have invested heavily in their children’s overseas education in the hope that their children will become wealthy and famous. Such expectations have made many young returnees hesitant to return to their families and the people close to them (Zweig and Han, 2010; Teo, 2011).

Such complex dynamics between Chinese student returnees' personal achievements from overseas studies and their parents' inflated expectations rooted in their investment in foreign education, have been the focus of much scholarly attention, including Kleinman et al. (2011), Yan (2013), and Kajanus (2015). Kajanus (2015) specifically argues that familial characteristics significantly influence the trajectory of the Chinese student's migration experience and their life upon return. She points out that students who come from elite family backgrounds have benefited from their parents excessive social, cultural and economic capital to provide their child with the
best opportunities available and consequently their education, career and marriage decisions and experiences, are significantly influenced by parental involvement. Conversely, students from low-income families exercise more independence in goal-setting and planning their lives during and post study aboard. Nonetheless, in comparison to their affluent peers, they must grapple with limited familial financial support and a lack of inherited social networks, impacting their opportunities both in China and abroad (Ibid).

However, a shared sentiment among Kajanus' (2015) study participants, irrespective of their family socio-economic backgrounds, was a profound sense of filial piety. This manifested as a requirement by their parents and society to enhance their family's reputation and financially reciprocate the considerable investments made in their overseas education. This dual obligation often places student returnees in a challenging position. They must reconcile the personal fulfilment derived from their international achievements, with the substantial familial expectations tied to their parents' financial commitment to their education abroad. Moreover, these young individuals are further burdened with anxieties about whether their early career earnings will be sufficient to meet these heightened expectations. Such concerns, combined with fears of misrecognition or potential mistreatment even within their close familial circles, add layers of stress and complication to their post-return life. The resulting dynamics can deeply influence students' decisions, their overseas experiences, and their reintegration into Chinese society (Kajanus, 2015).
Challenges in returnees’ workplace experiences were also identified. These extend beyond the systemic barriers highlighted in Section 2.2.1. Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) revealed that forty-four (44) per cent of the 652 respondents in their study on Chinese returnees, reported that the cosmopolitan competences they gained from study overseas had put them at odds with their Chinese workmates, who treated them with unfriendliness. Adding to this, Li et al. (2018) outlined the intense pressures returnees face in work, particularly the burden of heavy workloads. These challenges are often attributed to employers' misperceptions of returnees as being ‘different' or ‘foreign-influenced', which can inadvertently lead to unrealistic expectations. Owing to the perceived superiority of overseas education, many employers assume that newly graduated returnees are capable of handling increased responsibilities or complex tasks. This assumption results in returnees shouldering a heavier workload compared to their domestically-educated counterparts, as reported by numerous participants in Li et al. (2018)'s study.

In a similar vein, Li and Xue (2021) drew attention to the unexpected challenges experienced by returnee academics in Chinese universities. Even with esteemed Western PhD qualifications, many expressed a palpable sense of marginalisation. Many of these academics poignantly described themselves as ‘abandoned orphans' due to their sidelined status in both international academic networks and the Chinese higher education system. This situation is particularly pronounced for those in the humanities and social sciences, as the national/provincial grant distribution system in China has historically favoured the natural sciences and technology, which further exacerbates the challenges faced by returnee academics in these fields (Liu et al.,
Moreover, this bias is not just reflected in the distribution of grants, but also in hiring practices, promotional opportunities, and research support. Such institutional preferences reinforce the marginalisation that these returnees experience (Ibid).

A further complicating factor is the importance of networking and relationship-building (guanxi networks) in the Chinese professional world (Chen, 2017). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the competitive nature of most of the institutions in China is magnified by a hierarchical system heavily reliant on guanxi networks. Within this system, influential figures wield significant power, particularly with regards to resource allocation, usually prioritising those within their immediate networks (Liu et al., 2022). Returnees, having invested substantial time overseas, often find themselves with underdeveloped local networks when they return. This deficiency in connections greatly reduces their opportunities for career progression, income potential and reputation (Chen, 2017; Singh, 2020; Pham, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). To mitigate these disadvantages, returnees fervently attempt to reintegrate into the business customs of their homeland. For instance, many proactively engage with local professional circles, partaking in networking events more frequently than peers who never ventured abroad (Chen, 2017).

However, the pursuit of guanxi can sometimes come at a significant personal cost, especially for those lacking a legacy of established connections. For these individuals, desperate to gain a foothold in Chinese professional life, compromises may have to be made, often at the expense of personal rights and dignity. This
challenge is amplified for female returnees, who, as Kajanus (2015) points out, can find themselves caught in a web of entrenched gender biases.

Kajanus (2015) noted that some female returnees, navigating a male-dominated business environment, may feel compelled to utilise attributes like youth and attractiveness as assets and tools to carve out connections in the predominantly male business sectors. However, she also noticed that not all female returnees are comfortable or even capable of capitalising on these ‘assets’. For many, it feels more like a burden than an advantage. For example, some of her female participants noted that in their early-career life, they often face coercion to accompany senior male colleagues to dinners or karaoke nights with business partners to enliven the ambiance. While this may seem innocuous, it’s a subtle perpetuation of traditional gender roles, casting women in a light where they are objectified. Such practices intensify the dilemmas faced by returnee women, making them grapple not just with the complexities of reintegration, but also with pronounced gender disparities. Their experiences in more egalitarian overseas work and life cultures can make this re-entry into the gender-biased Chinese business environment particularly challenging. These overlapping cultural, professional, and gender-based challenges exemplify the multifaceted hurdles confronting returnees, frequently necessitating significant personal and professional trade-offs.

Adding to these challenges, returnees must also navigate the political currents within their institutions. For example, in academia some have reported feeling pressured to ensure that their research aligns with national strategic ideologies, including
embracing Marxist theoretical paradigms (Li and Xue, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). While these findings emphasise the instrumental role returnee academics play in internationalising China's higher education sector, they also underscore the pressing need for systemic changes to better leverage their unique expertise and experiences.

Nevertheless, despite the challenges, the number of Chinese returnees continue to rise and in general, their technical, academic and economic contributions continue, for now, to be recognised to a certain degree by the state (Ma et al., 2009). This recognition from the government highlights returnees’ invaluable experience and diverse skill sets derived from their global exposure.

As Xiang and Shen (2009) and Du et al. (2021) have explored in depth, the Chinese government’s proactive stance in facilitating the return of its overseas talents is evident. For several years now, the central and provincial governments have allocated significant funding not just to state-owned enterprises, but also to private firms. This strategic investment is directed towards creating a conducive environment to attract those international students and scholars who, with their overseas education and experiences, have accrued a wealth of transnational capital.

The rationale behind this is clear: these returnees, having been exposed to global best practices, research methodologies, and cutting-edge technologies, bring back a rich repository of knowledge and skills that are deemed invaluable contributions towards China's aspirations. The government's initiative in rolling out such incentives
is not a mere talent-recruitment strategy; it is a testament to the belief that these returning scholars have the ability and expertise required to advance China towards greater prosperity and global influence. As noted by Zweig et al. (2004) and Ahmad et al. (2020), this national strategy reflects an inherent acknowledgment of the valuable insights that overseas students and scholars have gathered, which are perceived as instrumental in shaping a future China that stands as a leading power on the global stage.

2.3 Current literature Gaps and Limitations

The experiences of Chinese international students, especially their roles in shaping global student mobility, have attracted significant academic interest. However, while an increasing number of studies address their reintegration challenges upon returning to China (Kajanus, 2015; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; Tu and Nehring, 2020; Li and Xue, 2021), a distinct gap in the knowledge of these returning graduates’ experiences of social recognition, and how they emotionally and psychologically respond to such societal perceptions during their re-culturation journey remains.

While many studies including those by Gu and Schweisfurth (2015), focus on the opportunities that the transnational experiences brought to returnees such as the acquisition of transnational competencies, they also highlight various reintegration challenges and obstacles experienced in their living and employment environments.
upon return home. The literature however tends to overlook a critical dimension: the emotional and psychological impacts of these encounters. For many studies in this area, issues faced by returnees were identified but the depth of their impact on returnees' mental well-being, identity, and sense of belonging remains largely unexplored.

The aforementioned studies on students experiences upon their return home, while insightful, largely bypass the emotional and psychological intricacies tied to the opportunities and challenges faced by returnees. Current literature would appear to leave a significant gap in understanding the full scope of the returnee experience, and my research, through the lens of recognition, endeavours to fill this gap. Moving beyond the predominant focus on returnees' transnational networks and competencies, my research takes a more intimate route. I delve into the personal journeys of these returnees, examining their familial and social dynamics upon return, especially how they perceive family, workplace and societal recognition or the lack thereof.

My research approach is employs recognition theories of Honneth, Taylor, and Fraser, and embedding them within a specific recognition cultural context of China. This framework facilitates the exploration of returnees' experiences across different living spaces (home, workplace and wider community) and recognition spectrums (from recognition to misrecognition to non-recognition).
The intention is for my study to extend beyond Gu and Schweisfurth's work and offering a comprehensive insight into the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of Chinese returnees' lives, expanding the knowledge base and academic discourse on Chinese international students' experiences but also paying due regard to Chinese frameworks of recognition and ethics.

2.4 The Experiences of Chinese Students Abroad

In order to enrich my understanding of Chinese returnees from the existing literature and the factors that could affect their reintegration experiences upon their return home, a brief review of Chinese international students' experiences during their time overseas were conducted.

It is well recognised that international experiences play a key role in conditioning international students' employability and participation in diverse circumstances, with experiences in a multicultural setting providing advantages for students' career development (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016; Huang and Turner, 2018; Fakunle, 2021). This perspective is especially shared by international students and their parents who view studying abroad as an investment aimed at securing improved job prospects upon return (Crossman and Clarke, 2010; O'Leary, 2017; Huang and Turner, 2018).
Research conducted by King et al. (2010), Luminita and Cristina (2013), Tu and Nehring (2020) has shown that international mobility experiences, can provide international students with various forms of capital that complement and reinforce one another from the perspective of capital accumulation. Such mobility capital, which includes social capital from social networking, human capital from attending world-recognised universities, and cultural capital from exposure to multicultural environments and overcoming challenges and obstacles from living overseas often ultimately converts into economic capital, in most cases in the form of employability.

2.4.1 Challenges and Obstacles Abroad that Hinder Students `Future Success

For many Chinese students, studying overseas is an emotional journey that can involve identity change and transformation (Gu, 2015). Students can experience contradictory emotions such as the combination of excitement of studying in an overseas university juxtaposed with the often lonely and isolating reality once in the foreign country. This in turn has contributed to a sense of alienation in the host society for a significant number of Chinese students (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Gu et al., 2010; Gu, 2015; Zhu and O'Sullivan, 2020).

To battle loneliness and ease their psychological stress from living in a different culture and country, most Chinese students developed close relationships with someone of the same ethnicity (Wang, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Gu, 2015). Gu and
Maley (2008) revealed a clear level of frustration in local students and lecturers with Chinese students, describing them as ‘physically in England but mentally in China’. As one of the lecturers responding to Gu and Maley’s study stated: ‘they are not trying, all they do is to form as a group as soon as they arrive the UK, and just come out of that Chinese community into the university for a few hours every day’ (Gu and Maley, 2008, p. 233). While this study was conducted over a decade ago, these same issues still echo today.

Such over-dependence on being in their own ethnic support network constituted a significant obstacle to Chinese students’ sociocultural interactions within the host society. For example, in 2004 the UK Council for Overseas Student Affairs’ national survey found only Fifteen (15) per cent of Chinese students reported having friends who are from the UK (UKCOSA, 2004). Studies such as by Berry et al. (1987), Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006), Williams and Johnson (2011), and Quan et al. (2016) have revealed that Chinese students who avoided making connections with people from the host country, tended to experience symptoms of acculturative stress, which means a reduction in students’ psychological, physical and social health status when they are undergoing acculturation, resulted in unsuccessful adjustment during their time in the West, contributed significantly to hinder Chinese students personal and academic success overseas.

The impact of living an such 'isolated lifestyle' overseas, as experienced by Chinese international students, has raised significant concerns upon their return to China, especially when they enter the job market. As mentioned earlier, Chinese employers
are complaining about a rising trend that Chinese international graduates are returning to the domestic labour market with only academic achievements, but lacking practical competences and insufficient foreign cultural/social awareness (Huang and Turner, 2018). The rapid development in Chinese economy internationalisation and globalisation, has prompted organisations and institutions in China to constantly redefine their expectations of their employees. Cross-culturally knowledgeable and transnationally competent workforces are assets for employers wishing to operate in culturally diverse contexts and manage international relationships (Tu and Nehring, 2020). Returnees with qualifications and skills that do not match employers’ demands in today’s rapidly expanding international business environment have disappointed public expectations in China. This disappointment is particularly felt by groups like prospective students, parents, and funding organisations, whose investment in study abroad is ultimately to ensure a return of better job opportunities (Crossman and Clarke, 2010; O’Leary, 2017; Huang and Turner, 2018).

To understand what institutional arrangements affect the interactions of Chinese international students, Yu and Moskal (2019) conducted a mixed-method study. where half of their 516 Chinese participants, surveyed when studying in UK business schools, reported ‘it was difficult to meet non-Chinese students in the schools where Chinese students constitute the majority’ (ibid p.659). Yu and Moskal (2019) suggests that when given full intercultural exposure, Chinese students opt to choose with whom they mingle. However, the undiversified, structured environment they find themselves in means that these opportunities are restricted by the mono-national
settings experienced in their programmes. Therefore, when assessing shortfalls in international student intercultural interactions, Yu and Moskal (2019) argue that institutions need to do more to examine structures rather than concentrating on individual students, as the overwhelming number of students recruited by UK universities from a single nationality in certain subject areas, has made it impossible for them to fully embrace diverse cultural interactions (Ibid).

Such inequality of opportunity in study overseas, stemming from the lack of diverse institutional environments, is also discussed in Fakunle (2021)’s investigation of host institutions’ responsibilities towards the development of international students' employability. Fakunle argues that, since the non-citizen status of these students restricts their access to opportunities for developing their employability in the wider society of the host country, host institutions need to consider the importance of providing work-integrated learning across all subject areas, as well as career services that can accommodate international students' culturally specific needs. This approach would facilitate the inclusion of employment development opportunities for international students within their educational experience and promote equality between international and local students, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable educational environment (Ibid). This would also enhance the curriculum vitae of students when they return to China enabling them to acquire the international and transcultural competencies that many Chinese employers have now come to expect.

Studies have also revealed that in certain host institutions, both faculty members and students hold unfavourable opinions about the academic performance of Chinese
international students in Western universities (e.g., Gilliland, 2016; Hu, 2017). This is supported by research that has identified the inadequate written and oral English skills of this particular group of international students (Heffernan et al., 2010; Gu and Maley, 2008; Wang et al., 2012; Skyrme, 2007; Hu, 2017); difficulty in adjusting to the expectations of the British education system, where an autonomous approach to study is encouraged (Gu and Maley, 2008; Gu, 2015), a lack of critical thinking (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015), and less likely to participate actively in class and group discussions (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009).

However, Wang et al. (2012) are critical of the assumption across the sector that the adaptation process undergone by Chinese students in the western country should be make them become more like a local student. Their criticism prompts us to consider whether the issues of perceptions and frustrations held by western faculty staff manifested in comments made about international students in 2023, should be viewed as part of a less tolerant, discriminatory or colonialising mentality. It is also worth reflecting how these adverse experiences Chinese students encountered overseas could potentially complicate their journey of reintegrating back home by having impact on their self-esteem and perception.

Yet, it’s essential to recognise that, despite the challenges that come with studying abroad, the experience is seen by most Chinese students as a valuable opportunity for personal development and a key to their future success (Gu, 2015; Schartner, 2015; Quan et al., 2016; Findlay et al., 2017; Li, 2019; Liu and Huang, 2011; Scally and Jiang, 2020).
2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of a range of literature that focuses on Chinese students returnees’ transnational experiences. To do so, it has drawn on a diverse set of studies to explore Chinese international graduate returnees readjustment experiences when they return home. The chapter also includes a discussion of the challenges and obstacles that Chinese students’ can face when studying and living overseas, in order for me to have a more holistic understanding of the returnees’ experiences. These aspects, influencing not only students’ educational and professional growth but also cultural assimilation and personal development have all contributed to shaping the landscape of their return. These aspects are returned to in Chapter Seven when I discuss the study findings.

In general, the experiences of Chinese overseas returnees discussed in this chapter have not been explored via the lens of recognition in any literature. My study focuses on how Chinese returnees are recognised (or misrecognised) and the impact of this on their everyday lives. While I draw from Western recognition theories, I integrate them within Chinese ethics and values as part of my analysis when discussing Chinese British graduate returnees social recognition experiences in China. I also offer a new theoretical framework in how recognition theories might be employed in the context of China.
The next chapter provides a detailed review of the concepts of recognition and misrecognition, as well as discussing the theoretical framework that guides this study.
Chapter Three: Review of Theoretical Frameworks Adopted in This Study

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is the second part of my literature review and focuses on recognition and misrecognition, which constitute the primary concepts underpinning the methodology, analysis and discussion in this thesis.

It is commonly accepted by many philosophers and scholars that Hegel was the first to introduce the concept of recognition into Western philosophy. For Hegel, recognition serves as the means through which our existence as social beings is acknowledged. His well-known concept of discovering oneself through others is an integral aspect of the principle of mutual recognition (Ikaheimo and Laitinen, 2007a, Brincat, 2014). However, it could be said that Hegel’s philosophy of world, constructed in a time of Western colonialism and imperialism, is more challenging to apply in our contemporary Western context, let alone to another part of the world. Indeed, Hegel’s Eurocentric and pro-colonial interpretation of the course of history is certainly not easily transferable or potentially appropriate to the Chinese context. Therefore, while I have considered some of Hegel’s views, I draw more inspiration from the thinking of Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser – who are often accredited as being key contributors to discussions around recognition. However, in the forthcoming sections, I not only elaborate on the thoughts of Honneth, Taylor and Fraser but also introduce a new theoretical framework that informs my study. This framework integrates Chinese perspectives on recognition, positioning Eastern and
Western thought on an equal, horizontal plane. This approach is deliberate, aiming to avoid the traditional hierarchy that often places Western frameworks in a predominant position, while relegating non-Western perspectives. By doing so, I seek to establish a more inclusive and balanced dialogue, acknowledging the validity and importance of diverse cultural understandings in the study of recognition, equity, difference, and power.

Much contemporary theorising and discussions around the concepts of recognition and misrecognition appear to have emerged in the period between the early 1990s and the late 2010s. The more recent writings (Fraser, 2008, K. Anthony, 1994, Modood, 2014, Hopkins et al., 2017) have problematised the concept of recognition, and some of these authors such as Modood (2014) and Hopkins et al. (2017) engage with the concept of recognition alongside addressing concepts such as ‘rights’, ‘equality’, ‘stereotyping’, ‘racialism’, and ‘Islamophobia’. This is not to say that these issues did not exist before, but rather that they are better recognised now and further informed by recent issues and events, such as the escalation of Black Lives Matter during the summer of 2020. What is clear is that the theme of recognition still has a crucial role to play at the centre of contemporary political philosophy, and its derivative theories and interpretations are ones I engage with in my study.

Recognition is not an unproblematic concept, and depending on who you speak to and through which lenses people are looking, the terms recognition and misrecognition can have different meanings. For instance, Charles Taylor (2004)
discusses the concept of recognition in relation to minorities and the subaltern, while others like Frantz Fanon (2008) and Nancy Fraser (2000) focus on the recognition of rights and status, while challenging the colonial misrecognition of people of colour and others. On the other hand, there are scholars who focus on the concept through a more interpersonal lens such as Axel Honneth (1995), who discusses the concept of recognition in terms of feelings and identities.

Recognition and misrecognition are tools that are used by different cultures and authorities. Depending on who holds power and how it has been used, recognition can be employed to include or exclude certain individuals or groups for political and economic reasons. To illustrate, ‘good Muslims’ or ‘bad Muslims’ are deliberately ‘recognised’ or ‘misrecognised’ and either included or excluded in political agendas, and certain refugees are seen as economically useful to authorities and thus included while others are not. This, even before considering the intersections of characteristics which further complicate concepts of recognition and misrecognition. Therefore, recognition and misrecognition are messy concepts.

While there are other significant theorists and writers who have focused on the concept of recognition, such as Frantz Fanon (2008), I only briefly reference their work. This is largely due to the type of participant group in my study, since my research participants are not considered to be underprivileged or living in a post-Western colonial society. As the aim of my research is to examine the experiences of returnees from international study in various spaces – for example, home, work and social life – I have primarily drawn from Honneth’s tripartite concept of recognition
(love, respect and social esteem), which emphasises altruistic and idealistic characteristics essential for delivering a good life and social goods. I have also drawn from Taylor and Fraser with regards to the concepts of misrecognition, status and (mal)distribution; as well as acknowledging the importance of the dynamics intersectionality. In my findings, issues were identified, for instance with regards to gender, where different experiences affecting men and women surfaced, as well as the intersectionality of gender with age, race, origin, capital, and profession.

In addition, the concepts of recognition are generally discussed from the viewpoints and lived experiences of Western philosophers. This is an aspect I bear in mind when I consider concepts of recognition alongside qualities considered in Honneth’s (1995) ‘framework of recognition’, such as ‘love’, ‘respect’ and ‘esteem’. I have endeavoured to be astutely aware of the normative theories of each of these concepts, as I have applied and translated them to the transnational and Chinese contexts of the participants in this study.

While I initially draw upon the insights of Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, and Nancy Fraser as my entrance into the study of recognition, acknowledging these theorists provide a valuable grounding, my research journey reveals the limitations of wholly applying their frameworks within a Chinese cultural context. To address these limitations, I ultimately park Honneth’s framework to the side, to enable me to integrate the insights and perspectives of both Western theoretical frameworks and the Chinese participants, in a way that is meaningful and true to both. Therefore, I
progressively shift towards articulating a theoretical framework that is more deeply rooted in Chinese recognition concepts and principles.

With this in mind, in transferring Western recognition theories to China, I pay due regard to Confucian influences. Consequently, this study has had to unpack how each recognition concept could be interpreted and practised within the context of China and Chinese cultures. I have therefore included section in the first chapter of this thesis which provides an introduction to Chinese traditional moral standards. This is important because China constitutes the cultural context of my study, and therefore discussions and deliberations about my data needs to be situated within the Chinese cultural and moral framework. This Chinese context is then discussed within Taylor, Fraser and Honneth’s theory of recognition, since the focus of the research is to understand students’ experiences acquired in two continental contexts.

Therefore, my emerging framework seeks to integrate traditional Chinese values and considers how these cultural norms shape recognition practices in China. This pivot not only acknowledges the rich cultural heritage and ethical norms present in Chinese society, but also presents them as a significant theoretical contribution to the field of recognition studies. By bridging Western theories and Chinese concepts, I aim to offer a more nuanced and culturally relevant understanding of recognition, one that respects and acknowledges the complexity and diversity of the human experience across different cultural landscapes.
This transition also aligns with the broader discussions of decolonisation in academic research. The concept of decolonisation came to my awareness quite late during my literature review, and was not part of my original theoretical exploration that guided my study until I began to write up. Thus, I have not conducted a full review of this concept due to time and space limitations; however, I have included this lens as a crucial part of my thesis. It underscores the importance of challenging colonial knowledge structures and advocates for the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives, especially in contexts where intercultural interactions are critical. This approach not only enriches the study but also places a responsibility on institutions to facilitate changes that enhance intercultural understanding and cooperation.

As a contemporary researcher, I am committed to transcending the limitations of Western-centric academic frameworks. By integrating a comprehensive review of Chinese ethical and moral standards, this study offers a nuanced understanding of recognition that is not confined to Western conceptualisations.

In the following section, I begin with a brief discussion of decolonisation and its impact on the recognitional theoretical framework guiding my study. I then provide an overview of Taylor, Honneth, and Fraser’s concepts of recognition and misrecognition. Following this, I examine their unique contributions to the discourse. A comparative analysis of the theoretical synergies and divergences between these perspectives is undertaken to better understand the complexities of recognition in different contexts. This analysis aims to enhance our understanding of the complexities of recognition across varied contexts. Subsequently, I delve into
Confucian moral standards of loyalty, filial piety, integrity/chastity, and righteousness, and their relevance to the recognition discourse. This exploration provides a unique angle to the discussion by integrating Eastern philosophical concepts. Finally, an in-depth investigation of the synergies and tensions between Western recognition theories and Confucian moral standards is conducted. This detailed analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between these philosophical frameworks.

3.2 Decolonising the Theoretical Framework

As I reviewed the literatures on Hegel’s pro-colonial philosophy of world history and topics on equity and inclusion, the debate on whose knowledge it is important to adopt and whose is not became a subject to reflect on. It made me critically reflect on the often Western generated perspectives that argue that Chinese students must conform to Western notions of how to write well, how to study, as well as what constitutes critical thinking alongside the framing that some thinking are standard and others are less progressive. It also made me think that not only is it essential to decolonise the curriculum, but also that the decolonial concept should inform my theoretical framework, and that I should also examine its’ impact on Chinese students international education experiences as a whole.

While colonialism may have largely disappeared as a political framework and process, ‘coloniality survives colonialism’ (Maldonado-Torres 2007:43, quoted in
Arshad, 2021b, 32:35), and as such colonial power is still oppressively present in people's lived experiences. Taking academia as a relevant example, regardless of whether you had received your education in the East or the West, the impact of colonialism is ubiquitous across the globe, and we are caught up within a colonised system. To decolonise academia, countries and scholars must unpack, reframe and recentre their own contribution to the world, in learning and teaching terms. As Arshad (2021) implores, it should involve: ‘a critical analysis of how colonial forms of knowledge, pedagogical strategies and research methodologies’, which ‘have shaped what we know, what we recognise and how we reward such knowledge accordingly’ (Arshad, 2020, para 5). She recognises decolonising the curriculum as a deepening of inclusive and transformative knowledge practices, and explains that:

‘To decolonise is not about deleting knowledge or histories that have been developed in the West or colonial nations, rather it is to situate the histories and knowledges that do not originate in the West against the context of imperialism and power and to consider why these have been marginalised and de-centred’ (Arshad, 2020, para 6).

My research on recognition and misrecognition initially drew from Western theorists like Taylor, and Fraser, and particularly Honneth's tripartite framework of recognition—love, respect, and esteem. I drew upon Honneth's framework to inform my study design and guide my discussion of research findings. However, as my analysis progressed, I found working with Western theories within an Eastern fieldwork context to be problematic. For example, when analysing and discussing the data, I
began to realise that Honneth’s framework which emphasises individual agency as a substantive factor in the process of acquiring love, respect and esteem did not translate smoothly or easily into a Chinese context. While Chinese participants possessed individual agency, the way they enacted it is shaped by concepts such as filial piety. How love, respect and esteem are defined, valued and enacted differs in different cultural contexts. It has therefore been challenging for me to navigate the tensions between Western theoretical frameworks and the lived experiences of my participants who come from a non-Western context.

Despite these challenges, the lens of ‘love, respect, and esteem’, as conceptualised in Honneth’s theory, remains highly relevant to my research. This relevance is rooted in the unique experiences of the returnees, who often find themselves caught between cultures due to their overseas experiences. These returnee experiences exemplify a blend of Western and Chinese cultural influences, making a Western-originated lens applicable. By approaching this lens with an open mind and integrating it with Chinese philosophical thought, I aim to create a more comprehensive framework that accurately reflects the complex, intercultural experiences of my participants.

In addressing these challenges, I have maintained an openness and a willingness to question and re-evaluate my own assumptions and biases, particularly in my discussions about Chinese values and expectations. Most importantly, I felt that to decolonise my original theoretical framework, it was imperative to actively seek out alternative perspectives and ways of understanding the data. This process involves a
critical examination of the dominant Western-centric models and the exploration of alternative perspectives that have been traditionally marginalised. In this vein, my research not only interrogates the applicability of Western theories of recognition, as posited by thinkers like Honneth, Taylor, and Fraser, but also actively seeks to incorporate and foreground Chinese concepts and principles of recognition. This approach represents a significant shift towards a more inclusive and culturally sensitive theoretical understanding.

The concept of decolonisation in this study extends beyond the curriculum into the foundations of our theoretical understanding of recognition and misrecognition. In challenging the predominantly Western-centric perspectives that have historically shaped the field, this research seeks to foreground Chinese recognition concepts and principles as a means to contribute to the discourse in a significant way. This approach aligns with the broader decolonisation effort by questioning the universal applicability of Western theories and by valuing non-Western perspectives that have often been marginalised or overlooked.

Therefore, I propose a theoretical framework that integrates the nuanced aspects of Chinese cultural recognition, such as the concepts of loyalty, filial piety, integrity/chastity, and righteousness, and frame these alongside Honneth’s three modes of recognition and Hegel’s account of three spaces of recognition (see Figure 1). My culturally sensitive recognition framework will then be used to weave in and out the participant’s stories. In doing so, it aims to gain insight into how they understand and construct their identities under the influence of their parental
expectations – both within their families and communities and in the larger societal context. The framework I proposed not only offers a culturally contextualised understanding of recognition, but also pre-empts a significant shift in the theoretical landscape by bringing Chinese philosophical insights to the forefront. This theoretical framework recognises the diversity of human experience and the importance of cultural specificity in shaping social and interpersonal dynamics.

Figure 1 Theoretical frameworks.

Moreover, by applying this framework to the experiences of Chinese students in transnational contexts, this study aims to illuminate the unique ways in which recognition and misrecognition manifest in their lives. This approach moves beyond a mere application of Western theories to a cross-cultural context; instead, it seeks to create a dialogue between Western and Eastern perspectives, thereby enriching understanding of recognition in a globalised world.
By so doing, this study not only contributes to the academic discourse on recognition but also participates in the broader movement towards decolonising knowledge. By acknowledging and integrating Chinese recognition concepts, this research challenges the dominance of Western-centric models and paves the way for a more inclusive and diverse theoretical landscape, that resonates with a wider range of cultural experiences and values.

3.3 Charles Taylor: Recognition and Misrecognition

Charles Taylor’s (2004) theory focuses on cultural recognition and he believes that all humans require recognition as a ‘vital human need’ (Taylor, 2004) p.26). Furthermore, Taylor argues that ‘misrecognition can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred’ (Ibid, p. 23). Taylor’s account of recognition highlights the significant role that such social interactions and relationships play in shaping an individual's identity and sense of self. He asserts that we need relationships as part of the recognition process to contribute to individual fulfilment, to shape identities but not to define us as individuals. How we define ourselves is rather achieved through our own agency, but for Taylor our identities are negotiated in part by our internal deliberations as well as by the views of others. In his work on recognition, Taylor (1992) also discussed the transition from traditional societies to modern societies in terms of how individuals are recognised and valued.
The old ways of recognition, as characterised by Taylor, are predominantly determined by social class, status, membership in particular social categories, and adherence to predetermined social roles and duties (Taylor, 1992). By contrast, Taylor highlights the emergence of new ways of recognition in modern societies, which place greater emphasis on individual dignity, autonomy, and personal identity to achieve equal recognition (Taylor, 1992). Taylor's new ways of recognition in modern societies revolve around the understanding that our identity is partly shaped by our interactions with others and the recognition we receive from them. He argues that there exists a fundamental dialogical aspect to human identity construction that ‘...one can become a self, capable of self-understanding and achieving ‘self-definition’, only in relation to other conversation partners, ...within ‘webs of interlocution’ (Taylor, 1989) p.32). This perspective highlights that our identity, sense of self-worth, belonging and dignity can only be constructed from interacting with others around us. Therefore, recognition plays a crucial role in human existence, greatly impacting a person's personal and social growth.

However, Taylor warns us against placing too much emphasis on a group's collective identities, as this may lead to the neglect of individual identity and interests. He emphasises that overinvestment on collective identity can lead to exclusion, alienation, and reduced self-worth for the group member who do not entirely adhering to group norms or expectations (Taylor, 2004). In these cases, group members' personal identities and interests may be overshadowed by the collective ones, leaving those who differ from group norms feeling marginalised within their community. Additionally, when the dominant culture in the group
demands that individuals from diverse backgrounds conform to its norms and values, it can lead to the sacrifice of important aspects of individuals’ identities. This expectation of assimilation can result in the loss of individuals’ unique cultural, religious, and ethnic characteristics, further perpetuating misrecognition and feelings of exclusion and alienation (Taylor, 1992).

Moreover, at the macro-level, Taylor is also concerned with the issue of expectation around the assimilation of marginalised and subaltern groups. He reminds us that when a society’s dominant culture demands these groups conform to its collective norms, values and customs, these groups’ unique cultural, religious, and ethnic identities may be lost due to potential suppression (Taylor, 1992). Such expectations can amplify feelings of exclusion, alienation and misrecognition among the members of these groups.

To address the issue of misrecognition in individual and collective identities, Taylor proposes a politics of recognition that tackles both the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference (Taylor, 2004). By advocating for a more balanced approach that addresses both social inclusion and cultural diversity challenges in modern societies, Taylor's dual concepts aim to acknowledge and appreciate individual and collective identities in a way that fosters harmony and mutual respect.

The politics of equal dignity is based on the principal that all individuals have inherent worth and deserve equal respect regardless of their social class, gender, religion, or ethnicity. This approach aims to reduce discrimination and promote equal
rights and opportunities for all. The politics of equal dignity is often associated to universalist values, which stress everybody in society should have their individual rights protected and be treated equally without exclusion (McQueen, 2011). On the other hand, the politics of difference recognises that individual identities are shaped by their cultural, religious, or ethnic backgrounds, and that these differences should be acknowledged and valued. This approach highlights the need for policies that accommodate and support these differences; therefore, people will be able to maintain and express their unique identities without fear of discrimination or marginalisation (McQueen, 2011).

By promoting a politics of recognition that values both equal dignity and difference, Taylor aims to contribute to creating a more inclusive and just society, in which individuals can develop a strong sense of self-worth and belonging. In this way, addressing misrecognition becomes a crucial component in fostering social harmony and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

3.4 Axel Honneth: Recognition and Misrecognition

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition builds on Taylor's insights and expands his culturally-focused concept by arguing that recognition is not just a psychological need but also a social and political requirement (Laitinen, 2011). Honneth's theory diverges from Taylor's in several ways. While Taylor focuses on the value realisation of particular cultural identities, Honneth broadens the scope to encompass three
distinct forms of recognition struggles, which he suggests are essential for individuals to develop if they want a healthy sense of self and be able to participate fully in society. These forms of recognition are love, rights, and solidarity and are unpacked in the following.

3.4.1 Love

This form of recognition is related to our intimate and personal relationships, such as those with family, friends and romantic partners. Honneth’s understanding of love, the means of care and affection, is that it is not universal but rather is not conditional on merits or other particularities. For Honneth, love can provide individuals with a sense of security, emotional well-being, and is a precondition for people to acquire self-confidence (Thomas, 2012). These primary relationships lay the foundation for individuals to develop self-esteem, trust, and emotional resilience, which are crucial for navigating the complexities of social life. Honneth’s focus on the importance of relationships chimes with Taylor’s point that social interactions play a key role in enabling recognition to take place.

3.4.2 Rights

This dimension of recognition refers to the legal and moral recognition of individuals as autonomous agents with equal rights, freedoms and opportunities. The recognition of rights is essential for fostering self-respect and enabling individuals to
participate as equal members in society (Thomas, 2012). For Honneth, by receiving rights, we are conferred recognition by other right-holders, and hence we are treated as equal to others which helps form our sense of self-respect. Moreover, he emphasises that respect for rights is directed toward a universalised and generalised other, that is not conditional on various particularities and differences between people. In Honneth’s view, as long as you are a person, it does not matter who you are and what characteristics define you, for each individual is entitled to an equal share of respect (Honneth, 2002, Laitinen, 2014). However, in such a context, the word ‘respect’ is problematic, as who decides what form ‘respect’ takes, is and it could be said that Honneth’s aspiration that everyone should be entitled to an equal share of respect is perhaps a tad too altruistic if not naïve. Indeed, Honneth appears to pay little attention to issues of difference and the existence of inequities. Nancy Fraser (1995), on the other hand, problematises the claim that people can have equal access to rights on the basis that injustices exist which can and do limit access to rights; for example, on grounds of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and so on. Similar to Taylor, Fraser also argues that an individual’s rights might be curtailed if they are perceived as not conforming to the wishes of their ‘identity group’.

Certain Chinese communities’ reactions to the recent Black Life Matters (BLM) and the Stop Asian Hate (SAH) campaigns are good illustration of Fraser’s arguments. For a very long time, due to Chinese people being lighter skinned, they have managed to avoid the worst forms of racism, and most Chinese people in the UK/West have not been as badly affected by racism and discrimination as people
who are darker skinned. Therefore, when BLM kicked off, most Chinese people kept out of discussions about BLM and Chinese people who lived in Western countries and were actively supportive of BLM were satirised, as people in China were rarely the subject of racism, and the opinion of the mainstream population in China has always been ‘it’s their problem’ and these are so-called ‘Western world issues’. However, when COVID-19 struck, Chinese people were directly subjected to racial prejudice, discrimination and overt expressions of racism, and suddenly many Chinese woke up to the reality of racism and along with others began calling for worldwide support for the Stop Asian Hate movement. This example highlights the limitations of Honneth's idealistic perspective, which assumes that everyone can access rights equally. While he acknowledges issues related to difference and inequity in the struggle for equal rights and respect, he does not engage with them as critically as Taylor and Fraser do. Moreover, this example illustrates that people do not always share common values or ideals, and that context and situations can significantly affect access to rights. Further emphasising the utopian nature of Honneth’s views and underscoring the importance of considering individual differences and varying circumstances in the pursuit of social justice and recognition.

### 3.4.3 Solidarity

Solidarity refers to the social recognition of an individual's unique skills, talents and contributions to society (Honneth, 1995). By acknowledging and valuing people's distinct qualities and accomplishments, society fosters a sense of belonging and
appreciation among its members. Through this social recognition, citizens can develop their self-esteem, which is a vital aspect of their psychological well-being. This in turn can create a positive self-image and reflects people's sense of self-worth and confidence in their abilities. In this way, solidarity plays a crucial role in cultivating self-esteem.

For Honneth, the recognition of esteem is different from love and respect. Esteem is not a form of recognition that is granted unconditionally; rather it is given on the basis of various markers that an individual is recognised to possess (Honneth, 1995). On such an account, the first and foremost precondition for one to be properly esteemed is to be able to contribute towards the common good. Then, the quality and quantity of due recognition depends on the individual's participation, merits, achievements or other particular positive features (Laitinen, 2015). Therefore, esteem has to be deserved. However, yet again we must be conscious of the influence of power on those preconditions in Honneth’s process of being esteemed. As Taylor (2004) and Fraser (2000) caution, devotion to collective identity could jeopardise individual rights and justice. We need to constantly ask ourselves who defines what the ‘common good’ is and who decides what is worthy of ‘merit’ and what is not, and moreover whether esteem is ‘deserved’ and under whose terms?

Honneth asserts that for individuals to achieve self-realisation, it is crucial to have a stable and continuous experience of all three forms of recognition (Martineau et al., 2012). In particular, he argues that ‘love’ is ‘conceptually and genetically prior to every other form of reciprocal recognition’ (Honneth, 1995), p. 107), emphasising
that we must be loved to gain enough self-confidence before we can experience self-respect as a right holder or self-esteem from contributing to the society in solidarity with others. In Honneth's three-dimensional theory of social recognition, he emphasises the significance of equal rights and respect. Here, he highlights the crucial role that legal and moral recognition play in both social and political aspects of life. According to him, the struggle for equal rights and respect is central to the broader struggle for recognition. This struggle addresses issues of discrimination, marginalisation and social exclusion in order to establish individuals as independent and dignified agents within society (Honneth, 1995). When individuals or groups experience a lack of respect or denial of their rights, they may engage in social and political struggles to claim the recognition they deserve. These struggles can manifest as social movements, political activism, or legal challenges seeking to change existing norms, institutions and power structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice (Laitinen, 2012).

Honneth’s emphasis on equal rights and respect in the struggle for recognition, has important implications for social and political theory. It highlights the need for inclusive and just institutions, laws and policies that ensure the recognition and respect of all individuals, regardless of their cultural, religious, or ethnic backgrounds (Laitinen, 2011). By promoting equal rights and respect, societies can facilitate social cohesion, reduce conflicts related to identity recognition, and create a more equitable and harmonious social environment. While it could be argued that identifying high-level aspirations is an important start, the lack of engagement with how we ensure
inclusive and just institutions, laws or policies makes converting aspirations into reality challenging.

In summary, Honneth’s theory is based on his worldview which emerged from his formative experiences in the contexts of his time, and therefore in the contemporary setting that forms the focus of my study, the framework appears to be excessively naive. I argue that Honneth’s thinking is grounded in an overly romantic and depoliticised version of how life is, believing that once people have their three qualities of recognition in place, they will be much more fulfilled, self-realised individuals. However, what he does not address or appear to acknowledge, is that different people are faced with different life opportunities and chances, and that their access to recognition can be curtailed by who they are, and by cultural and institutional values and inequities. Honneth assumes everybody is starting out from the same point, and that by having just institutions and policies, there will be equal opportunities for all; whereas Fraser and Taylor problematise the concept of recognition and add a degree of criticality to Honneth’s concept of recognition and egalitarianism.

Notwithstanding these flaws, Honneth’s tripartite theory provides a fruitful framework for analysing the adequacy of social recognition experienced by my participants. Indeed, as Fraser (2003, pp. 170–171) asserts: ‘With the stable and ongoing experience of all Honneth’s three forms of social achievement, there is potential for each individual to achieve a degree of self-realisation’. On the other hand, since personhood is the precondition for possessing human dignity and legal rights, any
inadequate application of recognition or denial of any one of the three of Honneth’s dimensions of recognition, might cause an inaccurate picture of someone’s true self and lead to a deprivation of their rights, resulting in loss of respect and even social injustice (Honneth, 1995).

3.5 Nancy Fraser: Recognition and Misrecognition

Nancy Fraser expands on the theories presented by Taylor and Honneth, highlighting the importance of power dynamics in recognition (Marcus et al., 2011). In doing so, Fraser added a political dimension to her interpretation of the recognition theory. She argues that recognition is not just a matter of psychological needs or social and political institutions, but is also a matter of power relations. She thus contends that recognition can be used to reinforce existing power relations or to challenge them.

Fraser (2000) believes that recognition must be understood in the context of social and economic inequalities, and that struggles for recognition are often intertwined with struggles for justice and equality. In response to Honneth’s focus on the struggle for recognition, Fraser proposes a status model as an alternative approach to understanding social justice. While Honneth’s theory of recognition concentrates on interpersonal relations and individual self-realisation, Fraser’s status model emphasises the importance of recognising power imbalances and the reality that we
do not begin from a level playing field, in order to address broader structural and institutional dimensions of social injustice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

Fraser’s status model acknowledges that social inequalities are not only a result of misrecognition or disrespect, but are also deeply rooted in economic disparities and unequal access to resources, opportunities and power (Schweiger, 2019). She argues that social groups and individuals suffer from misrecognition when their social status is devalued, leading to their exclusion, marginalisation, or subordination. Moreover, she contends that misrecognition also occurs when society’s institutionalised patterns of value systematically privilege certain identities or groups, while disparaging or devaluing others. This unequal treatment can lead to the internalisation of negative self-images and social stigma, further reinforcing social hierarchies and limiting opportunities for those who experience misrecognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

To address the injustices arising from misrecognition, Fraser’s (2000, p.115) status model advocates for what she calls ‘parity of participation’ to ensure that all individuals and social groups have the opportunity to participate as equals in social life, without being hindered by institutionalised patterns of value that undermine their social status. Achieving parity of participation requires both recognitional and redistributive justice as well as representative justice, as all three dimensions of justice are interconnected (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, Fraser et al., 2004):
• Redistributive justice focuses on addressing economic inequalities and material disparities, which are often linked to and perpetuated by the social status of individuals and groups. The goal of redistributive justice is to challenge and transform economic structures that result in social inequality. Addressing the material aspects of social status, helps create a more level playing field for individuals and groups, enabling people to attain recognition and fully participate in society.

• Recognitional justice aims to address the cultural injustices and inequalities in status that arise from the misrecognition or devaluation of certain identities or social groups. It seeks to challenge the institutionalised patterns of cultural value that contribute to misrecognition. By promoting cultural recognition and respect for diverse identities, recognitional justice works to dismantle the hierarchies of social status that underlie misrecognition and marginalisation.

• Representative justice focuses on ensuring that all individual and social groups have an equal influence in the decision-making processes that shape their lives. This approach aims to tackle how social status affects a person's or group's participation in democratic processes. Encouraging inclusive and participatory democracy, representative justice ensures all individuals have a say in forming the society they inhabit, no matter their social standing.
In the context of China, the Hukou system presents a significant challenge to achieving these three forms of justice. This system ties an individual’s access to social services to their place of origin, creating a significant barrier for migrant workers who move from rural areas to urban centres. As a result, these individuals are often excluded from accessing essential services like healthcare and education, and are viewed as second-class citizens.

Even though this injustice is politically driven and the Hukou system was created for population control rather than discrimination, it still perpetuates inequality and power imbalances, especially between urban and rural areas. This is an example of recognition injustice since migrant workers don't have the same rights as urban-born residents. It's also an issue of redistributive injustice because it limits access to essential services based on birthplace rather than needs or abilities. Lastly, it demonstrates representative injustice as migrant workers are left out of decision-making processes affecting their lives.

Addressing these injustices requires significant changes in the Hukou system, such as loosening restrictions on access to social services and ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their place of origin. However, this would require power-sharing, as those who currently hold power in urban areas would need to give up some of their privilege and share it with migrant workers. This represents a significant challenge, as people are often unwilling to give up their power, particularly when it threatens their own status and privilege (Fraser, 2000) - a tension not unique to China, however, as it is also present in the West. This is
particularly the case with regards to systemic racism, where white people may resist
giving up power to people of colour who are demanding a seat at the decision-
making table, for fear of losing their status and privilege. In both cases, recognising
and addressing recognition injustices is essential for creating a more just and
equitable society.

In general, Nancy Fraser's status model of recognition highlights the importance of
addressing cultural injustices and misrecognition through a multi-dimensional
approach to social justice. By advocating for parity of participation and emphasising
the interconnectedness of recognitional, redistributive and representative justice,
Fraser's model offers a comprehensive framework for addressing social inequalities
and promoting a more equitable and inclusive society.

3.6 Theoretical Synergies and Divergences

One of the most significant synergies between Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth's
theories, is their focus on identity recognition. Both theorists emphasise the
fundamental importance of recognition in shaping an individual's sense of self, self-
esteeom and sense of belonging. They assert that recognition is essential for personal
development and self-realisation, as well as for fostering social harmony and
cohesion.
However, Honneth’s theory of recognition expands beyond Taylor’s cultural recognition to address a broader range of recognition struggles that individuals and groups face in various social, political and economic contexts. Taylor primarily focuses on the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference in his recognition theory. While by contrast, Honneth’s theory is based on a threefold structure of recognition, comprising love, rights, and solidarity, which correspond to the interpersonal, legal-political and social dimensions of recognition. While both theorists acknowledge the psychological and social dimensions of recognition, Honneth places greater emphasis on the role of social and political struggles in the process of recognition.

Taylor’s work places more focus on cultural recognition and its impact on individual identity. However, unlike Honneth, his recognition theory advocates for a balance between individuality and connections to collective identities. While recognising that individuals have multiple identities and affiliations, Taylor cautions against over-identifying with a particular collective identity, as it can lead to the exclusion and intolerance of those who do not share the same identity (Taylor and Gutmann, 1994).

Nancy Fraser (1995) interestingly also highlights the dangers of collective identity and groupthink which can jeopardise individual rights. However, she has expressed disagreement with Charles Taylor’s culture-focused recognition theory. Indeed, she criticises it for not fully addressing the role of power dynamics in social recognition as well as the systemic marginalisation of certain groups (Fraser, 1995). According to
Fraser (1995), an excessive focus on collective identity in a culture, can inadvertently reinforce the power imbalances which might promote groupthink and conformity, stifling individual expression and marginalising dissenting voices that contribute to social injustice. Her argument emphasises the importance of considering economic and political structures that contribute to social inequalities. In her view, addressing cultural recognition alone is insufficient, as it may perpetuate social divisions and marginalisation by failing to recognise that some cultures will be seen more favourably than others, and some will have access to more power (e.g., monetary, social power, status power) than others.

Fraser is also concerned that Honneth's theory of recognition may be overly focused on interpersonal relationships and psychological dimensions of social life, which could also lead inadvertently to reinforcing existing power imbalances and social inequalities. She argues that Honneth's approach lacks a structural perspective and thus fails to address the root causes of social injustice, which often stem from economic and political inequalities. Fraser then contends that a comprehensive theory of social justice should encompass both recognition and redistribution, taking into account not only cultural injustices but also inequalities in materiality and status (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

Moreover, on the topic of misrecognition, Fraser (2003) disagrees with Honneth's account that focuses on misrecognition as being primarily about disrespect. Honneth, basing his argument on a dialogical conception of recognition, claims that unreciprocated recognition leads to social subordination, which in turn generates
disrespect. Those who feel disrespected perceive themselves as being misrecognised, and their struggle aims to restore or create the necessary conditions for reciprocal recognition (Marcus et al., 2011). Fraser (2003) argues that Honneth seems to overlook the demands for struggles between social groups that arise from their own interests, identities, value-horizons, and ways of life. In this way, Honneth's observations can be perceived as ‘ethical judgments grounded in a theory of the good rather than as deontological judgments of the right’ (Marcus et al., 2011, p. 208). Which means that it doesn't matter whether it is right or wrong as long as it serves the group's interests, or the group feels disrespected, and perceive itself as being misrecognised, thus demanding change. Therefore, according to Fraser, a proper theory of struggle against injustice must resist the temptation of taking any value-horizons as given: not those of the ‘dominant’, the ‘subordinate’, or the ‘sufferers’ (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). By emphasising this point, Fraser's critique highlights the need for a more nuanced and balanced understanding of misrecognition and the diverse struggles that arise from it.

In response to Fraser's critique, Honneth does acknowledge the importance of addressing issues of redistribution and power dynamics. However, he maintains his belief in the primacy of recognition as the fundamental basis for understanding and resolving social injustices. He argues that the struggle for recognition remains at the core of these issues, and that by focusing on recognition it is possible to address both material and symbolic aspects of social inequality (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Furthermore, he contends that Fraser's dualistic approach, which separates recognition and redistribution, does not fully grasp the interconnected nature of these
struggles. Fundamentally, Honneth believes that recognition can serve as a unifying concept that captures the complexity of social injustice, providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding and combating it (Marcus et al., 2011).

3.7 Synergies and Tensions Between Western Recognition Theories and Confucian Moral Standards

3.7.1 The Importance of Self

The fundamental difference between the two cultures of recognition discussed above, is where they situate the concept of ‘self’. Taylor (2004) theory of recognition emphasises the importance of the self in terms of cultural identity. He believes that individuals form their self-identity through a process of dialogue and interaction with others, particularly within the context of their cultural backgrounds. For Taylor, recognising the unique cultural heritage of individuals and groups is essential for building their self-esteem and sense of belonging. Honneth (1995) places people’s primary self-need for love at the top of his self-recognition hierarchy, and emphasises that without recognitions from family, any respect we receive from other people and esteems we achieved from contributing to society, could be meaningless for ourselves. His concept places individualism at the heart of his understanding of the politics of recognition. Such a model advocates that in any social relations, people should be perceived as individuals with distinct characteristics and recognised freely and equally by each other; and neither the recogniser nor the recognisee should dominate the other in such relationships (Ikäheimo and Laitinen,
Fraser (2000)’s theory of recognition on the other hand, highlights the importance of the self in terms of structural and power dynamics. She emphasises that misrecognition stems from systemic inequalities and power imbalances rather than just individual or interpersonal factors, and argues for a status model of recognition which requires redistributive, recognitional, and representative justice to address inequalities and ensure equal recognition for all individuals.

In contrast to Western cultures where individuals are raised with a focus on developing a strong sense of personal integrity and individuality, for very long-time sense of self has been downplayed in Chinese culture, and instead the prestige and supremacy of the state and collective has been emphasised. People have been educated to choose to ‘serve’ over to ‘love’ (Steele and Lynch, 2013), and such ideology is promoted and constantly reminded in many forms in peoples everyday life. For example, the word ‘country’ in Chinese is a two words phrase ‘国家’, with the first word meaning state in front of the second word which means family, it implies the importance of a state, that without it no home can exist.

The Chinese moral stance, deeply influenced by Confucianism, emphasises individual responsibilities towards the state and the importance of maintaining social harmony. It prioritises collective interests over personal ones, such as love for family or feelings for friends. This stance reflects the traditional Chinese hierarchical social order, where individuals are expected to adhere to specific roles and duties within
their social relationships (Huo, 2016). This aligns with Taylor's account of the old ways of recognition, where recognition in traditional societies emphasises social categories, class, and adherence to social roles and norms. Both Taylor's perspective and the Confucian-influenced Chinese moral stance, stress the importance of maintaining social harmony and cohesion by fulfilling one's responsibilities towards the state and the collective.

In this context, Confucian moral standards serve as a recogniser-dominated recognition mechanism, that encourages individuals to act according to established norms and values. By doing so, individuals receive recognition and acknowledgement from others in society, particularly those in higher social positions. However, this recognition can be condescending, as it is granted when individuals meet the expectations and ‘standards’ mandated by the dominant social and moral order (Yao, 2000). The term ‘standards’ is problematic because it is usually defined by those in power, such as rulers, parents, or people an individual seeks to befriend. This approach does not consider issues of difference (Taylor and Gutmann, 1994) and power inequities (Fraser, 1995) within these interactions. Thus, Confucian moral standards serve as a means of social control, ensuring individuals conform to prevailing norms and values maintain social harmony and stability. By prioritising responsibilities to the state and social order, individuals are therefore encouraged to put the collective good above their personal desires, fostering unity and cooperation within Chinese society.
When Chinese-born international students are exposed to Western recognition culture, which values individuality, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect, and independence (Honneth, 1995), they often experience conflicting emotions and challenges. Engaging with tutors and fellow students in an environment that prizes these qualities often causes them to be caught between their cultural background and the new cultural context, struggling to define their own identity (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009, Gu et al., 2010, Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015, Zhu and O’Sullivan, 2020).

This cultural dissonance can lead to feelings of alienation and culture shock, as students grapple with tensions arising from contrasting recognition ideologies. The impact of this dissonance varies among students. Some may embrace the individualistic recognition of Western culture, leading to further tensions when they return to Chinese society, which might gradually adopt more capitalist values. Others may choose to uphold Chinese values, facing an ongoing struggle reconciling the two recognition ideologies. This balancing act can have lasting effects on personal and professional development, as they work towards a harmonious middle ground between their cultural roots and experiences abroad. Moreover, cosmopolitan competences, identity transformation, individualistic values, and worldviews accumulated overseas, inevitably clash with Chinese norms.

Tensions between Taylor’s new ways of recognition emphasising individual rights and self-determination, and Confucian values influencing Chinese society, create challenges for individuals experiencing both Western and Chinese cultural contexts, such as returnees. While the new ways of recognition that Taylor identifies have led
to the rise of identity politics and social movements in the West, such as Black Lives Matter, MeToo, and disability rights activism, China's Confucian heritage may result in a different approach to individual agency and recognition. Confucianism values social harmony, respect for authority, and the fulfilment of social roles. In this context, the pursuit of individual rights and self-determination may be perceived as disruptive or even subversive. This creates challenges for Chinese returnees who have experienced life in Western countries where individual agency and self-expression are encouraged and valued. These returnees may often have to grapple with balancing individualism and collectivism, struggling to find a midpoint between personal autonomy and the collective values of their home culture.

Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge the intersectional influences, including age, gender, and cultural context, that may impact returnees' understanding of recognition or their journey to define their identity. Returnees exposed to Western ideas about individual rights and social justice may find it challenging to conform to traditional social norms in China. Indeed, they may question established hierarchies and expectations, leading to potential conflicts with family, friends, or colleagues.

In addition, returnees may encounter difficulties in building and maintaining guanxi, the complex network of social relationships that is crucial for negotiating interpersonal dynamics in Chinese society. Indeed, they may struggle to navigate the reciprocal obligations and expectations that come with these relationships, particularly if they have been influenced by Western notions of individualism and autonomy.
The tensions mentioned above may result in the alienation of returnee students from the people and environments they subsequently interact with on returning. Indeed, Gu and Schweisfurth (2015)’s study revealed that feelings of diaspora consciousness acquired by returnees when they studied abroad, could result in various levels of tension when they return. The longer they spend overseas, the stronger they felt the differences between themselves and those who never spend time abroad. It is evident that moving between Western individualistic and Confucian socially-minded cultures, can significantly impact on returnees' ways of thinking compared with their domestic peers. These tensions can result in varying degrees of misrecognition from both sides.

3.7.2 The Tensions Between ‘Love’ and ‘Filial Piety’

In Honneth’s theory, recognition from families is a given for all individuals. ‘Love’ is a basic need and a birth right for all human beings and is a form of social relation with families that can build an individuals’ self-confidence to establish their individual identity. In China, however, under the influence of the three-domination concept, kinship is guided by hierarchy where parents are positioned as superior and children have to earn parental ‘love’ through practicing ‘filial piety’ towards their parents (Kajanus, 2015). Moreover, children have to live up to certain high expectations in demonstrating ‘filial piety’ within their family. Confucianism proposes that: ‘孝有三：大孝尊亲，其次弗辱，其下能养’ meaning that in order to be recognised for
demonstrating ‘filial piety’, three grades of respect to parents need to be achieved. The highest level of filial piety is to attain family respect from others, followed by avoiding damaging the family dignity. The bottom level is to provide for the family. Therefore, recognition in Chinese family is not granted; rather, respect for people, their needs, affections, attachments, and trusts within their family, are due recognitions expected within the family that are valued for their contributions to their family’s collective dignity, esteem, and prosperity. Thus, bringing honour to the family and earning respect for the family from ‘outsiders’, are the common ways towards self-realisation within the Chinese familial structure where individualism is rarely rewarded with ‘love’.

Moreover, the word ‘love’ in the Chinese family context has been conceptualised to possess a more materialistic meaning, as noted in Kajanus's (2015) work on the relationship between Chinese international students and their parents. The exchange of care within these families typically manifests through practical support. It is customary for Chinese parents to invest heavily in their children's futures, including their education, career prospects, and even marital arrangements. In return, children reciprocate by materially aiding their aging parents, not only through financial contributions but also by providing essential goods such as food and clothing, as well as by offering direct physical assistance. This reciprocal arrangement underscores the tangible expressions of care and support that characterise familial love in Chinese culture. Furthermore, ‘love’ is often expressed in a rather reserved and controlled fashion in the Chinese family (Fong, 2004, Yang, 2017). As a society that vigorously endorses emotional self-restraint, expressing one's personal affections
can be seen as a sign of weakness. Even in family settings, reserve and control are considered qualities associated with high moral character, and love between parents and children is expressed silently and usually focuses on each other’s physical / material needs rather than emotional needs (womenofchina.com, 2012).

According to Fong (2004), the primary means by which relationships are managed within Chinese families, can be attributed to China's one-child policy. Fong argues that the implementation of this birth control policy aimed to produce a generation of highly educated and ambitious children who would elevate China's status and surpass First World countries. However, the unintended consequence is that most Chinese families have directed significant attention and investment towards providing their only child with access to the same living standards and educational opportunities as those found in First World countries. This focus on achieving material success has led to the neglect of singletons' psychological and emotional needs. Yang (2017) discussion of Chinese kinships echoes Fong (2004) assertions from a historical point of view. Yang, in referencing Confucius's emphasis on the importance of education, argues that Chinese people are inherently ingrained with the belief that poverty stems from inadequate education. This belief in the fundamental role of education, drives Chinese society to place a high value on obtaining knowledge and skills, as it is perceived as a key factor in ensuring success and alleviating poverty (Yang 2017). Furthermore, it is a deeply ingrained social custom in the Chinese community that the returns on investment in children, will significantly contribute to parents’ stability after their retirement. Children are expected to demonstrate ‘filial piety’ to their parents, providing them with a
prosperous retirement; therefore, parents’ attention commitment to their children’s education has always been their number one concern, if not the only priority.

Having said that, it is worth noting that people’s attitudes towards such historical norms have changed in recent years; in particular, there have been more discussions and debates about the negative impact of traditional Chinese family relationships on personhood formation, approaches to parenting, family conflict, and so forth. The main reason for these changes has been the desire for the younger generation to advocate for a more expressive love, by reflecting on their own upbringing, as well on Western influences (Xie and Li, 2019, Cheah et al., 2013, Xu et al., 2009, Xu et al., 2005).

3.7.3 The Tensions Between ‘Respect’ and ‘Integrity/Chastity, Righteousness’

The origin of integrity/chastity was to teach people to show restraint in expressing their desires, to promote moderate behaviour and self-control. It represents a noble virtue that counters temptations. Mencius, a Confucian philosopher, argued that a person with a noble character should not be swayed by external factors such as wealth and rank, poverty and obscurity, or power and force. (Guo, 2015, Huo, 2016, Peng, 2020). Righteousness originated as a moral guideline to regulate the appropriateness and the amount of interests and benefits a person should gain from dealing with others. It advocates for honesty and uprightness and opposes hypocrisy and greed. Therefore, a good person should always socialise with righteousness in
mind, and practice righteousness to make sure the right amount of personal interests and profits were made from whatever opportunity that arises. Any wealth and fame obtained beyond righteousness is viewed as meaningless (Guo, 2015).

With integrity/chastity and righteousness together, Chinese people believe that solid friendships can be built and positive guanxi will result (Luo, 2011). Guanxi is an essential resource in China for achieving personal, social, economic, and political goals (Yeung and Tung, 1996, Luo, 2011). Hence as the Chinese phrase goes: ‘A nearby neighbour could be more helpful than faraway relatives, and you are under your parent’s wings at home but in the wider world, your friends are who can rely on’. Obligations and reciprocity are required to acquire, maintain, and benefited from guanxi: it requires people to prove that they have the integrity and righteousness to be true, honest, devoted, and committed in social relationships, and ensure all parties in the friendship receive equivalent benefits (Tian, 2020).

When dealing with people outside the family arena, Honneth’s theory proposes that all people should be recognised with respect as individuals and holders of equal rights. Since people were born with equal rights, respect for each other’s rights should be unconditional on merits or other particularities and differences between people. Such egalitarianism in Honneth’s theory is somewhat contradicted within the Chinese communities, especially in the professional world where this research covers, since respect in the workplace is linked closely with guanxi. In the context of guanxi, privileges are often obtained through personal relationships and connections, rather than being based solely on merit or equal rights. This tension between
egalitarianism and the practice of guanxi reflects the complexity of social interactions and cultural norms in Chinese professional environments.

For thousands of years, Confucianism magnified the importance of the ‘rule by man and rule by ethics’ over institutional authority. People were educated to recognise that if the ruler is kind, the nation will be kind; if the ruler promotes righteousness, the nation will also; if the ruler is ethical, the national will also be ethical – an upright ruler defines a nation (君仁，莫不仁；君义，莫不义；君正，莫不正。一正君而国定矣).

The lack of considering institutional law means that whoever is at the top of the hierarchy, has power, influence, and positive guanxi – and being at ‘the top’ can create shortcuts to success in any venture undertaken (Yeung and Tung, 1996; Zhang, 2007, Peng, 2020, Yeung and Tung, 1996). Therefore, the politics of guanxi emphasises that people should make purposeful investments into relationships that might yield reciprocal benefits later. As a result, people benefit unfairly in competitions and gain unjustified respect through utilising their guanxi networks. It is a morally controversial concept that fosters inequalities (Yang, 1994, Yeung and Tung, 1996).

Another expression of social injustice embedded in the Chinese recognition philosophy, is the patriarchal imparity doctrine which is enacted through the concept of integrity/chastity. This sets numerous rules that only women must obey, in order to honour and satisfy their father, husband and other male counterparts. Such gender discrimination is deeply rooted in Chinese customs and public mindsets. Despite the
fact that gender equality was included in the contemporary China’s national policies, women struggle with mistreatments experienced in their everyday life. Indeed, constitutions, policies, and laws that protects women are often superseded by entrenched adherence to patriarchy customs. From emotional abuse to gender discriminations, women are not only subconsciously assumed to be inferior to men, but also misrecognised as being unable to thrive unless dependent on men (He and Ng, 2013). For example, when facing marital violence, women still struggle to obtain a divorce. It is not uncommon to see mediators in the marriage registration office and even judges during court trials placing emphasis on repairing broken marriages, built upon a subconscious assumption that women will be worse off living without their husbands (He and Ng, 2013, Michelson, 2019).

In education, gender bias is not only reflected in the higher dropout rate of Chinese women in rural areas from primary education in, but is also manifested on the way parents’ spend their household resources, which focuses on the developments of their sons, considered greater value than their daughters (Joan, 2005, Li and Wu, 2011, Bo, 2018). For my study, such partiality has caused differential treatment for both male and female participants.

Last but not least, as in every other country, the patriarchal norm also manipulates gender imparity in people’s perspective and impacts on women’s everyday geopolitics – whether socially, in the sphere of work, or in relation to pay and wider opportunities. For example, compared to their male counterparts, Chinese women have less access to social capital and resources such as funds, time, rights,
information, opportunities and so forth, because their social customs do not encourage them to establish broad social ties. Therefore, even working with the same responsibilities, women remain constrained as the economic ‘losers’ (Wei et al., 2017). The patriarchal disparity doctrine in China poses a significant challenge to achieving Fraser's concepts of recognitional, redistributive, and representative justice for women.

In China, discussions on tackling social injustice differ from those that play out in some Western contexts, which could be attributed to the unique cultural and historical factors at play. For example, Tan (2020) study on China's educational inequalities reveals that the government's current focus is on ensuring recognitional, redistributive, and representative fairness between schools rather than equalities among students. Similarly, Chen (2022) research examines China's ambition to build a just society, and notes that the approach taken by the state primarily involves discussing justice rather than addressing existing injustices.

These case studies highlight that the government's approaches to inequalities in general may appear somewhat naive or blind to the deeper issues at play, suggesting that China's policies have not yet adequately addressed power dynamics, as described by Fraser.
3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the concepts of recognition and misrecognition, as well as the theoretical framework that guides this study. Specifically, accounts from contemporary recognition philosophers such as Taylor, Honneth, Fraser were compared and examined.

However, as my study progressed, it became clear that applying these Western-centric theories in their entirety to a Chinese cultural context, presented limitations. To address these limitations, and from adopting a decolonial standpoint, I proposed my own theoretical framework, deeply rooted in Chinese recognition concepts and principles. This framework, integrating Confucian moral standards such as loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness, offers a more culturally resonant perspective on recognition and misrecognition. It reflects a significant shift from Western theoretical paradigms to one that is informed by and sensitive to Chinese cultural contexts, thus highlighting the interplay between Western theories and Eastern philosophies.

In the next chapter, I present the rationale for the methodological choices adopted in this research to pursue the study aims.
4 Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by presenting the epistemological perspective adopted in this study, and then moves on to explain my role in the study as a researcher. Next, it covers why semi-structured interviews from a qualitative research perspective were selected as the most appropriate research method to answer the research questions. It follows with an exploration of the study’s sampling process and then details the data-collecting procedure and the researcher’s approach to analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of research validation, authenticity and representation, as well as discusses ethical considerations.

4.2 Epistemology

This study considers how returnees from international studies experience issues of recognition on their return to China. To understand the social and cultural dimensions of my participants’ experiences, and how these experiences have shaped their identities and sense of self upon their return, I have drawn from both Western and Eastern theories of recognition (see Figure 1 in Chapter Three). Specifically, I draw from Confucian moral standards alongside Honneth’s tripartite framework and Hegel’s three spaces of recognition, integrating these perspectives to offer a comprehensive view of the returnees’ everyday experiences.
According to Honneth’s theory of recognition, there are three modes of recognition – love, respect, and esteem – which correspond to the three spaces of recognition in Hegel’s account of recognition: namely, family, civil society, and the state. Honneth explains that love is the kind of recognition people receive from our micro-circle of intimate others, such as families and close friends; while respect comes from other right holders recognising us as individuals with equal rights. Esteem is the recognition we receive when our contributions to society are acknowledged and valued (Martineau et al., 2012). To achieve self-realisation, individuals need a stable and continuous experience of all three forms of recognition in all their living spaces (Honneth, 1995). In my study, I see the two frameworks as working synergistically in facilitating the study throughout its design, analysis and discussion processes.

In my research, it is crucial to understand not just what is happening in the returnee’s everyday experiences, but also where their experiences are happening. Honneth’s framework assists us in understanding how recognition or misrecognition occurs, while Hegel’s helps us consider the spaces of their impacts.

Moreover, by integrating Confucian moral standards such as loyalty, filial piety, integrity/chastity, and righteousness, this study offers a culturally resonant perspective for exploring recognition and misrecognition experiences of returnees. This approach reflects a decolonial shift, moving from Western-centric theories to a framework informed by and sensitive to Chinese cultural contexts. It highlights the interplay between Western theories and Eastern philosophies, and helps me in analysing the tensions returnees face when transitioning from Western to Eastern
recognition cultures. This integration of diverse theoretical perspectives not only enriches understanding of recognition in a global context, but also constitutes a key theoretical contribution in this field.

However, neither theoretical framework is truly comprehensive nor without flaws. First of all, the definitions of the terms ‘recognition’ and ‘misrecognition’ are rather abstract and potentially subjective. Therefore, extra attention has been given to the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the Chinese translation of these two terms, as neither have a clear translation. Secondly, Hegel’s three spaces of recognition include civil society, and it was not possible to fully capture the breadth of this concept in this study.

The following actions were taken to address the abstractness of the terms and to overcome the issue of civil society. Firstly, I did not use the terms ‘recognition’ and ‘misrecognition’ during the interviews, to prevent confusing or misleading the participant. In terms of the coverage in Hegel’s theory, in discussion with the supervisory team, it was agreed to initially focus the research arena on the ‘family’, ‘workplace’ and ‘local communities’, as 72% of the Chinese student returnees are in fulltime jobs (CCTV, 2018), and therefore one of the most important spaces to consider in this study was their workplace.
4.3 My Positionality and Reflexivity

A section on positionality is normally included at a later stage of the methodology chapter. However, I wanted to foreground this as it is important that my positionality is acknowledged from the outset as it allows me to record my awareness of how such a positionality, if unrecognised, could unintentionally bias my data. It is also important to acknowledge that someone with a different position or identity may well interpret the data differently.

The subject of this study is Chinese students who have studied in the UK, a social group of which I am a member. Not only have I experienced this as an ‘insider’ during nine years as an international student in Scotland (from bachelor’s degree to PhD), but I have also had valuable experiences supporting and employing students as an ‘outsider’ in several institutions for many years. These different personal, professional, cross-cultural, and cross-identity backgrounds have provided me with context and lived experiences which I draw from to inform this study. It has allowed me to examine myself and reflect upon my own biases, providing me with a new perspective to understand the international returnees I focus on. In accordance with Berger (2015), conscious recognition of my own partiality provides a unique methodological strength to this study. This reflexive way of engaging with the research process and participants, which incorporates my conscious partiality rooted in my own experiences, is viewed as a potential positive in other studies. Gu and Maley (2008, p. 229), for instance, have argued that ‘The interaction between insider and outsider perspectives, and the acknowledgment of conscious partiality,
enhances an in-depth understanding of the intercultural experiences of the informants’.

However, throughout this study, I was also aware that this position of conscious partiality may also cause me to view the participants with certain preconceived assumptions. I worked hard to ensure that the feelings, agendas and biases from the multiple identities that I brought into the study, were minimised in my interactions with study participants and also in my interpretation of the data at the later stage of analysis. For instance, I noticed that during some interviews I was labelled as an experienced university teacher or returnees’ employer which could have caused a power imbalance with my participants, as I have been perceived as an authority figure and thus potentially affecting participants willingness to open up with personal true accounts. To alleviate such potential power imbalances and preconceived assumptions during my study, the following strategies were employed:

- Rapport building. A comfortable and trusting interviewing environment were intentionally created for every participant to help put them at ease and create a more balanced relationship;

- Active listening. I demonstrated genuine interest in the participants' perspectives by attentively listening to their responses. This can encourage them to open up more and share their true experiences; and
• Emphasise transparency and confidentiality. The purpose and aim of the research, and any potential biases or preconceived assumptions that I may have, were clearly communicated with participants. They were also reassured that their responses would stay confidential, and any identifying information would be removed from the research findings. This approach aimed to create an honest and trusting atmosphere between myself and the participants.

Moreover, as 92% of the participants were recruited using a combination of snowball sampling and direct invitations from among my own acquaintances, I intended to ‘maintain a polite distance’ (Gu, 2009b, p. 303) from the sample group during my engagements to develop a degree of objectivity in the research data. Therefore, my role as the researcher was always to act as the familiar stranger (Wang, 2010), who has maintained enough detachment from the acquaintance and established a safe environment where participants felt empowered and comfortable to share their personal experiences and reflections with me.

4.4 Methodology: A Qualitative Approach

According to Morgan & Smircich (1980, as cited in Hu, 2017), ‘The suitability of a chosen research approach is determined by the nature of the social phenomena being investigated through the research questions’. This study is exploratory in nature. Exploratory research is often conducted by researchers examining relatively unexplored topics or new areas where there is limited existing knowledge on the
subject (Sarantakos, 2013). Sarantakos identifies five reasons for conducting an exploratory study, with the most relevant ones for this study being under-studied topic, familiarisation, and new ideas.

The recognition experiences of international student returnees' has not received much focus in previous research and is therefore an under-studied topic. Thus, since the topic is under-researched, an exploratory approach allows for familiarisation with an area where limited pre-existing knowledge is available. At the outset of my study, I had a general sense that I wanted to explore the experiences of returnees using the concept of recognition as a lens; however, the absence of similar studies meant I could not identify a suitable paradigm to draw from. Another aspect of familiarisation relates to whether or not the researcher possesses some idea of the situation faced by those being researched. Through my own conscious partiality, I possessed some familiarity with the lived experiences of the study participants. Qualitative interviews were employed to gather in-depth data on the experiences of Chinese student returnees, generating a wealth of information on their views and attitudes. This approach allowed for the discovery and observation of new ideas, perspectives and opinions. By focusing on these key aspects of exploratory research, this study aims to shed light on previously under-explored areas and contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of Chinese student returnees.

While studies on Chinese international students’ and returnees’ experiences have not been carried out drawing on recognition theories or lenses, research has been undertaken using a range of qualitative methods (e.g., Wang, 2010; Smith, 2014;
Zheng, 2015; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; Gilliland, 2016; Hu, 2017; Hopkins et al., 2017; Skyrme, 2008); quantitative methods (e.g., Xiang and Shen, 2009; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Welch and Hao, 2013, Gu, 2015; Zhang and Brunton, 2007); and mixed methods (e.g., Zhou and Todman, 2009; Wang, 2009; Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Gu et al., 2010; Xue, 2008). For this study, a qualitative approach was adopted drawing on exploratory inquiry (Wang, 2009), thus enabling me to gain deeper insight into Chinese student returnees’ perceptions of their everyday lives. For example, I wanted to find out how they were perceived and recognised by their family, co-workers and wider community, and in particular to explore their feelings toward these different perceptions and recognitions.

This study draws from a phenomenological tradition where I aim to understand the lived experience of the participants, and focus on ‘how’ they themselves make sense of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). This requires that rich data and detailed information on the factors that could affect the results of the findings had to be sought, and qualitative approaches are often considered the most practical ways of capturing that. A simple set of tick-box surveys would not, on the other hand, capture the complexities of their attitudes, feelings and perceptions in such comprehensive ways (Skyrme, 2008). Qualitative research paradigms, by contrast, can provide the researcher with ‘understandable, credible, and relevant findings’ (Patton, 1990, p. 149).

Compared with much of the previous research on Chinese students, this study has taken a different markedly different approach. Rather than relying on large-scale
samples and a quantitative method that seek breadth rather than depth, this study has involved researching the experiences of 24 Chinese graduates, providing a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of their experiences. Thus, it intends to explain and understand the experiences that student returnees have encountered, not simply describe them. Such data richness, I contend, would not be attainable by employing alternative methods; for instance, mere observation would not enable me to delve so deeply into returnees’ expectations, desires and hopes (Xue, 2008).

Surveys exhibit limited scope in reaching the depth of informants’ innermost feelings, while questionnaires’ return rate can easily jeopardise research, especially a qualitative research study with a relatively small sample size. Therefore, these methods were ruled out from the beginning.

Another commonly used tool in educational research is focus group discussions. These were considered at the initial research design stage. The idea was that while using individual interviews can explore returnees’ social recognition experiences, a focus group can supplement this by focusing on issues that emerge during group dynamics and interactions to achieve comparative and supplementary insights. However, feedback from the study pilot showed that the sensitivity of some of the conversation topics, which were designed to capture the nuance of human behaviour, could cause embarrassment and discomfort to both the researcher and informants in public discussions; therefore, the focus group approach was also not included in the research design.
4.4.1 Drawing From Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and The Ontological Position of My Study

As mentioned earlier in the section on positionality, my past experiences can be viewed as an asset if used to critically inform rather than to presuppose. The reflexivity and insider/outsider perspective has been utilised by many educational researchers to capture the complexities of the focus of research within intercultural studies (Xue, 2008; Wang, 2009; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; Gilliland, 2016; Hu, 2017; Smith and Khawaja, 2011).

By consciously embracing partiality as a methodological strength, this study provides a distinct point of view and a more profound understanding of the experiences of Chinese students in the UK and upon their return to China. However, it is important to acknowledge that such an approach may pose potential challenges. One concern is the objectivity of the findings, as the researcher's personal biases and values may influence their interpretation of meaning and understanding through lenses deeply associated with their own sociocultural contexts (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2006). Therefore, in line with other reflexive scholars such as Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) and Smith and Khawaja (2011), I approached this study in a ‘grounded’ manner that allows theory to emerge from what the study revealed. I constantly reminded and prevented myself from allowing personal preconceived notions to affect the process of this investigation or its analysis of the data.

However, despite the fact that to varying degrees we live in the worlds we investigate, it is unfeasible and indeed unrealistic to assume that even the most
astute reflexive researchers can approach a study with no prior knowledge of the research subjects or research area (Charmaz, 2014). Indeed, Charmaz’s (2014, p.17) constructivist version of the grounded theory approach posits that: ‘We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices’. Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) incorporates systematic and flexible strategies from earlier grounded theory while ‘(1) assuming a relativist epistemology, (2) acknowledging researcher and their participants, multiple standpoints, roles, and realities, (3) adopting a reflexive stance toward researcher’s background, values, actions, situations, relationships with research participants, and representations of them, and (4) situating the research in the historical, social, and situational conditions of its production’ (Ibid, p. 8). These strategies have been useful for my study and resonated with my ontological position, which leans towards subjectivism. This stance acknowledges the personal, subjective nature of reality, recognising that the reality of each participant – Chinese returnees, in my case – is unique and defined by their individual experiences and interpretations.

In line with this perspective, my study does not seek an absolute or universal truth but acknowledges the multiple realities (often complex and messy) that coexist according to the distinct perspectives of the participants. This CGT approach requires interpretative methods to capture each individual’s unique context and understanding of their experience. Thus, my ontological stance underpins a nuanced, empathetic approach, emphasising the importance of personal interpretation and individual context in shaping each participant’s reality.
Indeed, I began my investigation by fully utilising the inductive CGT approach, drawing on my personal perspectives as an ‘insider’ and interpreting the interviews to develop an understanding of the returnees' experiences of recognition in their daily lives. Wang (2010) likened this process to a doctor treating their own illness while researching other patients. However, I found grounded theory methods are more valuable when used as adaptable problem-solving strategies rather than a rigid, step-by-step procedure. For me, continuous engagement with the literature and theoretical framework eventually led me to consider how emerging theories from the readings could assist the study in making sense of its findings. As a result, the overall research process of this study embodies a combined inductive/deductive approach.

4.5 Data-collecting Methods and Justification

This section discusses the two types of interview techniques used in the data collection process for the study: semi-structured and storytelling/narrative interviews.

4.5.1 Interviews

Following the principle of CGT, in-depth interviews were employed as the main research method. Through purposeful conversations, interviews enabled me to access respondents’ information, including ‘their own behaviour or that of others, attitudes, norms, beliefs and value' (Bryman, 2007, p. 209) from the inside (Burgess, 109
This helped my study lay emphasis on returnees' personal real-life experiences in China and accentuated their perceptions, experiences and attitudes on how their living surroundings treat and think of them.

There were two main reasons for employing in-depth interviews in this study. First, the study seeks to capture the returnees' perspectives on their experiences, specifically concerning how they have been received by their loved ones, colleagues, and communities upon returning from the UK. By encouraging participants to discuss their perceptions of how they are viewed and whether they feel adequately acknowledged for their contributions, intensive interviews provide an effective way to gain insight into these personal meanings and experiences. Another crucial reason for employing in-depth interviews is linked to my own knowledge and preferences. Sarantakos (2013) highlights the value of familiarity and personal comprehension of the research setting in qualitative studies. In CGT, Charmaz (2014) indicates that professional knowledge and personal experiences contribute to the formation of grounded theories and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being examined. The significance of familiarity with the phenomenon and the research setting is also highlighted by Xue (2008), Gu (2009a), Smith and Khawaja (2011), Gilliland (2016), and many other scholars in the field of educational intercultural research.

My personal background has given me the opportunity to experience aspects of the same processes of identity transformation, cultural adaptation, and the search for recognition as the subjects of this research. Indeed, my work, life experiences and professional knowledge enhance my understanding and theoretical sensitivity. As
shown in Xue's (2008) study, sharing a similar history with the interviewees can simplify data interpretation and collection. Moreover, my professional experiences with students in China and the UK has fostered a preference for in-depth face-to-face interviews. As a result, using interviews ensures that the research thoroughly explores and gains insight into the phenomenon of the politics of recognition for Chinese student returnees ‘through tracking unique or unexpected life events, illuminating different experiences, giving voice to students, generating and developing new knowledge’ (Ibid, p. 41).

4.5.2 One-to-one, Face-to-face Semi-structured Interviews

The in-depth interviews in this study were conducted in a semi-structured fashion assisted by an interview guide. This is a well-established approach in qualitative educational and sociology studies (Skyrme, 2008; Wang, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zheng, 2015; Gilliland, 2016; Hu, 2017; Hopkins et al., 2017).

In this research, I adopt an epistemological position following Honneth’s theory, where issues of recognition and misrecognition are themes of interest. In line with the CGT, possessing an ‘insider’s’ experiences I entered the interviews with some preconceptions about the potential outcomes of the conversations. However, I encouraged participants to speak freely with minimal constraints and maintained an open-minded approach, receptive to all aspects of readjustment experiences in the participants' interest. In accordance with CGT, thematic data analysis was conducted
concurrently with data collection. After the first four interviews, certain themes of common interest expressed by all participants were identified through constant data comparison. These themes helped me to develop additional questions that I incorporated into my semi-structured conversation topics in subsequent interviews, still enabling participants to convey their ideas and understanding on their own terms (Bouma and Atkinson, 1995).

In this study, all participants except one mentioned that they had never had the opportunities to discuss morality, rights, judgments, mistreatment, discrimination, and other social equality issues with such confidence in an anonymous setting in China. As a result, they enthusiastically shared their themes and stories. The primary thread throughout their narratives was their constant reflections having their everyday experiences and relationship with their struggles acknowledged. Therefore, using a systematic, semi-structured questioning process was crucial to enhance the comparability and transferability of the data (Xue, 2008).

4.5.3 Storytelling

In this study, semi-structured interviews served as the main form of data-collection, with participants being encouraged to tell their stories through a series of question prompts. Storytelling simplifies the investigation of participants ‘perceptions and conceptions of what they have experienced, as we ‘think in story form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through story’ (Atkinson, 1998, p. 1). Narrative
studies have been extensively employed in sociology to examine people's experiences from their own viewpoints (Skyrme, 2008; Wang, 2009; Smith, 2011; Gu et al., 2010; Gilliland, 2016).

The storytelling approach played a significant role in my in-depth interviews, as it allowed participants to share their experiences in a way that felt natural and engaging. This method facilitated a more personal and nuanced understanding of their perspectives on the phenomena under study. When participants shared their stories, they conveyed not only the events but also the emotions, thoughts, and context that emerged and surrounded them (Atkinson, 1998). For example, many participants’ stories expressed in the study were not only simple descriptions of what had happened, but rather combined with returnees’ own interpretations and reflections of how they saw those experiences and the value of those experiences. In these stories, returnees’ personal perceptions and how they talked about being acknowledged (or not) as well as their experiences, shed light on their attitudes towards family, society and the country’s political party. Moreover, when they were describing experiences of mistreatment, their accounts were not strictly confined to the narrow sense of being mistreated as overseas student returnees but extended to being misunderstood as human beings. These valuable data provided a richer and deeper understanding of how people’s personhood, moral principles and life expectations have been affected.

Using storytelling as an interview approach enabled participants to express themselves more openly, as the narrative format encouraged them to reflect on their
experiences and the meanings they derived from them. Throughout the data collection process, participants were encouraged to give examples as much as they could to tell stories of their social encounters, in their own time with minimum interruption from me. This approach allowed me to capture the complexities and subtleties of their experiences, which might have been overlooked using a more structured or rigid interview method.

Additionally, storytelling created a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere for the participants, allowing them to feel at ease during the interviews. This, in turn, fostered an environment of trust and rapport, which further encouraged open and honest communication. In analysing the data, the storytelling approach allowed me to identify patterns, themes and connections between the participants' experiences. This process facilitated the development of a more in-depth understanding of the recognition experiences under investigation and enabled me to draw meaningful conclusions and insights (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

Overall, the storytelling approach used in my in-depth interviews enriched the data collected and contributed significantly to the quality and depth of the findings. It offered a more authentic and engaging way for participants to share their experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of their perspectives and the experiences being studied.
4.5.4 Justifications and limitations

All interviews were conducted in person to ensure that conversations remained focused, allowing for the collection of rich data in response to the research questions. Additionally, face-to-face interviews offered greater flexibility in the data collection process, enabling me to adjust the depth, sequence, and format of the prepared questions, follow up on intriguing responses, and immediately clarifying any ambiguous descriptions. The in-person interview method also provided the advantage of allowing the interviewer to observe the interviewees' facial expressions and body language. This enables me to gauge the mood and, if necessary, help the interviewee feel more at ease. This was particularly useful when participants felt embarrassed about topics regarding their level of success or social status, when they displayed expressions of hesitancy such as shrugging their shoulders and scratching their head; or when they were being too modest in describing their level of achievement, and they provided ambiguous feedback such as ‘it was ok’ or ‘just so-so’. In these cases, the line of enquiry was modified on the spot and uncertain expressions and feedback were responded to and followed up in alternative ways, to allow returnees’ to feel more at ease to continue to share their feelings, emotions, anxieties and frustrations on their past, current and even future struggles for recognition to be elicited.

Even though the interviews provided the study with rich in-depth data, there were issues I had to be mindful of. First and foremost, sophisticated skills were required to enable me to negotiate the interview conversation to make participants confident to volunteer information or return to a piece of information that needed further
discussion. As I mentioned earlier, questions concerning returnees’ personal life, such as their financial status or recognition experiences within family, were understandably sensitive. Therefore, I needed to display emotional intelligence and sensitivity to read any uncomfortable body language and interpret any signs of a change in attitude over time, in order to approach the questions using diverse strategies and extra caution. Secondly, my preconceived notions from my professional knowledge and personal experiences could affect the process of the investigation or analysis of the data. Particularly in reflexive studies like this one, bias in sample recruitment and data collection processes could become an obstacle to achieving my research goals.

4.6 Data-collecting Procedures

4.6.1 Samples

In total, 24 UK-taught master’s graduates participated in this research. One-year MSc graduates were focused on for the following reasons:

- Based on statistics, the majority of Chinese students in British universities are pursuing one-year taught postgraduate programs (Amberedu, 2017), so they are easily recruited, but most importantly, their experience as returnees will be more representative of the Chinese UK-graduated student population; and
Additionally, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, criticism in recent years of the value of a short one-year master’s degree has led to an emerging form of prejudice and misrecognition in Chinese society of its returning graduates. This has created a challenging living and employment environment for the returnees.

Therefore, compared with other types of UK degree holders, I felt that the experiences of this group of returnees’ would offer useful insights.

4.6.1.1 The Process of Sampling

The participant selection for this study was guided by a purposive sampling approach to identify information-rich subjects, and to make the participants’ demographic features more diversified taking into account factors like gender, age, origin, academic discipline, professional background, and so on. In addition to this, all interviewees in this research had to meet the following requirements:

- they were master’s degree holders; and

- they had lived and worked in either Shenyang or Beijing for at least two years since their return from overseas.
The number of years that the participants had to have spent in the UK was nevertheless not explicitly set, which meant the participants could have lived in the UK and returned to China with skills and experience gained from several levels of the British education system. Moreover, two sets of married returnee couples were deliberately sampled to provide some understanding of their experiences and viewpoints as a family.

The research sampling goals were modified over the course of the five months of data collection and analysis process. As more people responded to my recruitment call than I needed, I was able to streamline my sample to ensure that a range of types were covered. The 24 participants included in this study were recruited at different stages, so I could boost the types that I needed and decide if there was a particular type that was either under-represented or didn’t quite feature somebody. For instance, as the study progressed, I became aware that many participants possessed skills that could make them employable or successful in the job market. To gain a different perspective, I wanted to include someone who might have chosen not to fully utilise their UK-acquired qualifications in their work. So, I revisited my list of respondents and selected an individual who opting to work part-time and focus on their family life.

Lastly, numerous qualitative studies often involve convenience sampling to some extent (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the selection of master’s level returnees was partially influenced by their accessibility. Additionally, convenience played a role in
choosing the geographic location of the interviews: given my familiarity with Shenyang and Beijing, participants from these two cities were prioritised.

4.6.1.2 Sample Recruitment

Having secured ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh on 5 December 2018, initial invitations for participation were immediately sent out via emails, phone calls and social media to the following sources:

- four Scottish Universities where I had studied and worked;

- organisations that I had worked with in Liaoning province, China including the Provincial Returnees Association and the Returnees Advisory Group, and four Universities based in Shenyang city, China;

- students whom I had supervised or recruited in my past role as staff at Edinburgh College and Glasgow Caledonian University; and

- ex-school mates and friends.

The outcome of the request was very positive: 32 people responded to my call by the end of January 2019, and another 17 were introduced to me by the chosen participants after the fieldwork began.
Table 1 Summary of the sample recruitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Official/Informal</th>
<th>Channels</th>
<th>Number of responders</th>
<th>Number of participants recruited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Official</td>
<td>Liaoning Provincial Returnees Association</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official</td>
<td>Liaoning Returnees Advisory Group</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Supervisor’s personal introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Researcher’s personal contacts</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Introduced by participants</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 1, informal networks are trusted more than official channels within the Chinese international students’ community (Wang et al., 2012). Therefore, five respondents were introduced through an official introduction, while 44 agreed to participate in the study through the snowballing sampling technique, making 49 in total.

At this point, as I had more potential participants than I needed, I could have decided to proceed down a quantitative route to acquire a snapshot analysis using a Likert-scale survey or other techniques. However, it was not the intention of my study to pursue breadth, but rather to listen to participants’ stories and examine the topics that arose in depth. Therefore, the sample size for this study was refined to include
24 participants. As illustrated in Table 2 of the participants' demographics below, interviewees were selected with the intention of ensuring diversity in terms of gender, region, length of study in the UK, length of time since returning to China, and professional representation. This diverse sample aimed to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

A brief description of the research was sent out to all those interested in participating (see Appendix 3). This was followed up by a five-minute phone call as a screening procedure before interviews were scheduled, to verify potential interviewees’ eligibility for the study. Once the participants had passed the screening process and confirmed their participation, those selected were provided with a Research Participants Information Sheet and a Consent Form. Upon confirmation of their participation, interviews were scheduled at a convenient time for both participants and myself. Simultaneously, it was made clear to them that they were free to withdraw from the process at any point. Two days prior to the scheduled interview, individual reminder messages were sent to all participants to confirm that the interviews took place as planned. This process helped to ensure that the interviews were conducted smoothly and efficiently.

All communications during the sampling process were made via WeChat1 in Mandarin in order to encourage responses. However, the Research Participants

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1 The most popular Chinese social media network, with over 1 billion active users monthly.
Information Sheet and the Consent Form were sent in English to prevent important information being ‘lost in translation’, and none of the participants who took part in the research reported problems in understanding the content.

### 4.6.1.3 Sample Profiles

Table 2 Details the demographic information of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID code</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>City of origin</th>
<th>City of residence</th>
<th>Degrees from UK</th>
<th>Years in UK</th>
<th>Years returned to China</th>
<th>Job positions and employer info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wang</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Anshan</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>BA, MSc</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Low-level management, large domestic private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zheng</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>BA, MSc</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Owner, private entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mid-level management, world top 500 state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>High-level management, large state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feng</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mid-level management, civil servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kong</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Junior officer, world top 500 foreign private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chu</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Junior officer, world top 500 foreign private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Dalian</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Lecturer, Chinese state HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td>Position/Job Role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Huludao</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lecturer, Chinese private HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>BA, MSc</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Owner, private entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiang</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>BA, MSc</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Freelancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Dalian</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Junior officer, Civil servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhao</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Shijiazhuang</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>BA, MSc</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mid-level management, world top 500 foreign private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bao</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Qingdao</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>BA, MSc</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mid-level management, world top 500 foreign private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Zhengzhou</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mid-level management, domestic private HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Anshan</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mid-level management, world top 500 domestic private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Zhengzhou</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>BA, MSc</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Owner, private entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhou</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Shenyang</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mid-level management, large state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Nanjing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Low-level management, mid-sized domestic private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Primary schoolteacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>BA, MSc</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Freelancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ren</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>MSc</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Part time junior officer, large state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Xian</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>TNEBA, MSc</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>High-level management, large domestic private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All participants took part enthusiastically in their scheduled interviews, and no dissatisfaction with the study or the researcher was expressed or reported during the data collection process.

The interviews were carried out in the two most iconic cities in northern China: Beijing and Shenyang. Beijing is, China’s capital and one of the most developed cites in the world. Its’ internationalisation and financial prosperity have been at the heart of Chinese people’s aspirations ever since the country’s 1970s Reform and Opening. The city has a population of 21.89 million, and one in every three of its residents is a migrant from elsewhere in China (Wang, 2016) (National Bureau of Statistics 2022). Shenyang, the largest city and provincial capital of China’s Liaoning Province in northeast China. It has a population of 9.07 million (National Bureau of Statistics 2022), and is one of the key industrial centres of the country with fast-growing industries including software, automobiles and electronics.

The reason for the comparative sets on participants geographical location was to understand ‘if’ and ‘how’ larger cities’ dynamics and complexity affect returnees’ struggle for recognition, and whether their identity as overseas graduates can offset any sense of loss in their life as a domestic sojourner far away from home.
In determining the appropriateness of the sample size from the two cities, it was decided that 12 participants from each city would be adequate to gather sufficient data to address the study's objectives.

4.6.2 Interview Design

Semi-structured individual interviews were utilised as the method to elicit detailed accounts of returnees' experiences. In accordance with the study's inductive/deductive nature, an interview guide was developed; however, the interview questions were modified throughout the data collection process in keeping with emerging themes and interview experience and feedback. Template semi-structured interview questions were used as prompts to help focus interviews in order to address each research question.

Following the semi-structured approach, interview questions were designed in an open-ended, flexible and indicative manner, for instance: ‘Can you please describe the best and worst experiences you have had in your workplace?’ The intention was to encourage interviewees to speak freely about their personal experiences and to create a conversational atmosphere during the interviews (Gilliland, 2016). The interviews aimed to listen to participants’ voices on their social recognition experiences in their micro, meso and macro living spaces; thus, the questions were structured into three subsequent sections, with an extra section at the beginning to warm the process up.
All warm-up sections were initiated with simple biodata questions (see Appendix 2) to ease both the researcher and participants into a comfortable setting and to try to lessen the distance between them. While it could be argued that data collected in these stages may be viewed as being irrelevant to the broader inquiry (Glaser, 1998), factors such as age, family’s educational background, performance at school or length of time in the UK, proved relevant and useful for providing the context to the participants’ experiences during data analysis and case discussion.

Once the participants gradually settled into the settings, conversations could be more focused on topics such as what motivated their return, their own and others’ expectations, their initial impressions after returning, readaptation experiences, psychological stress and challenges, relationships with people around them, as well as experiences of recognition and misrecognition.

From this point on, the interview guide rendered more opportunities for the participants to respond to more directed questions. For example, the open question ‘What were your best experiences and worst experiences in your workplace?’, was followed by the more directed questions:

- Do you think that the knowledge and competences/experience gained from your overseas studies have brought you any opportunities and/or challenges in your professional life?
• How do you find others treat you as returning international students?

• Have you experienced any surprise/unexpected judgements or treatments as a result of returning with a western qualification?

However, in quite a number of cases the participants’ narratives elicited from the open questions were very detailed and comprehensive, taking the conversation straight to the end of the particular pathway of inquiry, and relevant pre-planned questions were thus not posed.

Toward the end of every interview, participants were invited to sum up their experience in responses to questions such as ‘What were the highs and lows? If you could choose again, would you come back? Will you choose to leave China in the future?’, followed by a final opportunity to make any further comments.

4.6.3 Pilot Study

A pilot run was conducted in December 2018 and modifications were made to the original design. Three pilot participants, one a university friend and the other two introduced through my personal contacts, were invited to my home in Scotland, and each was interviewed for half an hour. The interviews were audio recorded and several pitfalls in the interview design and interviewing techniques, such as leading questions, unclear terminology and jargon, were pinpointed. Furthermore, feedback
from the pilot study, indicated that my positionality might be perceived by participants as superior in terms of age, knowledge, experience, and even social class. This perception could result in the investigation leaning towards harmony, excessive respect, implicitness, and adherence to authority, causing interviewees to feel as if they were in a weaker power situation. This impacted the quality of the pilot data, as participants did not provide an authentic account of their experiences.

Thus, three modifications were made to the research design to avoid such power relationships:

- My full background information would not be provided to the participants unless requested;

- In terms of personal familiarity, more strangers than acquaintances were recruited as research samples; and

- Participants were constantly reminded of research confidentiality and were reassured by my professionalism and ethics throughout the interview that their experiences were being collected for scientific research only, and that my own personal feelings and judgements would not be involved.
4.6.4 Conducting the Interviews

The interviews were conducted in Shenyang in February 2019, and in Beijing in March 2019.

A copy of the Research Information Sheet (See Appendix 3) and Consent Form (see Appendix 4) were presented and explained to every participant, and extra time was given to answer concerns and questions before the interviews commenced. Permission to audio record the interviews was acquired from all the participants, and no objections were made by participants to handwritten notes being taken throughout the data collection. All the audio files were transferred to a password-protected computer and deleted from the recording device straight after the interviews. In addition, all soft copy files, including audio transcripts, were also stored on a password-protected computer. Hardcopy files, such as handwritten notes and consent forms, were kept in a locked suitcase in my hotel room during the field trip, and in locked drawers at my home after return. This method of secure storage was used throughout all stages of the study.

To ensure a safe and comfortable space for each participant, interview venues were selected with care. This was essential for fostering an environment conducive to open and honest dialogue, allowing the participants to feel at ease while sharing their experiences and perspectives. The venues for each of the 24 interviews are shown in Table 3; while pseudonyms are used instead of the names of the venues:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wang</td>
<td>Restaurant, chosen by Wang</td>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>Sun workplace, chosen by Sun</td>
<td>Zhao</td>
<td>Researcher's home, chosen by researcher</td>
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<td>Zheng</td>
<td>S2 workplace, chosen by ZHENG</td>
<td>Li</td>
<td>Coffee shop, chosen by Li</td>
<td>Bao</td>
<td>EFG coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
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<td>Lu</td>
<td>ABC coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
<td>Wu</td>
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<td>EFG coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
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<td>Shi</td>
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<td>Name</td>
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<td>Kong</td>
<td>ABC coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
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<td>Chu</td>
<td>ABC coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
<td>Yu</td>
<td>Restaurant, chosen by Yu</td>
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<td>He</td>
<td>ABC coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
<td>Jin</td>
<td>Jin workplace, chosen by Jin</td>
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<td>Zhang</td>
<td>ABC coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>Coffee shop, chosen by Yang</td>
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<td>Wei</td>
<td>ABC coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jiang</td>
<td>ABC coffee shop, chosen by researcher</td>
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As indicated in Table 3, eight out of the twelve interviews in Shenyang and all three interviews in Scotland, were conducted in venues I chose. In Beijing, the interview location was selected to suit the Beijing participants. The main reason for this was the geographical size of the cities where data collection took place. Unlike Shenyang and Glasgow, where the size of the city and the convenience of its transportation makes travel simpler, Beijing’s enormous scale and population can make day-to-day commuting extremely challenging; moreover, the dates of the fieldwork in Beijing clashed with the country’s annual Communist Party of China conference, where traffic controls were implemented across the city, accelerating the difficulties in commuting.

Therefore, while the Shenyang interviews were scheduled at a time and place suitable for both the researcher and participants, interviews in Beijing were organised to favour the participants in terms of time and location. This caused a delay of eight days for the Beijing end of the fieldwork, with one participant who was unwell, having to reschedule their meeting to be held via WeChat. Lo Iacono et al. (2016) have argued that data collection through online video connections, could cause the researcher and participants to feel lost due to a lack of social contact and intimacy with each other. Therefore, extra thought was given on
how to proceed with the WeChat interview, including posing more warm-up questions to create a comfortable conversational environment. Both researcher and participant were seated further away from the camera so that facial and body language could be observed. In the end, the outcome was satisfactory; in fact, as both I and the participant experienced the interview in our own living room, neither of us were worried about the time or the cost for travelling to meet in person. Hence, the conversation was proceeded with a slow-paced, relaxing and comfortable atmosphere. Apart from the interview with participant Qin, all the interviews were conducted in person, face to face.

4.7 Data Analysis

Drawing from Constructive Grounded Theory (CGT), data analysis and data collection were conducted simultaneously (Charmaz, 2014). Transcription of interviews was promptly carried out to enable reflection on both the data and the interviewing technique. This approach facilitated the identification of useful information that could inform subsequent interviews, thereby proceeding along an iterative process. However, due to the lack of experience of audio transcription, the first three interviews, which were around 1 hour 40 minutes each, took on average eight hours each to fully transcribe. Thus, the challenges and time consumption of transcribing verbatim were significantly underestimated. Therefore, the second and the third interviews were conducted without being fully prepared in terms of researcher self-reflection as they were tightly scheduled. In addition, this also
resulted in a delay in participants checking their accounts and my interpretations. In order to halt a negative chain reaction, interviews four and five were postponed to the end of the Shenyang interview schedules, which gave me enough time to catch up with the transcriptions, and also allowed time to reflect and rethink on the following data collection process.

I transcribed all the interviews verbatim in the original interview language, which was Mandarin. All changes in voice, such as stammering or longer pauses than expected in the audio file were noted, and any important facial or body language expressions were recorded in the handwritten notes and marked with yellow highlights. All participants had the opportunity to look at the transcriptions, with only a few making suggestions on the appropriateness of some wordings, and amendments were made. The confirmed transcripts were treated as raw data. Moreover, only part of the transcripts, largely those chosen to be used as quotes, were translated into English and presented in this thesis to support the data analysis and discussion. Finally, participants were initially identified by their last name and first initials during the transcription process. However, from the analysis process onwards, they were referred to by a pseudonym or ID code.
4.7.1 Analytical Approach and Making Sense of The Data

The data were analysed manually as opposed to using NVivo or other software, which proved a valuable experience and strategy as it allowed me to immerse myself once again in the voices of my participants.

In this study, data analysis was guided by the general principles of CGT (Charmaz, 2014), where initial listens to interviews and reading of transcripts were followed by breaking down the content into smaller, more meaningful and manageable units. These units were then compared with data from other participants to identify patterns, similarities and differences. This approach established a cyclical process of revisiting earlier interpretations and testing emerging concepts and themes following interviews and further investigations (Skyrme, 2008). Moreover, my ongoing engagement with the literature, both general and related to the theoretical framework, occurred alongside data collection and analysis. Thus, influenced by Skyrme (2008) and Gilliland (2016), the data collected in this study were processed through five iterative inductive/deductive stages.

4.7.1.1 Stage One

The primary objective at this stage of the research was to transcribe the interview recordings as accurately and promptly as possible. This involved repeatedly listening to recordings while typing and reading the transcription – which also enhanced my familiarity with each participant’s circumstances and the overall interview process.
Transcription was a time-consuming, but not merely a mechanical process. Continuous memo writing was carried out throughout the transcriptions to aid the analytical process (Charmaz, 2014). This approach allowed me to acquire significant familiarity with the data, and according to Dowling and Brown (2010) and Gilliland (2016) aids the analysis process. On average, each transcription took up to seven hours to transcribe, with at least an additional hour spent on replaying the recordings for accuracy checks. A key advantage of completing this extensive process has been the inclusion of verbatim quotations, which has enabled a more thorough analysis.

It is worth noting that the quotes' literal translations from Chinese to English were not always grammatically accurate. To make the translations accessible to English readers, some grammatical adjustments were made during the translation process, while preserving the original meaning and context.

Also at this stage, I began to keep reminding myself that the data were collected from each individual participant’s own story, stories that were told from their point of view, which were influenced by many factors such as their age, gender, home of origin, personal and professional background, social status, and even their political standpoint. Therefore ‘each interview is a partial (both incomplete and biased) view of particular states of affairs or events’ (Schostak, 2005, p. 15); and the following analytical weighting was concentrated on the interviews (Gilliland, 2016).
### 4.7.1.2 Stage Two

Having familiarised myself with all transcripts, the task then was to engage in some initial coding of the collected data. Line-by-line coding served as the primary modus of analysis at this stage with the support of index coding. Relevant segments of participants' stories were extracted during the analysis process, specifically those that related to the research questions and phrases or paragraphs that provided insight into the recognition experiences being studied. For instance, a female participant highlighted the importance of not revealing her personal relationship status at work, particularly when being considered for an internal promotion (italicised text in the quote):

> We were going to mortgage a flat together, so I needed that promotion badly, but I could not let them know I was buying a flat, especially with my husband-to-be. Because they would think I will soon be married, I am almost 30, my clock is ticking, I ought to have babies soon, promoting me now would be a waste. So, I had to fake at work and avoid people during the weekends when viewing properties.

At this stage, all individual interview data were organised into manageable units, and then composed into summaries on each individual participant. These streamlined life stories provided an informed record of each informant's social encounters, which facilitated the identification of themes in the next stage.
4.7.1.3 Stage Three

At this stage, themes were developed by establishing patterns in the interview transcripts and summaries that were composed at stage two. Focused coding was utilised to facilitate this process. Frequently recurring topics, thoughts and/or most significant experiences and events that were coded in the individual transcript were identified. Next, these earlier codes from each participant were used to ‘sift through and analyse large amounts of data’ (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138) from the whole sample set. This exercise helped me to explore commonalities and differences within data. For example, many returnees have experienced alienation after returning home; one participant, however, explained that his feelings of disorientation differentiated him from other returnees (italicised text in the quote):

I knew I would be different, and I understand why people will think I am different, what I don’t understand is why most of the time my politeness and courtesy towards others were held in contempt and ridiculed, and were seen as an affectation or being pretentious. *Wasn’t this what Confucius was all about? Wasn’t this what been promoted since when we were small? I felt betrayed, I felt I had been betrayed by my own culture...*

4.7.1.4 Stage Four

By perusing through the range and depth of the data, many potential themes were identified. The subsequent step involved connecting the identified themes with each
other, not only within an individual informant’s data but also between all the other stories in the research.

For instance, at the beginning of an interview one participant commented: ‘I never thought about remaining in the UK after study or looking for a job…my family had the ability through connections to arrange me a better future and a good job at large state-owned enterprises in China.’ This participant demonstrated a clear understanding of the significant impact his family had on his life, while also expressing a strong sense of self-esteem and pride. At the end of the interview, he went on to say: ‘I regret my return; I want to go back for my children's education…I had the skills to work overseas but now I am too comfortable to strive.’ Thus, he acknowledges that the privileges he derived from his family’s influence was one of the reasons he could not obtain adequate recognition, neither for himself nor others around him. Meanwhile, several other informants expressed regretful feelings for similar reasons. For example, another participant stated: ‘Two years after I came back, my dad lost his position and all he had arranged for me became a great burden…all eyes were on me…I should have stayed in UK.’

Clearly, there is a strong commonality in these feelings of regret and thus a new theme around being envied on returning but regretting it later was coded, which helped orientate the next phase of coding around issues of recognition and misrecognition.
4.7.1.5 Stage Five

When the themes and correlations between them were identified, a document was prepared for each participant with a summary identifying these key themes. At this stage, interviews were broken into theme-titled stories; which then provided a structure for the thematic analysis.

Table 4 provides a summary of the key themes from the literature review related to theoretical concepts such as recognition and misrecognition, as well as returnees' experiences upon returning home. These themes were used to guide the structure of the interviews. The last column summarises how the combination of the literature review and interview findings was used to conduct the thematic analysis. This process is consistent with the inductive/deductive approach, as more theories emerged from my continuous reading on the theoretical framework, which led me back to the data with new lenses for further analysis.

Table 4 Summarises of the key themes from literature review, interview, and themes for analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature review themes</th>
<th>Themes from interview</th>
<th>Theme title for analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transnational culture shock</td>
<td>Cultural changes experienced in the UK with transnational implications.</td>
<td>Identity formation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prejudice and discrimination</td>
<td>Perception of the changes that may occur in personal and professional lives upon return to China.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stereotypes</td>
<td>Returnee's and receivers' expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>The normativity of the demand of recognition</td>
<td>Family background, parental influence</td>
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<td>Aspirations, payback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Educational performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Personal behaviour before UK</td>
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<td>Decision of return home</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Micro and meso circle views of return home</td>
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<tr>
<td>The link between fallibility, solidarity and recognition</td>
<td>Cultural dislocation, culture shock, transformation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class, values, status</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attitudes, stress</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opportunities and challenges</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Surprises (unexpected judgements or treatments)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public dimension, democratically created opinions</td>
<td>Group norms, social activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<td>Locals (Beijing and Shenyang)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration experiences with the receivers</td>
<td>Public opinion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognition as appreciation in workplace</td>
<td>English language ability</td>
<td>Experiences with managers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other cosmopolitan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>competence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
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<td>Stress/opportunities/challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognition as admiration in workplace</td>
<td>Networks, relationships, efforts to integrate</td>
<td>Experiences with colleagues</td>
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<td>Values, cosmopolitan</td>
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<td>competence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stress/opportunities/challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equal human rights</td>
<td>UK/China comparison</td>
<td>Experiences of human rights</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Injustice/challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual contributions to the society</td>
<td>Sense of belonging/isolation/social security</td>
<td>Value of returnees of life to society</td>
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<td>Stress</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dedication and reward</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recognition struggles</td>
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### 4.8 Validation, Authenticity and Representation

Several measures were put in place to prevent factors that might invalidate the research findings. Verification procedures were also adopted to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.
As the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, extra attention was given to the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the Chinese language and terms used by the researcher to facilitate the interview, prior to starting data collection. Since I left China 20 years ago to live in the UK, the Mandarin version of the questions was proofread by one of my former colleagues, a native Mandarin speaker and professional Mandarin teacher in Scotland. The phrases and expressions were further tested during the pilot runs, with careful consideration given to feedback and improvements.

During the interviews, I was cautious not to impose my ideas on the interviewees. Terms such as ‘recognition’ and ‘misrecognition’ were avoided when eliciting descriptions of feelings, and participants were encouraged to use their own words to describe whether they felt valued for who they were and what they had done. Additionally, internal validity was sought by cross-checking interview transcripts with the participant list for maximum accuracy.

The trust between the researcher and participants, either established by me or inherited from the participant's introducer via snowballing, helped to enable them to provide a more honest account of their life experiences. In my estimation, this contributed to the reliability and validity of the study (Xue, 2008).

Although some research questions were designed to probe higher-sensitivity topics such as relationship status and financial status, the confidentiality pledge outlined in the participant information sheet and consent form helped reassure interviewees,
allowing them to open up with honest accounts of their thoughts and feelings. This strengthened the authenticity of the data collected.

Lastly, the small size of the dataset meant that this study was not designed to produce generalisable conclusions. However, efforts were made to diversify participant representation during the selection process. Apart from considerations of gender, age, time since returning to China, and professional background, the sampling also covered different career lengths, life stages, and social classes. This allowed for the collection of data on participants' varying levels of government connections, personal aspirations and political standpoints. Therefore, although the small research sample cannot claim to represent the entire Chinese student returnee population, the samples diversity and depth provides a solid foundation for illuminating Chinese returnee experiences.

In addition to the various challenges faced during the research process, I also had to confront the difficulties of working in a second language. As a researcher, working in a language other than my mother tongue posed a unique set of challenges, which not only required substantial effort but also added to the stress and complexity of the study. One of the most significant challenges was reviewing the literatures of the study field and grappling with the theoretical frameworks. Engaging with complex academic texts in a second language demanded a thorough understanding of the concepts and theories discussed, which often required additional time and effort to ensure accurate comprehension. The process of synthesising and critically evaluating the literature was made more difficult by the language barrier, as I had to
continually check for nuances, subtleties and contextual meanings that might be lost in translation. Furthermore, writing the study in a second language heightened the burden of ensuring that the text was both clear and accurate. With the aid of my study supervisors and a proof-reader, I continually checked my grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure to prevent misunderstandings or inaccuracies. The added pressure of communicating complex ideas and findings in a language other than my own was significant, and required considerable patience, perseverance, and resilience.

The process of interpreting and translating the data required great attention to detail, as I needed to ensure that the original meaning and nuances of the participants’ words were preserved while making them comprehensible to an English-speaking audience. This involved grappling with cultural, idiomatic and linguistic differences, which often demanded a deep understanding of both the source and target languages. Despite these challenges, I strived to maintain the integrity of the research and faithfully represent the voices of the participants, while navigating the complexities of language, interpretation, translation, literature review, and theoretical framework. The difficulties and stresses encountered during this process, ultimately contributed to providing me with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the challenges faced by researchers working in second languages, and the importance of careful communication in cross-cultural studies.
4.9 Ethical Considerations

This study was ethically approved by the University of Edinburgh, Research and Knowledge Exchange Ethics Committee, and was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical guidelines.

Participants were provided with research information sheets containing details of the project's ethical considerations prior to the interviews, and were reminded at the start of each interview of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. They were also asked to read and sign a consent form, which included a request for their permission to be audio recorded during the interview, and their right to turn off or pause the recording at any time was also included. All participants agreed to be recorded and no participants chose to withdraw from the study, while two participants requested to pause the recording during their interviews. One participant needed to take an expected phone call from work, while the other requested a pause due to the sensitive personal information the participant did not want to be recorded. However, in both instances, the recorder was not turned off completely, ensuring the continuity of the interview process once resumed. All recorded files were transcribed verbatim by me, no information was disregarded or deleted during the transcribing procedure, and member-checking mechanisms were in place to ensure accuracy and reliability.

All the audio files were transferred to a password-protected computer from the recording device straight after the interviews and deleted after the transcription. All
the soft copy files, including audio transcripts were stored in a password-protected computer too. Hard copy files, such as handwritten notes and consent forms were kept in a locked cabinet in my private office.

The anonymity of participants was protected by assigning them all with an ID code during the data transcription and analysis process, and then assigned a pseudonym in the thesis discussion. No personal information, including the names of participants' workplaces or the universities they graduated from, were either published or passed on to parties not involved in the research. Also, extra care was taken to ensure that no comments or discussion in the study could be traced back to original informants.

I already discussed my positionality at the start of this chapter, justifying the need to do so as part of engaging with the ethics of research, an acknowledgement of the power a researcher has to define, describe and analyse, and a need to work constantly not to abuse such a privileged position.

**4.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented my epistemological and ontological stance in conducting this study and also described my role and positionality. It detailed my research design which is qualitative and that I draw from constructivist grounded theory to assist with my analysis. Moreover, the process of research, including sample recruitment, data-collecting procedures and data analysis methods have been
explicitly expounded. Finally, the trustworthiness of the research finding have been discussed and ethical considerations of the study noted. In the next chapter, research findings are discussed in the form of composite biographies of the returnees studied, followed by a thematic analysis of their experiences back home.
5 Chapter Five: Composite Biographies to Present Interview Data

5.1 Introduction

The use of composite biography as a research method has increasingly attracted the interest and acknowledgement of scholars across diverse disciplines (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Adams, 2008; Macintyre Latta and Buck, 2008). This innovative approach combines the lives of multiple individuals into a single narrative, providing a unique and comprehensive perspective on complex societal issues, cultural contexts and historical events (Willis, 2019).

The composite biography approach enabled me to explore and synthesize the experiences, struggles and achievements of the Chinese student returnees, weaving their stories together into different single narratives which captures the types of returnees emerging from the study. My decision to utilize composite biography as a way to present my research findings, was significantly influenced by R.W. Connell's (1985) book Teachers' Work. By drawing from the narratives of multiple teachers, Connell weaves together their experiences to create a holistic understanding of the teaching profession, as well as its challenges, demands and rewards. Her work demonstrates the value of integrating multiple individual narratives to provide comprehensive and nuanced insight into a particular phenomenon. Inspired by Connell's approach, I sought to apply the composite biography method to my own research, capturing the complexity and diversity of experiences among my study's participants, while identifying common themes and shared experiences.
In the rest of this chapter, I present my research findings through four sets of interconnected biographical sketches, which collectively represent the complete experiences of my 24 participants. While the chosen names for these composite biographies might suggest gender specificity, they are simply names, with both male and female participants included in each composite biography. My objective is to examine the lives of my participants from various perspectives, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues and themes that define their experiences of recognition.

5.2 Smith

5.2.1 Smith: The Thumbnail

Smith represents participants in my study who come from privileged backgrounds with connections, such as being part of a family involved in provincial or national level politics. These individuals exemplify success achieved primarily through their resources and connections, rather than personal ability.

All of the participants in the Smith category are in their late thirties, originate from second-tier Chinese cities and have lived in Beijing since returning from their studies in the UK. As the only grandsons on the paternal side of their families, they enjoy the highest level of indulgence and privilege compared to their female cousins. At the same time, they also face immense expectations of success, particularly in education.
Despite these expectations, none of the participants in the Smith category excelled academically during their schooling years, leading their parents to perceive them as disappointments to their family. To turn things around and restore their family's reputation, the parents sent their children to the UK, hoping the change of environment would enable them to outperform their peers.

Upon returning to China, all participants in this category not only held BSc and MSc degrees, but also possessed valuable Western living and working experiences. After years of hard work in Beijing, their fortunes transformed. Participants in the Smith category went on to become multi-millionaire entrepreneurs, secure senior executive positions in private companies, and obtain mid-level management roles in large state-owned enterprises. This showcases the variety of successes achieved by these individuals and highlights the combined impact of their international experiences and their family's socioeconomic influences on their professional trajectories.

5.2.2 Smith: The Story

5.2.2.1 Micro (Family)

Smith comes from a typical high-ranking official China Communist Party (CCP) family. His grandfather was among the party's first-generation governors, and his father continued the political legacy, boasting numerous influential connections.
As an only child, Smith was raised, as we say in China like a prince. He wanted for nothing from his family, and they meticulously planned and arranged each step of his upbringing to ensure he could fulfil his purpose to carry on the family legacy. Smith described his childhood with a tone of resignation:

Oh, they love me, no doubt about that... but their love made my life very boring. It was like the planned economy, everything is planned and decided for the family’s ‘greater good’... so in their eyes I was not a son, I should be their best creation.

In order to protect and sustain family’s prosperity and wealth, i.e., the ‘greater good’, Smith described his parents as being: ‘determined to configure their family’s only grandson to the highest specifications’. For this reason, Smith parents’ purposeful love for him largely manifested in excessive investment in his educations and nutrition. They believed it was their obligation to raise a smart, strong, top university graduate with the intellect and physique to take over the ‘throne’. To achieve this, Smith's parents secured spots for him in the best schools, provided private tutoring and fed him the finest foods.

Despite these investments, Smith never met his parents' expectations. He was never perceived as a ‘good’ student at school, where core subjects like Chinese and Mathematics were the sole criteria for academic success: ‘I was bad at the main subjects, but I was very good at making things and interacting with people, so I wasn't considered “academically smart”.' Smith's low ranking in school exams shamed his parents: ‘I used to go to the same schools as my parents' friends'
children, and everybody knew how much we spent on my studies, so my low ranking in the exams made my parents lose face, big time.’ He was seen as a disappointment in everyone’s eyes: ‘They think I should be much better since I was born into such a respected family with a strong social standing.’ Moreover, Smith lamented that the endless coursework his parents imposed, left him no time for anything but academic training. The excess nutrition he received led to weight gain, resulting in body shaming at school: ‘So in most people’s eyes, I was just an awkward, flabby, low achiever who had a rich dad.’

Eventually, Smith's parents lost hope in his academic success in China and decided to send him to the UK in his mid-teens: ‘I think my results just broke them at that point; they lost faith in me...they were misled into believing that UK higher education was easier...so I was on the plane.’ Without his parents' constant supervision, Smith found the freedom to experiment, and his studies improved. He reflected on this significant change in his life:

My people skills, which had never been appreciated in China, were my biggest strength in the UK. I had many local and international friends who helped me in learning English and all other things...Although life in the UK wasn't as easy as I was told, I think I was more suited for the Western way of teaching and learning; I did well in the universities...Without my parents controlling me every day, I was able to do my best, and I just think I was more respected by people around me there (in the UK); I felt you were allowed to be different.
Eight years later, Smith returned home with two degrees from a Russell Group university, fluent in English and having acquired cosmopolitan competencies. His parents were overjoyed that Smith had restored their reputation and given them their ‘face’ back: ‘They took me to different celebrations and showed me off to everyone; they were happy and proud, and for the first time, I felt I had been recognised by them.’

From being perceived as a let-down to the family's pride, to becoming a successful returnee, Smith's transformative study experience abroad significantly enhanced his parents' self-esteem. They now believe they have fulfilled their family responsibility of raising a capable successor. This immense sense of accomplishment, led them to change their approach to Smith's life, transitioning from a controlling role to a supportive one: ‘I began to feel a sense of respect from them (the parents), something I had never experienced before.’

After returning to China, Smith chose not to settle in his hometown but instead moved to Beijing. Despite being hundreds of miles away, his parents' love remained close, primarily expressed through aiding Smith by investing their financial and political wealth in his life and career. Smith outlined four significant ways his parents alleviated his stress in Beijing. First, leveraging their political connections, they helped him transfer his household registry from his hometown to Beijing. To illustrate its significance, Smith explained that: ‘it was much harder and more expensive than getting UK citizenship...a very limited quota with very strict rules, impossible for a majority of the migrant population.’ Second, his parents bought Smith a decent-sized flat in a prime location in Beijing. Coupled with the household registry, their
generosity propelled Smith straight to the front in the competition of life, as these achievements were the lifelong aspirations of countless others. Third, Smith’s father helped him secure his first job through connections after he had been refused by many companies when applying by himself. Fourth, when Smith left his job to become an entrepreneur, his parents supported his decision and provided financial investments.

To sum up, Smith categorizes the love he received from his parents into three main types. Before going to the UK, he was protected and guided, with his family’s love manifesting as strong possessiveness. While in the UK, his achievements earned his parents’ pride and self-esteem, so their love was based on their appreciation. After returning with his world-class education experience, Smith gained his parents’ trust. As he began working, they gradually passed on their connections and wealth to him. Nowadays, with both of Smith’s parents retiring from their positions, he is inheriting the family legacy and his career is flourishing. His parents are pleased with his progress in life and career, and Smith is viewed as a role model by many young people in his and his parents’ social circles. From Smith’s perspective, although the love he received from his family was not always in a form he approved, he recognizes and understands their intentions: ‘I am loved in my family’s own way.’
5.2.2.2 Meso (Workplace)

Upon returning from the UK, Smith worked for two organizations. He has therefore interacted with two different sets of co-workers, and the experiences were completely different.

The first recognition challenges he faced in his work life were during his job hunting. Smith came to Beijing in early 2008 to pursue a career in the fast-growing tourism industry, burgeoning as a result of the forthcoming Olympic Games during that same year. Armed with two world-class business degrees and strong references from his tutors and internships in the UK, he was confident of his ability to secure a job at one of the internationally expanding Chinese travel agency. So, when his father offered to help arrange for him to obtain a job, Smith declined due to his self-confidence and desire for independence.

He had his sights set on two dream positions at China Central Government-led Enterprises (CGLE), both involving the development of Western techniques new to China. Smith was confident in his qualifications but was unexpectedly passed over for both positions in favour of less qualified but better-connected candidates. Smith had not anticipated the importance of family connections in the Chinese government-affiliated institutions' recruitment process. After being rejected by all six tourism CGLEs in Beijing, he turned to his father for help:
I had no option but to use my father’s guanxi,...the whole industry was monopolised by CGLEs at that time, and they were corrupted...it was not about what you knew, it was all about who you knew.

Eventually, with his father's assistance, Smith secured a position in the international department of a top Chinese tourism CGLE. He was one of three employees who had studied abroad and the only one with both BSc and MSc business degrees and overseas work experience. As the company was going through its internationalisation process, Smith was eager to contribute his skills and expertise. Ironically, soon after he started his new post, Smith realised he was being 'babysat', meaning that he was not given any real tasks and was being praised for doing nothing outstanding by his managers in order to please his father. Smith was disgusted by such behaviour, and felt frustrated that his skills and expertise from the UK were going unused and unappreciated. He was told to 'hold his horses' and enjoy the easy work, which led to resentment from his colleagues: ‘...my colleagues hated me for doing nothing and stealing their attention’.

Despite feeling undervalued, his friends and family considered him fortunate, telling him not to be ungrateful for his comfortable position. Smith interpreted these comments as sarcastic swipes at his powerful father. To prove himself, Smith drafted a list of recommendations for the company's internationalisation strategies based on his overseas experience. This caught the attention he sought, and he was assigned to work on the company's new international website. His dedication and cross-cultural knowledge contributed greatly to the project, leading to promotions and
commendations. Smith and his parents were proud of his achievements, acknowledging both his father’s influence and his own hard work: ‘I know my father’s influence was there, but my efforts played the big part …my parents were very happy to see their son being recognised by others.’

However, Smith’s diligence and enthusiasm did not help him connect with his colleagues. One main issue was that his energy disrupted the company’s harmonious culture. In Chinese bureaucratic government institutions like CGLEs, promotions were often based on seniority, so employees avoided being innovative or enthusiastic to minimize mistakes. Smith’s innovative ideas and energy disrupted this balance, causing friction with his co-workers, particularly those who had held the same comfortable positions for a long time. They initially tried to persuade Smith to conform, but when he refused he was isolated. Moreover, Smith’s co-workers grew increasingly resentful when they were assigned to work with him on his new ideas, accusing him of dragging them down. Additionally, they often mocked his recognition by management, attributing his success to his father’s connections rather than his abilities.

Smith’s Western characteristics and attitudes towards life and work further strained relationships with co-workers. They viewed his attention to detail, Scottish accent and courteous manners as pretentious: ‘...they didn’t approve of me, they even despised me for wearing colognes and different outfits every day and made fun of my manners to the ladies…I didn’t have any friends at my first job.’, where Smith faced constant ridicule and struggled to make friends. He complained to
management and HR, but to no avail: ‘no one is willing to displease anyone, as you
don’t know who they know.’

Consequently, five years into his first job, Smith decided to move on: ‘it was a waste
of time for me working in there…the higher I climbed the harder and more frustrated I
got when dealing with the undisciplined teams and the pointless company political
guanxi games’. In 2013, he left his job to start his own travel business. Although his
parents initially disagreed with his decision, they supported him with investment.
Smith’s start-up was a success, and his dedication to principles and high standards
attracted customer loyalty. He used his knowledge from the UK and his previous jobs
to create a positive work environment and expand his business. For instance, with
his transnational knowledge and experiences, Smith created a modern, fair, efficient,
and motivated family-like environment for his colleagues. He recalled, ‘I was in a
Scottish family business during my internship year, and they treated everyone like
their own...when I introduced it to my business, it united us as one, and everyone
was full of energy. Unity is strength.’

As a reward and team-building mechanism, Smith took his ‘employees of the year’ to
the UK every time he visited his suppliers. He explained, ‘I give them the opportunity
to experience what their customer would experience, and also show them where I
studied and lived when I was young, let them know me, believe in me.’ His creativity
and innovative spirit also expanded his business further: ‘I was the first private
company in Beijing with direct collaborations with UK tour operators to offer Chinese
As his business grew, Smith expanded into various aspects of the holiday market, crediting his study abroad experience to his success. Looking back, Smith considers himself to have been recognised in his career, though he acknowledges his parents' financial and political influences contributed greatly to his success. Although he faced prejudice and lack of appreciation in his earlier years, the respect he now receives from stakeholders outweighs those negative experiences. Smith views those challenges as tests of his determination and focuses on the opinions of those who truly matter to him.

### 5.2.2.3 Macro (Community)

In contrast with the challenges he faced in gaining recognition within his family and workplaces, Smith has consistently been admired and praised by his community. With the strong support of his family and his own accomplishments, he has always been highly esteemed by those around him. For instance, Smith’s intercultural identity is recognised and valued by Chinese companies and their human resources departments. Most returnees cannot afford to self-fund a longer-term overseas education or secure formal employment during their time abroad. Smith's eight years studying and working in the UK are viewed as both rare and commendable in the Chinese job market and by the general public.
As a successful returnee with a strong drive to pursue his dreams in Beijing, Smith has been an inspiration to many. People have used his story to encourage their children, and local study-abroad recruitment agencies have leveraged his experiences to promote studies in the UK. His Beijing household registry and mortgage-free flat have afforded him high social status among his peers too, making him highly respected and esteemed in various situations. Smith notes that local Beijing residents regard him highly due to his accomplishments and resources:

‘When local Beijing people learn that you are from out of town but have a local household registry, they think highly of you, and if you tell them you have a mortgage-free flat inside the third ring road, they will marry you to their daughter.’

Another source of public esteem stems from his CGLE employee identity. He was admired not only for his competitive pay and benefits but also for his patriotism, having returned to serve his country with the foreign skills he acquired through state-level jobs in international affairs. Smith's most significant recognition experiences were the ones after he started making his own journey through his own entrepreneurship: in his own words, ‘the experiences encountered in my own life without much of my family’s involvement.’

As the owner of his company, he introduced many Western business models and social responsibility concepts into its business operations and culture. His overseas
experiences brought him not only wealth but also reputation and honour on multiple occasions. For example, within education, he became a regular guest speaker at top Chinese tourism schools. He also collaborated with non-Beijing based universities, offering paid internships to students from less developed cities and providing them with opportunities to gain exposure to cutting-edge experiences in the industry as well as cosmopolitan opportunities. Furthermore, as a successful entrepreneur, Smith’s story inspires numerous people. He has been interviewed by multiple media outlets about his achievements and frequently appears as a guest at British Council and China-Britain Business Council events, showcasing the accomplishments of successful returnees. In his local community, as one of the major taxpayers, Smith is recognised by the local government as a role model for other businesses and individuals to follow in contributing back to society.

When discussing his most significant recognition experiences, Smith focuses on the influence of Chinese moral principles on his life. He found that his eight years living in the UK made him very Western, but once he returned to China his Western traits were quickly suppressed by traditional Chinese ideas. Smith particularly emphasised that his cosmopolitan competencies held little value before his financially successful and socially reputed father. He noted that, although his father appeared to recognise Smith’s academic and career achievements, he felt he would never attain the level of acknowledgment and individual agency he desired. Smith attributed this to the traditional Chinese father-son relationship based on filial piety, where a son’s position remains subordinate to his father: ‘In this relationship, a son will always be a son.’
In general, Smith has been treated with respect and has established his place in wider society. With his influence and wealth, Smith feels a strong sense of security in his life; therefore, when asked if he would leave China to live in the West, he answers 'no' without any hesitation:

I know a lot of people are in difficulties in China in terms of accessing social welfare and social security, and I know certain things in the West could be much easier and better, but with the establishments I have today I am living in the best circumstances; it may be costly, but it is affordable to me.

5.2.3 Smith: In Summary

Participants in the Smith category are confident individuals who are loved and respected at home, work and in the wider community. The lives of Smith-type participants have been significantly influenced by their families, whose strong support, both financially and politically, has contributed extensively to their personal success. Furthermore, their successful study abroad experiences marked a turning point in their lives, as it opened up opportunities for them to showcase their personal abilities, gained their parents' trust, and laid the foundation for gaining respect and esteem in their meso and macro living spaces.

Independence and autonomy in life and work are important to this group of participants, coupled with a strong consciousness of personal freedom which they
brought back from their extended stays in the UK. However, this sense of individual agency is not widely embraced or appreciated in Chinese society, where collectivism and adherence to traditional values often take precedence. As a result, these participants found that their desire for independence and autonomy in both their personal lives and work, conflicted with the cultural expectations they encountered upon returning to China.

Nevertheless, Smiths have high expectations of themselves and strong capabilities, allowing them to fully utilise their cosmopolitan competencies to thrive, particularly when they face fewer restrictions from their families or workplaces. Furthermore, Smith-type participants appreciate and recognise the out-of-towners’ struggle for basic social security in Beijing, but their accomplishments and family supports have kept them away from such obstacles in life. Overall, Smith-type participants are very satisfied with their current lives and status, and have achieved the three recognition indicators in Honneth’s framework across the three spheres that Hegel writes about.

5.3 Taylor

5.3.1 Taylor: The Thumbnail

Taylor represents participants in this study who moved to Beijing after returning from the UK. They come from middle-class families in second or third-tier Chinese cities. Unlike Smith, the families of the ‘Taylor’ participants did not possess substantial economic capital, and their parents were unable to offer significant financial aid,
especially after investing in their UK education. As a result, the Taylors achieved their accomplishments in Beijing primarily through their own abilities and efforts. Similar to the Smiths, Taylor participants were not considered ‘good students’ in school, and their reason for pursuing UK studies was that their parents believed they had no chance of succeeding in China and hoped studying abroad could increase their competitiveness. However, due to affordability constraints, Taylor participants’ overseas experiences were limited to a shorter one-year UK master's degree program, preventing them from staying longer to gain experiences like those Smith had.

Upon returning to China, Taylor participants' limited UK experiences did not provide them with significant advantages in their initial job-hunting efforts, and after many years of hard work, their migrant identities in Beijing still meant they had to struggle to find a sense of belonging under the Hukou system.

5.3.2 Taylor: In Layers

5.3.2.1 Micro (Family)

Taylor is an only child and his parents support him with everything they can provide. However, unlike Smith, Taylor grew up in a more pressurised family environment. His parents aspired for the entire family to benefit from Taylor’s future success to enjoy a wealthier life. To achieve this goal, Taylor's parents created a rigorous
disciplinary culture within the family. They were determined to push Taylor to reach educational and career levels that they themselves desired.

As a son living within a filial piety moral framework, Taylor understood his obligation to obey his parents and his responsibility to financially provide for them when he grew up. Thus, he worked hard in his childhood studies, trying to prove to his parents that they could depend on him in the future. Unfortunately, his exam results never met his parents' expectations, leading to increased pressure from them.

After high school, Taylor was admitted to a mid-ranked Chinese university in his region, but it was not the institution his parents had in mind. Unlike some of his wealthier classmates, Taylor’s family lacked the resources to send him to a better university. Therefore, they considered sending him abroad to study. However, the family could not financially support a full undergraduate degree overseas. Instead, they decided Taylor would pursue a UK MSc degree after completing his bachelor’s in China to save on costs. They hoped that a short UK experience would ‘gold plate’ Taylor and increase his future competitiveness and employability.

Throughout his university years in China, Taylor and his parents actively prepared for his planned overseas studies. Apart from following his usual curriculum, Taylor was asked by his parents to devote his extra time to studying English. Meanwhile, his parents carefully invested their savings to ensure they were financially ready to support his adventures abroad. However, the arrangement did not serve its intended purpose. With the excitement of going abroad in mind, Taylor became distracted...
from his studies, resulting in only average grades and intermediate English skills upon graduation.

Taylor's university and language attainments did not impress his parents, as they did not enable him to gain admission to a highly ranked UK university. For the ‘collective family interests’, Taylor's parents used a student recruitment agency to exaggerate Taylor's academic abilities in his applications, and he was sent to a top UK university to study Computing through a pre-master course.

Taylor recalls his time in the UK as challenging but rewarding: ‘It was very hard to follow the programs sometimes…I had to spend most of my time in the library to catch up, so I didn't really have time to explore things outside the university.’ He also emphasised the stress he experienced: ‘I was very stressed, largely for financial reasons, as I couldn't fail. It would be too costly for my parents, and I didn't know how to face them.’ With dedication and perseverance, Taylor completed his MSc with a passing grade and returned to China immediately after his final exams: ‘I didn’t plan to find employment in the UK, as I wasn't sure how long it would take. Every day in the UK cost money, and I needed to start making some to repay my parents as soon as I can.’

Despite the growing scepticisms about the employability and value of one-year British MSc degrees in China, Taylor's parents celebrated his return. They believed Taylor's UK degree would mark the beginning of the family's prosperity.

Consequently, Taylor was persuaded by his parents to leave home for a career in
Beijing, where the IT industry was much more advanced. Taylor was determined to find a job in one of the top foreign IT companies in the capital: ‘I knew it would be a hard life, but I needed a high-salary job to prove myself and repay my parents…I knew they were waiting for me to do that.’

To date, Taylor has been living in Beijing for seven years. Unlike Smith, Taylor has received hardly any financial aid from his family; on the contrary, he sends money back to his parents every month to support them financially: ‘although I have my own life here, supporting them is my undeniable responsibility. It’s a tiring life…it was not quite what I expected when I returned from the UK.’

Moreover, Taylor and his wife have been experiencing difficulties in their relationship since their baby was born 10 months ago. To cover the unanticipated increase in living costs, Taylor, currently the only one able to work full-time, has taken on more responsibilities at work, leaving him with little time for his wife and baby. As a result, Taylor finds little enjoyment in his life in Beijing and feels far from being truly ‘loved’ by his family. He believes that the pressure from his parents' expectations has guided his career and personal life in an undesired direction. Their misjudgements of his abilities, the value of his degree, and his own needs, have led to a life that falls short of the prosperity and happiness he had envisioned.

Furthermore, being confined within a family culture that emphasizes filial piety, Taylor feels guilty for not being able to meet his parents' ever-growing expectations. This has significantly contributed to his overall anxiety and has left him questioning
his self-worth. He explained, ‘In my mind, I'm constantly torn between opposing and resisting my parents' actions and feeling that doing so is morally wrong. I'm not sure what I'm doing.’

5.3.2.2 Meso (Workplace)

Taylor's personal abilities and perseverance have been the primary drivers of his current career success. Unlike Smith, Taylor began his journey in Beijing with minimal family support. His pragmatic attitude enabled him to adapt quickly: ‘I knew I had no work experience, and my job-hunting budget was limited, so I couldn't be picky or overly ambitious. I needed to take whatever I could get before going broke.’ However, his parents did not appreciate Taylor's realistic approach to his career path. In their opinion, his UK credentials should have led to a higher starting point in his career: ‘They felt the money they spent on my UK education was wasted.’

Despite his parents’ expectations, Taylor secured his first job just three weeks after arriving in Beijing. He joined a small start-up IT company that subcontracted orders from major foreign brands, localizing their software for the Chinese market. The job was not particularly challenging, and Taylor was hired more for his English skills than his professional abilities. Although the pay was modest, it included food and accommodation: ‘It was not an ideal job, but it suited my situation at the time. It saved me money and gave me work experience, which were the things I needed most.’
Another attraction of the job for Taylor was the chance to access larger companies. As he was in charge of customer liaison, Taylor was determined to use the position as a springboard for his desired career. For this reason, he devoted himself to every task, impressing his customers with his diligence and competence. Taylor’s performance earned appreciation from his employer as well. He was grateful for the recognition but felt it was not for what he truly wanted to be acknowledged for: ‘They used me only as a translator: that wasn’t what I was trained for.’ Recognising that Taylor’s talents needed a bigger platform, his boss recommended him for a product development position in a large Foreign Invested IT Enterprise (FIE) that had just entered the Chinese market.

Taylor was satisfied with his new role. He was part of a small team led by an American manager, and all his colleagues were young Chinese MSc graduates who had returned from overseas. Taylor got along well with his team: ‘We respected each other, not just because we had similar experiences, but most importantly, we felt equal. We were all recruited based on our abilities; Guanxi was not influential in foreign companies in China, at least back then.’

Taylor's American manager held him in high regard. As the company had just entered China, Taylor’s local knowledge from his previous job was a valuable asset. Additionally, his English language proficiency allowed him to assist his manager both professionally and personally, leading to a close friendship:
My manager was new to China when he recruited me, so we were both new to an unfamiliar environment. We were grateful for having met and helped each other back then, and he has been a friend and mentor to me ever since, and our two families are friends too.

In contrast to Smith's experience in CGLEs where close relationships with managers attracted co-workers' jealousy and denigration, Taylor and his colleagues maintained a healthy working relationship in the FIE. He reflects, ‘I guess we all understood at that time, that in a foreign company you survive on your abilities; Chinese-style guanxi hardly works.’ However, outside his co-worker circle, Taylor found it challenging to navigate his professional life without guanxi, especially when dealing with customers.

Nevertheless, after two years of exceptional contributions to several successful projects, Taylor was promoted to the position of his manager's deputy. This significant advancement in his career provided him with a larger platform, and the accompanying salary increase alleviated some of his financial stress. He was able to afford a place much closer to work without needing roommates. At this point, Taylor felt that he was finally gaining his parents' approval. His status as a returnee and holding a high position in a foreign company were the ideal combination his parents desired, as they believed it would bring prestige to their social status. Taylor continued to thrive in his new position, receiving favourable feedback from both his Chinese and foreign colleagues. His dedication and contributions were recognized by his company headquarters, and he was awarded the Outstanding
Contributor Prize for three consecutive years. As a result, his team enjoyed substantial annual bonuses, and all staff members expressed gratitude and respect for his leadership.

At present, Taylor is a well-respected team leader and highly appreciated employee. However, he gradually faces a plateau in both his career and personal development. He attributes this stagnation to his decision to work in Beijing, noting: ‘Beijing is a big city dominated by powerful people, you need to have bigger guanxi to get things done, which I don’t have. If I were in my hometown, my current guanxi would be enough to take me to a better place.’ Thus, at work, Taylor is happy to be recognised by his colleagues and employer, but he is anxious that his lack of substantial guanxi in Beijing may hinder his further growth and success. This anxiety casts a shadow over his professional life, leaving him to wonder if his efforts to build a career in the capital city were truly the right path to follow. Additionally, his parents’ expectations continue to influence Taylor's life, adding to his anxiety and uncertainty. They often compare him to successful returnees they know, emphasising their accomplishments in prestigious companies, their extensive guanxi, and the wealth they have accumulated. This constant comparison exacerbates Taylor's self-doubt and puts immense pressure on him to excel in his career. Moreover, his parents expect Taylor to eventually assume a leadership role in a large, multinational corporation. They believe that his education and experience in the UK have equipped him with the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve this level of success.
Taylor, on the other hand, wants for a sense of personal fulfilment and balance in his life. While he understands and respects the importance of his parents' expectations, he struggles to reconcile these aspirations with his own desires and values. Indeed, he sometimes wonders if moving to a different city or exploring alternative career paths would alleviate the pressure he constantly feels to meet his parents' expectations.

5.3.2.3 Macro (Community)

Taylor's initial reflections on his experiences in Beijing after graduating from the UK, focused on the feelings of uncertainty and alienation he experienced during his transition. Without any assistance, Taylor recalls that his first few months in Beijing were the most challenging and insecure times of his life. To illustrate, he compared his experiences in Beijing with those he had in the UK:

In the UK, people and government agencies made me feel more tolerated and relaxed whenever I was lost during my transition...Here, they made me feel that it was a violation to the local people and council that I had decided to move to my own capital. I was hardly treated with patience and decency, especially when dealing with the authorities...I hate to say it, but a lot of the time, the UK was much easier and more welcoming than my own capital.
As an out-of-towner, Taylor had to obtain a temporary residency certificate to live in Beijing and report to local police periodically to keep it valid. The cumbersome application process and the troublesome procedure to obtain certification, made Taylor feel as if he was in a foreign country dealing with an unfriendly immigration system. To complicate matters, Beijing city policies on temporary residency change arbitrarily. Taylor was once asked to leave the city immediately because the authorities decided to reduce migration numbers for a risk assessment during the Party's annual conference: ‘You don't know what's going to change tomorrow...For a long time, I was living out of suitcases, ready to be evacuated at any minute.'

Taylor's identity as an overseas returnee did not ease his transition in Beijing. On the contrary, it became his biggest psychological burden, as his parents constantly reminded him that their investment in his UK education had not yet been repaid. Additionally, the high cost of living contributed to his heightened stress levels. Even in his current position with a healthy salary, Taylor struggles to feel secure. Furthermore, not being on the Beijing household registry, means he has to pay considerably more to access certain social benefits. For example, visits to the hospital could be quite expensive for him: ‘It was not easy to stay healthy in such a stressful environment...every cough could be costly.’ Thus, Taylor sometimes felt like a refugee, but later corrected himself, noting, ‘I have seen refugees receive better treatment in the UK.’

The local general public often held a low opinion of migrants like Taylor. It was commonly believed that ‘out-of-towners’ steal local jobs and resources, and until they
are admitted to the local household registry, they are held in contempt: ‘They saw us as second-class citizens with slim futures...Many people I know had to end relationships with local partners because they couldn't get blessings from their partner's family.’

Therefore, although Taylor's career has brought him recognition at work and within his community, such esteem has never been able to outweigh the sense of inferiority he feels as an out-of-towner. The wealth and status he had accumulated over the years through his professional life, are not enough to provide the comfort he desires, leaving him feeling powerless: ‘I could be very confident with my local staff in the office, but really small and embarrassed when overhearing them talk about their privileges in life during coffee breaks.’

Taylor's stress levels spiked again when his baby was born ten months ago. He elaborates on his frustration by comparing child social welfare in China and the UK:

As we're not on the local Hukou registry, the national insurance we have paid, which was at the same rate as the local people paid, did not cover all my wife's medical bills, especially with my baby's dystocia, it has cost me an arm and a leg...A friend of mine who is working in the UK on a temporary visa had her pregnancy medical care for free.
In contrast to the UK’s more inclusive approach, Taylor and his family also face significant barriers in accessing local state childcare and education services due to their migrant status:

Unlike in the UK, we migrants in our own country are restricted in accessing local state childcare and education services, so we have to relocate our home to a cheaper district and spend all we had on a mortgage to be added to the waiting list of a private nursery...As we can't afford a flat within the catchment area of both a good nursery and the schools, we can only hope that we can afford to move again later for the schools...it is just unrealistic.

Another major concern for Taylor and his family is the lack of trust in baby food safety within the country:

Government controls on baby food safety have been just hopeless, you can't trust any brand in the shops...I have to pay my friend to send us baby formula from the UK every month.

The dramatic increase in living costs has forced Taylor to take on extra jobs in addition to his already demanding workload: ‘I am 24/7 at work, and my wife is 24/7 at home...We may be seen as successful with good jobs, a flat and a baby, but we know we are both worn out and can’t see an end to this exhaustion.’ Taylor insists that no matter how hard he and his wife work or how much they earn, they will never
be recognised by the country and the people around them without a Beijing Hukou. As a result, he is losing faith.

In general, as an out-of-towner, Taylor's life in Beijing is filled with challenges that significant impact his self-esteem. The constant sense of misrecognition and the difficulties he faces due to the Hukou system, contribute to his struggle with self-worth. Taylor's professional achievements have brought him some recognition at work, but as mentioned before this recognition is not enough to offset the feelings of inferiority that stem from his out-of-town status. His interactions with local colleagues, for instance, can be disheartening when he overhears them discussing the privileges they enjoy simply because they hold a local Hukou. This further reinforces Taylor's feelings of inadequacy and exclusion, undermining his confidence and self-assurance. Moreover, his inability to fully access social services and benefits available to local residents, exacerbates his self-esteem issues. Despite his hard work and contributions to society, he is not able to afford to access to the same level of recognition and support that local residents receive. This constant reminder of his ‘second-class’ status, serves as a blow to his sense of value.

Financial stress also plays a role in Taylor's self-esteem struggles. The high cost of living in Beijing, coupled with the added expenses of accessing private healthcare, education and imported baby products, forced Taylor to take on the aforementioned second job – increasing his exhaustion and dissatisfaction with his life.
Taylor's strained relationship with his parents, who have high expectations for their son, is another factor that affects his sense of self-worth. Their disappointment in his choices and inability to fully appreciate his accomplishments contribute to Taylor's feelings of inadequacy and guilt. He is torn between opposing his parents' expectations and feeling morally wrong for doing so, which only compounds his self-esteem issues.

In conclusion, Taylor's self-esteem struggles as an out-of-towner in Beijing are deeply connected to the Hukou system, financial stress and his relationship with his parents. His constant sense of misrecognition, exclusion and inferiority, along with the unrelenting pressure to meet high expectations, have left him questioning his self-worth and struggling to maintain a positive self-image.

5.3.3 Taylor: In Summary

Participants in my study like Taylor are hardworking 'out-of-towners', who have survived in Beijing by relying on their own competence and diligence. They have benefited little, if at all, from their limited family social and financial capital. Taylor participants' recognition as returnees in Beijing is unclear and problematic, with a complex mix of achievements and challenges characterising their relationships with their parents, co-workers and the country as citizens. Taylor participants grapple with high expectations from their parents, who have invested significantly in their UK educations. These parents believe that foreign degrees should lead to prestigious
careers, but fail to recognise the realities of the job market and the hard work their children have put into their professional lives. This misrecognition of the participants' efforts and accomplishments by their parents, results in strained family relationships and leaves the participants feeling guilty.

In their professional lives, Taylors have generally achieved recognition through their dedication and contributions to successful projects. They have been able to climb the corporate ladder and earn respect from their co-workers. The appreciation from colleagues and employers for the participants' skills and work ethic, have not only provided them with a sense of validation but also contributes to their financial stability. However, in everyday life, Taylor participants struggle with misrecognition due to their status as out-of-towners. The Hukou system and its associated difficulties, such as providing limited access to social services and a sense of exclusion to those who do not enjoy local status, contribute to their feelings of inferiority. Furthermore, the high cost of living and societal attitudes towards migrants like Taylor add to their stress and affects their overall sense of self-worth.

In summary, Taylor participants' recognition experiences as returnees in Beijing are messy. Even though they can find some success and recognition in their professional lives, this however is overshadowed by their parents' unrealistic expectations and the challenges they face in everyday life due to their out-of-town status. These factors collectively impact their sense of identity and self-worth, resulting in incessant psychological burdens. Consequently, Taylor participants are
losing confidence in their government, and they have begun looking for alternatives
to provide for their small families. As one of them noted:

    For us migrants living in Beijing, the Hukou is the pass from hell to heaven. I
don't want to live in hell, but I have no pathways to heaven. I'm considering
leaving; I'd like to return to the UK with my family when I can afford it.

5.4 Freya

5.4.1 Freya: The Thumbnail

Freya represents participants in the study who were born and raised in Beijing. Now
in their late twenties, they have settled down in their hometown after returning from
the UK. Participants like Freya exemplify the modern, young local professionals in
Beijing who successfully leverage the benefits associated with their indigenous
identity to maintain a ‘white-collar’ lifestyle. Despite her privileged background, Freya
remains acutely aware of the challenges faced by individuals striving for recognition
in Beijing, particularly those disadvantaged by the Chinese Hukou system.
5.4.2 Freya: In layers

5.4.2.1 Micro (family)

Freya was raised in a civil service family with both of her parents employed by central government institutions in Beijing. Although they lacked any significant strategic connections, their high-ranking government positions in the capital city provided the family with a prestigious social status and generous material benefits. Additionally, their identity as local Beijing residents granted them various privileges under the government's Hukou policy:

When I was young, many things we needed were covered by my parents' staff benefits from work, such as our flats, holidays, my school placements, and we even got supermarket store credits for food and groceries...Top local universities and certain government jobs in Beijing prioritised or had lower entry requirements for local Hukou holders, this kind of advantage is something that money can't buy.

These favourable circumstances contributed to Freya's parents' relaxed attitude towards her life and development. Furthermore, because of their belief that 'sons are for careers, while daughters are for marriage,' they never had specific expectations for Freya. They were confident that their local Beijing identities and social status would be sufficient to secure a prosperous future for her: 'They taught me to relax ... they would not tolerate my “indolence” if I was a boy.'
Despite being encouraged to take it easy, Freya was self-motivated throughout her childhood. She was humble, academically gifted and dedicated to her studies. From her parents' perspective, Freya was a dutiful daughter who was sensible, respected her elders and adhered to the family's wishes.

In line with the trend of studying abroad, Freya’s parents sent her to the UK for a master's degree in Fashion after she completed her undergraduate studies in China. They did not expect her to excel academically; instead, they viewed the year in the UK as an opportunity for Freya to broaden her horizons and experience a luxurious lifestyle. With ample financial support, Freya enjoyed a fruitful year in the UK. However, when it was time for her to leave university, her parents overruled her decision to stay in the UK for employment and called her home. They were worried that Freya might prioritise her career over her relationships and marriage.

Freya returned home without hesitation. In retrospect, she acknowledged that she had considered alternative courses of action, but she was accustomed to her parents' authoritative approach and perceived it as their way of caring for her:

I think I am more influenced by traditional Chinese culture, where girls must listen to their parents...I understand that my marriage was their 'ultimate concern,' and I didn't want them to worry about me.

Upon returning from the UK, Freya was expected to prioritise her 'love life' over employment. However, she diplomatically declined this suggestion. As a
compromise, Freya accepted a position arranged by her father. The job did not require any skills from her degrees, but her parents insisted it was the perfect fit for her: ‘It's an easy, safe, stable job, and they could “watch out” for me.’ While Freya did not particularly enjoy the job, she appreciated her parents' efforts.

Freya's home recognition centres on her identity as a daughter embodying filial piety. Raised in a prestigious civil service family in Beijing, she enjoyed numerous benefits and privileges due to her parents' high-ranking government positions and local Hukou status. Her parents held a traditional belief that daughters should prioritise marriage over career, and as a result, Freya's obedience to her parents' hopes was the only condition she needed to meet to earn their love. Freya's filial piety is evident in her willingness to follow her parents' guidance and prioritise their wishes, even when it comes to her career and personal choices. This demonstrates her deep-rooted respect for traditional Chinese values and her commitment to being a dutiful daughter in her family.

5.4.2.2 *Meso (Workplace)*

At home, Freya always complied with her parents' wishes, never going against them. However, in her professional life, she transformed into an independent, decisive woman who knew exactly what she wanted.
Shortly after starting her first job, Freya knew she would not stay there for long. She worked at a government internal training school, which provided Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses to regional officials throughout China. Like many other CGLEs, the staff culture at the school was unenthusiastic, half-hearted and plagued by procrastination. Most of her colleagues were her parents’ age or older, creating a power imbalance. Some of her co-workers saw themselves as superior to her due to their age and experience – as exemplified in the following quotes:

They used ‘I am old, and you are young’ type of excuses to get me to do tasks they didn’t want to, like fixing printers or early morning airport/train pickups. They often stole credit for my work and manipulated me into giving up good travel opportunities, saying I was young and would have many chances in the future. Some of them even felt entitled to lecture me about my private life, telling me what kind of boyfriend I should have and when I should have children.

Out of courtesy and respect for her elders, Freya tolerated these disturbances. However, an incident at work crossed the line and ultimately led to her to resign – as described below.

Freya’s role at the school involved organising social events and downtime entertainment for officials visiting Beijing. Many of her friends and relatives considered this a highly desirable job, as it entailed building connections with hotels
and restaurants and gaining access to valuable regional guanxi networks. However, Freya had a different perspective, especially when she was selected based on her appearance to join a team responsible for hosting dinner parties for high-level delegations. She described the situation: ‘There were six of us, attractive boys and girls, meant to “add flavours to the party”. We were asked to be humble, smile and finish our wine when asked.’ Freya felt deeply insulted and strongly opposed her new assignment, stating: ‘They framed these initiatives as public relations efforts, but I felt uncomfortable around those arrogant strangers, drinking, smiling and pretending to enjoy their company.’

When she expressed her discontent, her colleagues ridiculed her as naive and unworldliness. They made sarcastic remarks like ‘Nobody is going to touch you; just drink and smile. What an opportunity! Don't be aloof and distant.’ Her identity as a returnee from the UK was also targeted, as they accused her of adopting a hypocritical Western attitude: ‘You are in China, not the UK. You haven't brought back any competencies, just capitalism's hypocrisy.’ To her disbelief, even some members of the ‘public relations’ team criticised her. Particularly the ones who were the ‘out-of-towners’, as they were eager to accumulate social capital and recognition in Beijing by attending high-level events. They mocked Freya as a black sheep for her reluctance.

This apathy and derision isolated Freya from most of her colleagues, and after 14 months, she resigned. Her parents' reaction was indifferent, as they had never expected much from her career. Since Freya's return from the UK, they had focused
on setting her up with potential partners, prioritising her personal relationships over her other needs. Following her resignation, Freya had more time for the blind dates her parents arranged. A relationship would not only ‘complete’ Freya in her parents’ eyes, but also lead her to a new career that she genuinely enjoyed. Freya's boyfriend worked at a local primary school with high demand for after-class English tutoring. Since leaving her first job, Freya has been freelancing as a private English tutor for her boyfriend's students, saying, ‘I love the flexibility and I enjoy working with kids.’

However, Freya's new career path did not meet the expectations of her boyfriend's parents, who did not view freelancing as a legitimate occupation. In their eyes, freelancers were seen as unemployable, lazy and unreliable, particularly female freelancers. They believed that a casual attitude towards work reflected a girl's carelessness in marriage, and some of their criticisms were quite personal. Freya recalled some of the prejudiced comments she heard: ‘It was a mistake for her family to send her to study in the West; she learned nothing positive... she's improper and no match for my son.’ Despite these opinions, Freya remained steadfast in her chosen path, even after her boyfriend's father offered to help her secure a more ‘decent’ and stable teaching position at a school: ‘I don't want to go back to working in the “system” again...I don't want to surrender myself to someone else's wishes.’

At the time of the interview, Freya had married her boyfriend and been working as a freelancer for nearly three years. She enjoyed her work and had established a solid reputation. Although the misconceptions of her in-laws and others still caused some
annoyance, she was grateful for the support of her parents and her husband: ‘I don't mind the noise because the people I care about support me.’

In general, Freya's recognition at work has been shaped by gender issues and the stigmatization of freelancing as a legitimate occupation. Despite being independent and decisive in her professional life, Freya faced power imbalances and mistreatment in her first job due to her age and gender. When she transitioned to freelancing as a private English tutor, she faced criticism from her boyfriend's parents who viewed freelancing, particularly for women, as a sign of unreliability and carelessness. They associated her chosen career path with her Western education and considered her an improper match for their son. Nonetheless, Freya remained steadfast in her decision and continued to enjoy her work and the support of her parents and husband. Her journey highlights the challenges she faces in gaining recognition and respect in her professional life, while navigating societal expectations and gender biases.

5.4.2.3 Macro (Community)

As the interview conversation shifted to Freya's experiences in her broader social circles, her responses exuded confidence and satisfaction. Freya stood out among other participants as her social recognition was predominantly derived from the privileges associated with her Beijing indigenous identity and her considerate personal qualities. Growing up in the 1990s, Freya witnessed Beijing's rapid
development as millions of Chinese internal migrants flocked to the city seeking citizenship for a better life. From a young age, Freya's parents made her aware of the value of their ‘Beijinger’ identity:

My parents often discussed stories of people they knew from work who were desperate to move to Beijing. They used these stories to remind me to be grateful and cherish my local citizenship.

Freya first realised the envy her origins sparked when she began university in China. Top Beijing-based institutions prioritised local Hukou applicants with lower requirements, while non-local applicants faced higher standards for acceptance. She recalled:

When my classmates discovered I didn't have to work as hard as they did for my university place, I could sense their envy, sometimes even hatred...I felt sympathy for them but was grateful for my privileges.

Upon returning from the UK, Freya's interactions with the wider community led her to compare her life with others. Over time, her appreciation of her birth right grew into a sense of identity superiority. She admitted to feeling superior and better, especially around ‘out-of-towners’, but also felt sorry for them occasionally. Freya said:

I never truly realised how convenient and privileged my life is until living alongside them...We've been treated differently in many ways...They often tease me by saying, 'You even look younger,' implying I don't have much to worry about.
Being indigenous enabled Freya and her family to obtain reasonably priced properties before the city expanded. Their well-located flats had become highly desirable, symbolizing their elevated social status. The aforementioned properties generate considerable rental income, and the local authority's planned demolition for further development will bring significant relocation compensation, enhancing Freya's social standing in a money-oriented society. Furthermore, government jobs like Freya's first position are highly sought after, with some roles only open to Beijing Hukou holders. Freya noted that some colleagues who did not have Beijing Hukou had worked in temporary roles for years.

While Freya's local Beijing identity led to her being highly regarded by some, she found certain imposed expectations unacceptable, such as the 'Beijing girl mating preference'. People often believed that a Beijing girl should have higher standards when selecting a partner, with 'out-of-towners' considering themselves honoured if chosen by a Beijing girl. Freya was seen as foolish when she said she did not care if her boyfriend had a Beijing Hukou, and everyone lectured her about how she should marry someone local, with a Beijing household registry and at least a master's degree.

Freya had a caring and compassionate nature. She was grateful to be able to earn respect and esteem by using her privileges to help others. For example, Freya generously offered two non-Beijing origin returnees from her MSc course a significantly discounted rental rate at one of her well-located Beijing flats. This kindness not only materially assisted her friends' readjustment to a new environment,
but also significantly boosted their sense of security and self-confidence as they faced upcoming challenges in life.

Furthermore, Freya never allowed herself to become self-righteous about her indigenous identity. She was always mindful not to display any complacent attitudes, particularly in front of ‘out-of-towners’:

I leased my Beijing vehicle 'on-road' permit, an entitlement strictly for local citizens, to a colleague who didn't have a Beijing Hukou...I never mentioned it to anyone else, it was a secret between him and me.

Freya’s empathetic, generous, and humble qualities were genuinely appreciated and respected by those in her circle.

Regarding her experience with the government as an entrepreneur, Freya expressed disappointment in the government's policies on financial subsidies for returnees' entrepreneurial ventures. She once considered applying for support for her English tutoring business:

None of the policies I knew of provided meaningful benefits to businesses in social science areas...If you come back with a degree in computing or technology, you're set...Many IT, technology, or science industrial parks were built to attract talent to return...We social science returnees were just unwanted.
Freya further commented that her concerns stemmed from the unbalanced distribution of resources, which not only mistreated social science returnees by creating a challenging living and employment environment, but also negatively impacted on the younger generation Chinese attitudes towards subjects other STEM courses:

There was a mandatory documentary movie made by the Party that was shown everywhere, including schools...The entire film focused on how rockets, construction, computers, and other technologies made China great...There wasn't even a small segment showcasing contributions from classrooms, art stages, and so on...None of my students will want to study social sciences in the future.

In general, Freya's esteem recognition in her wider community is significantly shaped by her Beijing Hukou, which has granted her numerous privileges and opportunities. As a Beijing local citizen, she enjoyed advantages in housing, financial capital and employment, which elevated her social status and contributed to her sense of identity superiority. However, Freya remained empathetic and humble, using her privileges to help others in need. Her empathetic, generous and humble qualities were genuinely appreciated and respected by those in her circle, reinforcing her positive self-image and esteemed recognition within her wider community.

Despite her local identity and recognition, Freya faced challenges as a returnee entrepreneur due to the government’s unbalanced distribution of resources favouring
technology developments over social science businesses. This unequal allocation not only created a challenging environment for social science returnees like Freya, but also negatively impacted on the younger generation's attitudes towards non-technology-related fields. Nonetheless, Freya remained steadfast in her chosen path, demonstrating resilience and commitment to her entrepreneurial endeavours, further bolstering her self-esteem and recognition within her community.

5.4.3 Freya: In Summary

For participants like Freya, their returnee identity played a minimal role in their struggle for recognition in work and life. Their harmonious relationship with their parents and their accomplishments in social spaces were not achieved solely through personal ability nor diligence. Instead, these outcomes largely resulted from the privileges associated with their indigenous identity and their parents' biased expectations favouring sons over daughters.

At work, Freya was unable to gain the recognition she desired from colleagues or managers. Instead, she experienced gender harassment. Additionally, due to the government's policies and societal attitudes prioritising science technology, engineering, and maths (STEM), social science returnees like Freya faced challenges in gaining recognition for their expertise and entrepreneurial ventures. Consequently, Freya's self-esteem and recognition within her community may have been adversely affected by the diminished value placed on her chosen subject area.
Nevertheless, for those with profiles similar to Freya in my study, their Beijing indigenous identity served as their primary source of respect and esteem. As a result, when asked whether they ever considered living in another country, their responses were resoundingly negative:

No other citizenship can give me the same satisfaction that I have got from my Beijing one.

5.5 Aaron and Bella

5.5.1 Aaron and Bella: The Thumbnail

Aaron and Bella are a husband and wife who represent married participants in my study, where both spouses are overseas returnees. Like Smith, Taylor, and Freya, Aaron and Bella share certain common traits. However, their perspectives as a family provide a unique understanding of how returnee couples have been perceived individually and as a whole, as well as how they recognise each other as husband and wife. Additionally, Aaron and Bella’s stories were constructed in a comparative way to illustrate the differences in recognition experiences between male and female returnees through the lens of gender.
Aaron and Bella were both born in Shenyang city during the late 1980s. Aaron is an only child, while Bella has a younger brother, which is unusual for their generation in China. Due to Bella family's strong preference for sons, Bella's brother was born five years after her, breaching the country's one-child policy:

It has been the tradition in my house that sons are preferred…my father has four older sisters…they paid a heavy birth control fine to have my brother … 'no son, no stop’.

The arrival of her little brother shifted all parental attention away from Bella. Although she understood that she had to share what was offered, most of the time she was only allocated with what was left: ‘I am always second in their considerations.’

This strong family favouritism for boys also influenced Bella’s upbringing. To some extent, Bella was deliberately raised as a boy alongside her younger brother: ‘I do not think I had any dolls as a child or wore dresses before my twenties.’ Her interests and hobbies were also affected, making her more adventurous and courageous than most boys in her school. This attracted numerous criticisms from other students and teachers, resulting in her isolation at school.
Bella’s parents, on the other hand, were satisfied with her development. However, occasionally, they still felt sorry for themselves that Bella was not a boy, especially when she was admitted to one of the top engineering universities in the region, their first reaction was: ‘a girl in a boy’s major, what a pity.’

In comparison with Bella, Aaron’s childhood was much more characterised by parental expectations and resources. Like the other male participants in the study, Aaron was not only the only child but also the centre of his parents’ attention. They spared no efforts in taking care of him and providing him with everything. Despite being seen by his wife as privileged for not having any siblings, Aaron discussed a stereotype that people have about only children:

Everybody suggests that the only child gets what they want and all they want as if they were the ‘emperor’ of the family…they only see the pretty side … you have to know that the more they give, the more they expect you to return…especially if you are the only boy…if there were two children, the pressures are shared too.

On probing this response further, Aaron commented that gender bias exists in single-child families too, and it is worse for boys. He argued that compared to the apathy that some girls receive in their family, the unrealistic expectations and overzealous pressure concentrated on boys can also be psychologically traumatic. He used his own experiences as an example:
During high school, through great efforts, my parents placed me in a class that only recruits regional top students and expected me to progress among them...I could not keep pace with their speed, but my results were good enough to be praised in a regular class...everyone recognised me as a bad student, and for a very long time, I lost self-confidence.

Apart from losing self-confidence and self-esteem, Aaron also exhibited rebellious behaviour towards his parents' wishes. The most noticeable instance was when he intentionally failed his university entry exams, missing the chance to be admitted to his parents' dream university. Aaron's father was very disappointed: 'He said he had done everything for me, but I was not meeting his expectations at all.' Aaron's father's disappointment was the primary reason he was sent to study in the UK. His father believed that Aaron had no future in China with the university he chose and hoped an international postgraduate degree would help him become more competitive.

Bella's overseas study was also the decision of her parents. After completing her first degree in China, Bella's father decided to send her to study in the UK. Bella perceived the reason as:

There was no place for me at home. My father said since he could not leave me with his fortune, he would fulfil his responsibility by paying to equip me with knowledge, and then I would be on my own.
Aaron met Bella when they were MSc students in Scotland. Their similarities in age, origins and experiences brought them together as a couple. After graduation, they returned to their hometown and started their family life in Shenyang.

After returning from the UK, both Aaron and Bella quickly secured suitable employment, which satisfied their parents. Regarding their relationship, Bella's parents were pleased that she had found a nice partner to settle down with, and their attitude towards her shifted from a lack of concern to a sense of dependence: ‘They saw me as ready to help support my younger brother to grow up... everything was for the son.’

On the other hand, Aaron's parents were happy that their son had finally established a career and a family. However, Bella sensed a preconception from Aaron's mother about the fact that she had a younger brother. As Bella interpreted, ‘she was paranoid that her son would end up paying my brother's bills.’ Aaron disagreed with his wife, believing that Bella was the one who was paranoid due to her mistreatment by her childhood family.

Despite the challenges they faced, Aaron and Bella’s family life after marriage has been happy and harmonious. However, as a couple, they experienced a new wave of pressure from their parents. This new wave of pressure primarily centred around starting a family and having children. Both sets of parents began to express their desire for grandchildren and the continuation of their respective family lines. Indeed,
the expectation to have children became a frequent topic of conversation during family gatherings and casual discussions.

In addition to the pressure to have children, Aaron and Bella also experienced pressure to maintain a certain level of financial stability and social standing. Their parents wanted them to buy a flat in a desirable neighbourhood and maintain successful careers that reflected their status. Aaron and Bella believe such pressures stemmed from their parents' traditional expectations and their desire for their children to lead successful, stable lives that aligned with societal norms. While both Aaron and Bella appreciated their parents' concern for their well-being, they also struggled with balancing their personal desires and goals with the expectations placed upon them.

Moreover, Aaron and Bella reported that the pressures they experienced were, in part, a result of their returnee status. Having invested significant resources in their children's overseas education, their parents had high expectations for their success, both professionally and personally: 'They want to see a return on their investment as soon as possible, so they squeezed us hard.'

The fact that Aaron and Bella were returnees also contributed to the perception that they had certain advantages over their non-returnee peers. Their international education and experience were seen as valuable assets that should translate into success in various aspects of their lives. However, they reported that in reality, things did not really work out this way:
We only had a few years in the UK, and most of the time we had to concentrate on catching up as it was too hard for us...we don’t have those advantages as those rich kids who can stay in the UK long enough to have good English and other foreign skills.

In general, similar to Taylor, Aaron and Bella’s love recognition from their parents was messy, and was significantly influenced by the Chinese traditional patriarchal parental expectations, societal pressures and expectations of filial piety. Under such a context, both of them have experienced different forms of gender-based expectations and pressures during their upbringing. Bella, having a younger brother, faced preferential treatment towards her sibling; while Aaron, as an only son, experienced heightened parental expectations and pressure.

Upon returning from the UK, both Aaron and Bella were subjected to a new wave of parental pressure centered around starting a family, maintaining financial stability and achieving social standing. The couple struggled to balance their personal desires with the expectations placed upon them by their families. Moreover, as returnees, Aaron and Bella faced additional pressure from their parents, who had invested significant resources in their overseas education and expected them to perform at a level that exceeded their actual skills and experience.

Despite these challenges, Aaron and Bella have managed to build a harmonious family life together, navigating the complexities of meeting high parental expectations.
while trying to establish their careers and personal lives based on the skills and knowledge they acquired during their time abroad and have built on since.

5.5.2.2 Meso (Workplace)

After returning with his UK master's degree in Finance and hers in Computing, Aaron and Bella were expected by their family and friends to be adventurous and ambitious in pursuing their careers and to move to a more developed city for better, tougher challenges. Despite this, the couple chose to settle down in their hometown of Shenyang:

It was a well-thought-out decision, we may benefit more in our careers in cities like Beijing, but we would have to face more pressure in all aspects ... we have our roots in our hometown...life will be much easier.

Such a pragmatic view of life and career attracted more criticism than recognition, with most of the critics targeting Aaron, some even from his family:

Many people see my decision as cowardice, that as a man, I do not have the courage to take on challenges...I was humiliated as my parents' only hope but did not want to fight for the family...my parents compared me with their friends' sons who were in the big cities and told me how I disappointed them.
As the female counterpart of the ‘wrongdoer’, Bella was accused of influencing her husband to avoid sufficiently focusing on his career, particularly by Aaron’s mother, who blamed Bella’s multi-child family status for obstructing her son’s future:

She did not want to believe it was a unanimous decision...she would rather believe that I kept her son in Shenyang so my younger brother could benefit from an extra pair of hands.

Despite the negative opinions, Aaron soon secured a post in an investment banking institution. Bella’s job hunt, however, was not as straightforward. Prior to searching, Bella felt confident that as an overseas-qualified programmer, she would be in an advantageous position to be hired in the local IT industry, which suffered from a brain drain. However, to her surprise, only a few companies she applied to contacted her for further information, while the rest showed no interest. Desperate for an answer, Bella learned through an insider in an IT company’s HR department that there was an unspoken understanding across the industry that no IT company preferred female programmers at the ‘marriageable age’:

They suggested that physiologically, women conflict with efficiency... marriage was the alert for employers that troubles were coming, as the next thing would be pregnancy, maternity leave, childcare, motherhood, and so on.
The conversation with the insider also made Bella recall that the phone calls she received for supplementary information were all related to her marital status, and with hindsight, she obviously did not pass their ‘risk assessments’.

The discrimination from IT companies left Bella feeling discouraged and defeated. Meanwhile, further frustrations from unfriendly comments among her circle of acquaintances almost caused her to give up her profession:

What a foolish girl...of all the subjects suitable for girls, why choose to pursue a man's career...such a waste of her parents' money on her UK studies...no wonder they gave up on her over her brother.

Fortunately, Aaron and some of Bella's close friends were supportive, and by a twist of fate, Bella was introduced by her first-degree mentor to teaching computing undergraduates at her alma mater.

When Bella started her job as a university teaching fellow, Aaron had already settled into his investment account manager's post. Due to increasing demand from local investors looking to expand their operations overseas, Aaron was hired to assist the company by using his cosmopolitan competencies to improve operational efficiencies with foreign suppliers. However, a few months later, both Aaron and his boss realised that the exaggerated level of international skills Aaron included in his resume was not sufficient for his position. Aaron explained the reason for this was
his parents' pressure to find a good job: 'I had to lie a little; otherwise, I couldn't face my parents.'

As Aaron continued to struggle in his position, it became clear to both him and his boss that something needed to change. Aaron opened up to his boss about the pressure he felt from his parents to find a good job, which led him to embellish his resume. Understanding the cultural and familial pressures, his boss decided to give Aaron a chance to improve his skills and prove his worth. This incident also impacted Aaron's relationship with his colleagues, as he was ridiculed for a long time. This made Aaron feel uncomfortable and anxious around his co-workers, further affecting his self-esteem. Despite the challenging circumstances, Aaron was determined to overcome the setbacks and prove his capabilities. He worked diligently to improve his skills, taking English lessons after work, and seeking guidance from experienced colleagues. As his skills developed, Aaron's performance began to improve, gradually earning the respect and trust of his co-workers and employer.

Bella on the other hand had experienced a honeymoon period when she started her post at the university. As a new member of the computing department, she and four other new lecturers were specifically recruited for a Canadian transnational education project in Shenyang to deliver Canadian computing degree syllabuses in English. Bella was very pleased with securing such a respected lecturing post, and her parents also acknowledged her as an achiever: 'I was finally doing something that they could brag about in front of others.'
Bella was recognised by her students and colleagues too. She was not only a patient teacher but a considerate one as well. Based on her own experience, she developed a brief learning handbook on her subject to help students digest English jargon, Western learning cultures, foreign case studies, and so on. Additionally, she used her own time to organise pre-departure workshops to prepare students for their overseas studies. With such enthusiasm for education, Bella was well-respected and appreciated by her students and their parents.

However, throughout Bella's career at the university, she also suffered several major setbacks. Due to the deficiency in students' English language skills, the progression rate of the top-up program was considerably lower than expected. Instead of introducing measures to strengthen students' language ability, the university instructed Bella and her colleagues to deliberately lower the exam marking standards. Bella was one of the few staff who strongly opposed such action, which attracted denigration from different perspectives: ‘Some students and staff even called me a traitor, as I defended Canadian standards over Chinese students.’

Bella was mistreated on many occasions due to the depreciation of her British master's degree at work. Certain students and their parents doubted the quality of her one-year study in the UK, viewing the year study as being too short to provide her with a credible basis for teaching the course. There was also a chain of disdain among her colleagues that placed the three-year US master's degrees at the top of the chain and the one-year ones, such as the British and Australian, at the bottom. This mentality resulted in Bella being omitted from various discussions, projects and
opportunities at work. When her university was offered a Canadian PhD scholarship for its teaching staff, Bella’s UK degree was deemed to be less research-skilled; hence, she was not even on the candidate considerations list: ‘They didn't even think about me...all they cared for was their image in front of the foreigners...not sending someone they think will fail.’

Lastly, Bella mentioned her hardships surviving the university's political factional conflicts. Due to her overseas experience, Bella was automatically categorised in the university's ‘returnee’ faction, and she had no idea what to do or who the ‘unfriendlies’ were as Bella called them:

I am very bad at political games at work...until today, I am still not exactly sure who is under whose sphere of influence...it has made my life at work very tiring...I have been caught in crossfire several times between the factions.

Meanwhile, in Aaron's workplace, the nature of his post altered due to changes in the investment market, bringing him unexpected challenges. As the government tightened its controls on currency exchange for private overseas investments, there was a significant drop in Aaron's employer's turnover. As a measure to strengthen relationships with customers and officials, Aaron's company set up a PR team similar to what Freya encountered in Beijing, to entertain certain ‘useful’ stakeholders. However, Aaron did not feel the same antipathy as Freya about being chosen for his appearance rather than his professional credentials. In fact, he felt fortunate, explaining:
Shenyang's economy and its financial market were too fragile to handle policy changes...my equivalent positions in the big cities would never be affected...I can't go to Beijing...since I can't use my brain to make more money, I'll use my appearance to gain as many connections as I can.

Ever since Aaron turned his focus on accumulating guanxi, his health has suffered. As drinking alcohol is essential for developing business relationships in China, Aaron must show his sincerity and gratitude by drinking excessively. This has harmed his health, and Bella criticized him, saying he has ‘sold his health to the devil’.

On another note, Bella's job has also suffered from government policy changes. A few months before the interview, relations between China and Canada were strained due to a diplomatic dispute. As a result, all Canadian personnel in Bella's program were called back by their government, and the university postponed its student recruitment until further notice.

In summary, Aaron and Bella's journey to attain recognition at work has been a difficult one, hindered by a combination of parental expectations, societal pressures, gender discrimination, and the dilemma of the Chinese politics of guanxi. In their opinion, their UK qualifications have given them certain advantages in their work, but these advantages are not strong enough to overcome the deeply ingrained cultural challenges they face. As a result, both of them have had to sacrifice their personal aspirations, agency and even their health in order to navigate the challenges they
face in their careers. Despite their efforts, they find it difficult to strike a balance between their personal desires and the external expectations and social inequalities imposed on them. This makes it difficult for them to receive the respect and recognition they believe they deserve in their professional lives.

5.5.2.3 Macro (Community)

At the time of the interview, Bella was pregnant with their second child, and she was relieved it was another boy. She clarified that she was not under pressure from anyone else to have boys; it was her own wish because she believed that 'girls' lives are too hard in society.' To further explain her reasoning, Bella noted several points based on her own experiences. She argued that no matter how hard she worked or how successful she was in her career, in societal terms, she was still someone's daughter or wife. At her parents' home, Bella felt her father's domination worsened after she returned from the UK, as she now owed him for his investments in her education. In her own house, Bella complained that the more connected Aaron became at work, the more patriarchal he was at home: 'a power relationship...very subtle but noticeable...sometimes it became his way or no way...lack of respect.' In response, Aaron admitted his change in attitude at home but suggested that such attitudes were influenced by the current social ethos: 'it's almost like common sense.'

Bella further described another form of non-recognition of women:
If people don't know I am married and see me in a nice car, 99% of the time they will say she must have a “rich father”; if they know I am married, then the “rich husband” gets the credit...women usually do not get the credit for their own hard work...I am lucky that I am not young and glamorous, otherwise, they would think I am someone's mistress.

Moreover, Bella also argued that compared to what she witnessed in Western societies, China is relatively underdeveloped in terms of promoting and enforcing gender equality. To illustrate, she criticized the scarcity of support and consideration behind China's new policy to encourage families to have two children as a limit: ‘Before, it was usually young girls who were discriminated against in the workplace for being pregnant; now due to the policy change, women my age are seen as a potential risk to many employers' operational efficiency too.’

Finally, Bella condemned the local authority's lack of effort to protect gender equality after her manager insinuated that she would lose research opportunities if she insisted on taking her full maternity leave entitlement:

The central government law and the regulations were there, but the regional enforcement was immaterial... I was meant to complain, but I was talked down by a friend who works at the city's Women's Federation, who said that it would be more beneficial if I just compromise.
Apart from gender-based discrimination, both Bella and Aaron criticised the government's uneven distribution of resources between its cities. Aaron's grievances were targeted at the unbalanced economic developments that affected his job and the difficulties of the Hukou policy. He argued that compared to Beijing, Shenyang, as a second-tier city, received far less attention and support from the central government. The underdevelopment of its local social security system and regional economic stagnation, created an unattractive business and employment environment for local talent. He had thought about moving his family to big cities such as Beijing, but the Hukou dilemma stopped him from pursuing this idea.

However, Aaron admitted that ever since their first child was born, they have been considering leaving China for their son's future. Bella is planning to self-fund an overseas PhD degree in the near future and bring Aaron and the kids to start a new life, as she noted: ‘moving overseas is cheaper than moving to Beijing.’

In general, Aaron and Bella’s quest for esteem recognition from their wider communities has been a complex and challenging journey. Similar to their experiences in their professional lives, the couple has faced numerous difficulties in navigating the intricate web of cultural expectations and norms. These challenges have forced them to make significant sacrifices in their lives in order to gain proper recognition from society. However, the burden of parental expectations and societal pressures has frequently left them feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, gender bias and government policies have only served to exacerbate the challenges they face. As a result, their lack of self-esteem and sense of belonging have led Aaron and
Bella to question the structures and systems that govern their lives, prompting them to consider alternative futures for themselves and their children.

5.5.3 Bella and Aaron: In Summary

Gender bias and discrimination play a significant role in the recognition and misrecognition experienced by individuals like Bella and Aaron. At home, the preference for sons not only negatively impacts the lives of daughters and girls but also puts immense pressure on boys, who must shoulder excessive demands and expectations. In the workplace, women face widespread discrimination, with insufficient enforcement of laws and regulations designed to protect their rights.

In similarity with what participants like Freya have experienced, the Chinese government's uneven distribution of resources poses a challenging dilemma for Bella and Aaron, forcing them to consider whether to leave or stay in their hometown. This situation has a substantial impact on their personal and professional lives, further compounding their struggles for recognition.

Reflecting on their experiences in Shenyang and how these have shaped their perspectives on returning to China after studying abroad, Bella and Aaron express strong reservations. They firmly believe that if someone has the opportunity to remain overseas, they should not hesitate: 'if you can stay overseas, don't come back...or come back, make your fortune in China and then migrate overseas again.'
Chapter Six: Parenting Styles and How These Influence Issues of Recognition

6.1 Introduction

As I progressed in my analysis, it became increasingly clear that parenting styles impacted on how returnees experienced and understood recognition. I had not anticipated the degree to which parenting styles, expectations and hopes would play in shaping the participant’s responses to my research questions. I have therefore decided it is important to discuss parenting types in more detail. Thus, in this chapter I offer a typology of parenting styles which I have named Tiger, Ironsmith and Saviour in part to make sense of the composite biographies in Chapter five, but also as a way of understanding points I will make in the discussion chapter.

It needs to be noted that when I drew together participant narratives to form composite biographies, the issue of parenting styles and its’ impact was not evident. Therefore, composite biographies in Chapter five do not map neatly onto parenting styles. For example, in each composite biography, as with the Taylor, there will be elements of Tiger, Ironsmith and Saviour in each biography. Therefore, some of the quotes below are attributed to more than one composite biography.
6.2 The place of parental expectations

As discussed in the literature review, Chinese hierarchical kinship culture places emphasis on the superior status of parents and the importance of ‘filial piety’ in children's upbringing. Kajanus (2015) observes that Chinese parents, particularly fathers, draw their authority from the patrilineal and patriarchal kinship models that regulate not only intergenerational dynamics, but also influences the heterosexual relations of their children. In such a context, Chinese parents tend to exercise their authority to ensure their children follow the right path to meet their expectations (Fong, 2004; Xue, 2008; Gilliland, 2016; Yang, 2017), strongly influencing their life trajectory and mobility, which are profoundly shaped by the geography of power within the families of the Chinese students, as explored by Kajanus (2015).

Kajanus (2015) explained that in a patrilineal and patriarchal family structure, parents are not just as caregivers or providers, but act primarily as decision-makers, particularly in crucial areas like their children's education and career paths. The influence of parental authority, especially that of the father, is deeply rooted in cultural values such as filial piety and respect for elders. Children are often expected to prioritise parental guidance and wishes over their personal aspirations.

Parents’ authority in these families also extends to the regulation of their children's romantic and marital choices. This can include expectations around appropriate partners, often influenced by considerations of social status, family background, and even economic prospects. Such expectations can place significant pressure on the
children, particularly in balancing their personal choices with familial approval. In some cases, this can lead to conflicts or challenging situations where individual desires for romantic autonomy clash with deeply ingrained cultural and familial expectations (Ibid).

The patriarchal aspect of these family models also creates distinct experiences for sons and daughters. Sons may face pressure to continue their family lineage and uphold family honour, which can translate into high expectations regarding career success and selecting a spouse who aligns with family values. Daughters, on the other hand, might experience constraints related to their autonomy and independence, with a significant focus on their roles within the family and society, often emphasising marriage and motherhood (Ibid).

In my study, all of the participants very clearly understood that they were duty bound to conform to their ‘family decisions’ and wishes. They reported that at every stage of their life, before, during and after their UK studies, their parents never ceased to actively influence their lives, where parental wishes and expectations were largely based on their parents’ own level of knowledge, experiences, and personal interests – as highlighted in the following excerpt:

When I was young, I wanted to be a professional animator, but my parents wanted me to focus on studies and become a teacher like them in the university...when studying abroad became a trend in China, they sent me to a UK business school because that university was ranked the highest among all
my offers...when I graduated and just started my career they pushed me into marriage, so I had my daughter...now, when the country allows people to have a second child, they are expecting me to have another one, they want a grandson this time. (Smith/Taylor/Aaron)

The experience described above chimes with the findings of previous studies such as by Lee and Morrish (2012), Xue and Yan (2015), (Kajanus, 2015), Gilliland (2016) and Lin (2019), who argued that it is not uncommon for Chinese parents to prioritise their own expectations for their children over their children's individual interests, abilities and goals.

As a result of this, I decided it was important that I unpacked the theme of parental expectations, and to consider this theme in relation to issues of recognition, I have developed a typology of three parental styles (Tiger, Ironsmith and Saviour) to assist understanding and discussion of the participant’s responses. I developed the typology from my analysis of the participant comments in relation to parental expectations, and each parent typologies represent a different family culture with unique sets of expectations, values and recognition attitudes. I understand that within such a typology, generalisations are made and there will be parents who do not fall into the three types that I have identified. However, what I am trying to convey here are parental types, subsequent expectations and the impact on how participants understand the concept of recognition.
Initially, I had not anticipated having to write extensively about participant experiences of recognition in relation to parenting types. However, the extent of parenting type and consequent influences on the participants’ everyday lives justifies further exploration.

6.3 Tiger Parents

Tiger parents are elites with high socioeconomic status. They can be described as ‘rich’, ‘powerful’ and well connected, and were frequently referred to as ‘leaders’, ‘bosses’ and ‘persons in charge’ in the participant interviews. Parents in this group are highly successful and are recognised with esteem in the world of business, politics or in academia. Their contributions are recognised by society at a regional or even national level. In the interviews, the Tiger children have described their parents’ expectations on them through a Chinese metaphor as ‘虎父无犬子 tigers will not beget a dog son’, meaning that these Tiger parents expect their children to live the mantra of ‘like father like son’. Therefore, they expect their children to be as successful, reputed, esteemed, and as ‘aggressive’ as them. By contrast, Tiger parents do not accept nor expect their children to be ‘weak’, ‘incompetent’ and ‘relaxed’ like a tamed pet dog.

When I was young, my father never felt happy about my studies. He said my results made people think he is incompetent that cannot even manage his
child well, and he used to shout ‘how can a person like me have a son like you’ at me all the time. (Taylor/Smith)

Some of the participants described themselves as being part of their parent’s portfolio: ‘One of their assets or creations that they use to earn faces.’ Tiger parents expect their children to contribute to the consolidation of their already excessive family wealth, status and reputation. They do not pay too much attention on what subjects or career pathway their children choose as they already have plans in place for their children’s education, career and even marriage. The obedience and adherence to these plans are perceived by Tiger parents as credentials for their children to be qualified as a ‘tiger cub’ not a ‘dog son’ in their commitment to the mantra ‘虎父无犬子 tigers will not beget a dog son’.

However, the hurdles to jump to obtain such credentials are not necessarily high, as Tiger parents are confident that their personal guanxi and wealth will guarantee their children a flourishing future.

When I was young, I was told countless times that they (parents) do not need me to be rich and famous, as long as I am relatively good, and as long as I listen and obey, I will be fine...I did not need to get good marks in any entry exams to get into those good schools, they can just arrange me in...my UK university was part of the plan too, my father paid a powerful agent and then I was there...when I came back my father get me into my current job with his
guanxi and my spouse is the child of his good friend...I did what they asked of me and I never worried about what to do next, it has all been taken care of. (Smith/Freya)

Tiger parents view having a good education environment and the best of education resources as an essential building block to enable their children to network, thereby facilitating them to more easily follow in their parent’s footsteps and sustain their family wealth. Consequently, Tiger parents are willing to invest in their children by sending them to what they perceive as the best schools, to engage in a range of extracurricular activities, and to attend what they consider to be the best UK universities at all costs, in exchange for academic success or more at least a Western qualification. These parents’ determination to pursue ‘elite’ education can be seen as part of the plan to maintain their children’s elite class identity and status (Liu, 2020).

From the perspective of the parents’, under Confucian moral standards, there is a presumption that a father must be a responsible father who provides for his children (Zhang, 2007; Huo, 2016). Such persistence of continued financial investments also contributes to the ‘completion’ of their own successful, responsible parenting image. What is more, as investment in education has always been seen as a moral virtue in China, and such efforts spent on their children’s education can enable these parents to be perceived to possess high moral character by friends, family and wider society. Tiger parents interpret their responsibility to their children as an obligation to arranging.
In such a context, the condition for children to earn 'love' within this type of family, is their unconditional obedience to their parents' plans and to remain under their protection. Thus, in China, where the concept and practice of filial piety remains hegemonic, recognition is gained through honouring your parents. The recognition and respect given to Tiger children within their families, are largely determined by their adherence to predetermined social roles as sons and daughters, and their commitment to fulfilling their duties of filial piety. This 'tied' recognition has implications for Tiger children in areas such as their identity formation, agency and sense of self-worth.

6.3.1 The Consequences of Living in the Tiger’s Shadow

Based on the interview conversations, children with Tiger parents are fully aware that they live privileged lives, enjoying the honour and status conferred by their parents' success. They take pride in their family and are generally grateful for the wealth and opportunities they receive due to their parents' achievements.

Because of my father's leadership position in the Party, I always have access to things others can't get. People envy me for having imported goods, attending the best schools, and having people drive me everywhere. I don't have to worry about money while I'm in the UK. I feel really lucky to have been born into this family, and I respect my father a lot. (Smith)
The power held by Tiger parents often results in their children assuming a submissive attitude towards parental authoritative, leaving them with an apparent diminished sense of autonomy, self-identity and self-worth. Tiger children’s primary concern is their parents' reputation, rather than their own needs and desires. In the context of the Confucian standards of filial piety discussed in the literature review, Tiger children must achieve the highest level of filial piety—'attaining family respect from others'—before they can be ‘loved’ (recognised) at home.

Gender plays an interesting role in this context too. While it could be argued that the submissive female child might be more accustomed to fulfilling expectations of filial piety and obedience due to their gender within the traditional patriarchal Chinese family culture (Kajanus, 2015; Martin, 2022), daughters from Tiger families found it difficult to obtain appropriate recognition from their fathers.

The higher his position in his work, the more unreachable he becomes at home, and the more difficult it is for me to please him…I respect him, but I prefer to keep my distance. He wants me to obey, so I obey. I don't want him to cause trouble for me or cut me off. (Smith/Freya)

Tiger children's freedom to explore other life opportunities is restricted, as they dare not risk doing anything that might damage their family honour, status and esteem. This aligns with the experiences of some participants in Kajanu's (2015) study, who were also financially reliant on their parents for a luxurious lifestyle. This financial dependency grants parents additional leverage in family negotiations, further
suppressing these children's voices and confidence, and affecting their sense of belonging within the family. Consequently, Tiger children may develop a distorted self-perception, struggling to cultivate a strong, independent sense of identity and self-worth.

Even where Tiger children are able to succeed, these achievements are not necessarily recognised for their full worth. For example, regarding studying in the UK, the expectation was for Tiger children to achieve and graduate so as not to tarnish their parents' reputation with poor academic results. Therefore, the academic achievements in its own right were not valued or recognised (e.g., classification of degree); rather, it was the fact that they had to return with a Western qualification. Where Tiger children had performed well in their overseas education, the lack of value attached to their grades meant that Tiger children tended to undervalue their own achievements in academia, instead valuing the esteem they gave their parents by meeting parental expectations.

Honneth (1995) argues that a sense of self-worth emerges from positive experiences of recognition, where individuals feel valued and respected for their unique qualities. In the case of Tiger children, their sense of self-worth is contingent upon their ability to meet their parents' expectations, resulting in a fragile and performance-based sense of self-esteem. When they fail to meet these expectations, their sense of self-worth is negatively impacted, which will cause them to feel of inadequacy and a diminished sense of self.
I started to enjoy people telling me that my good rankings have brought my father honour, especially when they say it in front of him...I no longer particularly care if people only say that I am good at studying, it doesn't mean much to me anymore. My happiness was attached to my parents' moods, which were tied to my exam results. (Smith/Taylor)

However, for students who cannot meet their Tiger parents' expectations, their experiences are even more challenging. They not only pay the price in terms of a loss of their autonomy and self-value, but found their voices were largely dismissed.

They don't allow me to make any decisions, even now that I am a grown man, I still don't have a say in front of them (parents). (Smith/Taylor/Aaron)

It was also not uncommon for friends, family and work colleagues to attribute Tiger children’s success solely to their parents' involvement, such encounters will be discussed more in-depth in Chapter seven. Moreover, Tiger parents themselves often expect to take credit for their children’s success, believing that their children would not have made it without family guanxi or financial support.

They don't believe you did it yourself, they will say that was his father's money or guanxi talking...when you did badly, they laugh at you and will call you a wastrel child forever. (Smith/Freya)
For Tiger daughters, due to the gender bias inherent in Chinese society in general, they were perceived as being even more dependent on their rich parents than Tiger sons.

When they know you are a girl from a rich family, they automatically prejudge you as useless...people think of me as someone who apart from having a rich father, is nothing. (Freya)

The stereotype of these Tiger children as not being able to achieve success by themselves, would appeared to be pervasive among the participants who fall into the Tiger category. For many people, including some of the Tiger parents, the 'rich kid from a privileged family' label is the only identity they attribute to Tiger returnees. There is a sense of the loss of the ‘I’, of the individual identity of the Tiger children themselves. This form of misrecognition is personal, blinded by prejudice and is a little discussed form of discrimination (Laitinen, 2012).

6.3.2 The Benefits of Living Under the Tiger’s Shadow

Despite the loss of the ‘I’, the benefits of living with the wealth that the Tiger family brings, mitigated some of life hurdles for Tiger children and provided positive life changing opportunities.

Money has brought me a peaceful state of mind. (Smith/Freya)
Tiger parents do not expect their children to provide for them financially or to advance family status or reputation. Rather, Tiger children only have one hurdle to surpass, which is ‘not to cause their parents to lose face’. For this reason, they are relatively less pressured when compared to the children from other typology categories. Indeed, Tiger children in general have a sense of security and possess more leeway to make mistakes. They view the exchange of filial piety for security to be a hurdle that is relatively easy to clear.

Sometimes I really pity those young returnees who work for me, they have to send money home, sacrifice everything in their job or in society to not to shame their family, and obey their parents...how much is enough to provide for parents? How much do you still need to do so they won’t be laughed at by others? Are there any more they would like you to obey to? These are the questions these young kids (participants’ returnee employees) must ask themselves every day...compared to them, I am so lucky, I just need to obey, bring faces, tell me what to do and I will do it, it is easy. (Smith)

As Tiger children do not have to compete for good jobs or to generate income, they are often more relaxed in their workspaces. This has seen them enjoy better relations with their co-workers. Leaving personal profits aside at work, has enabled this group of participants to focus more on employers’ interests when preforming tasks. Therefore, participants from Tiger families have acquired greater recognition through increased appreciation and admiration from their colleagues and employers, respectively (Smith and Deranty, 2012).
People like me we don’t really depend on our salary or bonus to enjoy our life, so there is no point to intriguing for those little bit of gains, not worth it...I work there because I want to work there, not because I need to work there...I let my colleagues know a bit of my background, so they understand that I am not here to fight over some small interests...my boss likes me too because he knows I am not the greedy one, he knows it is not worth it for me to do those ‘dirty’ things behind his back. (Smith/Freya)

Tiger children’s access to their parent’s money and resources has also enabled them to afford to study and remain in the UK for longer periods of time. They have had opportunities to learn, explore and understand the local social and cultural knowledge that they could not grasp by just being a student for a short period or within the confines of campus life. Such significant influence from their family is consistent with findings from other studies by researchers such as Sullivan (2001), Li and Bray (2006), Jaeger (2011) and Xu (2021). They argued that students from higher social classes often have access to greater socioeconomic capital through their upbringing and social networks, which can provide them with advantages in areas such as education and career opportunities. Tiger children’s extensive transnational networks, strong English language proficiencies and communication skills, honed and acquired through their interactions with the host community over a longer period of time, dramatically increase their self-value after their return from the UK. Whether it was at home, in the workplace or in the community, Tiger children’s confident and practical cosmopolitan competencies were premium qualities that
distinguished them from the crowd. For instance, several Smith participants stayed in the UK for five years or more post-study:

Unlike those who just went to the UK for a degree, I am not just able to speak English, I can communicate with people in English, I know the culture, I understand the needs, and I can get the meaning across...My networks in the UK and other country are the reason why I am in this high position in my job, it makes me irreplaceable.

6.3.3 Pros And Cons of Living as Part of a Tiger Family

It is clear that the returnees with Tiger parents are considerably less stressed, as compared with returnees from the other parental types. They also displayed greater confidence in their everyday pursuits for recognition. In their stories, Tiger children’s obedience and adherence to their parents’ wishes in education, their career and marriage, have served to enhance the reputation of their parents. Tiger children themselves are consequently recognised by their parents as fulfilling filial piety, which in turn is rewarded with parental ‘love’.

However, the experiences of Tiger children reveal the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of living under Tiger parenting. There are consequences of being part of the Tiger parental family expectations ‘虎父无犬子 tigers will not beget a dog son’. While many Tiger children may enjoy benefits financially and
professionally, they often do so at the cost of their autonomy, self-worth and personal aspirations to a large degree in order to demonstrate and achieve the obedience and adherence that their parents require. However, in general, Tiger children acknowledge and accept the cost they must pay to receive their parents' ‘materialised love’. They are willing to sacrifice their autonomy, self-worth and aspirations to fulfil filial piety, in exchange for their current privileged and convenient lifestyles. As demonstrated in Smith and Freya's stories, they are unwilling to give up their inherited privilege for anything.

6.4 Ironsmith Parents

Parents in the Ironsmith typology are generally small business owners or work as middle level managers in companies or government agencies, and have an average socioeconomic status. They are successful and respected in their careers, and their contributions to society are generally recognised on a local level. These parents are themselves generally from less influential family backgrounds and have built up everything they have by themselves. In the UK, they would be considered to be ‘self-made’ rather than people who have come with inherited wealth. They are very proud of what they have achieved, and recognised, praised, and admired for their accumulation of sufficient wealth to achieve a decent standard of living environment.

However, due to personal limitations such as their educational level, professional capability and systemic age and gender discriminations in work, most of the parents
in this category gradually face a plateau within their career and personal developments. Such loss in potential and opportunities have spurred their struggle for both their identity and status recognition in an increasingly competitive Chinese society. These parents are anxious about their family’s future, and they are concerned that their middle-class status can no longer provide them with the same status and confidence they used to have when their skillsets and the level of educations were desired and appreciated by their employer and society. Ironsmith parents overall now feel they are ‘losing out’ compared with others in their social circle.

I think I was in my high school when they started to talk about how they are losing out in company restructures and salary rises to their colleague who is young or with degrees or with better guanxi...you can feel their anxieties at home, as every time they were complaining about their life, they will drag me into the conversation, they always say ‘do better in you study otherwise you will end up like us. (Taylor/Bella/Aaron)

Ironsmith parents also attributed their frustrations to issues of geography, and thus they wanted their children to be successful enough to move to bigger cities. As Aaron stated:

They think their talents and opportunities were hindered by living in a small city, they want me to study hard and move to top tier cities.
Taylor, Aaron and Bella from the composite biographies in Chapter Five are the closest examples of children who come from Ironsmith parents. In these participants interview narratives, they describe their parents’ expectations on them through an idiom in China as ‘Hen tie bu cheng gang (恨铁不成钢)’. This metaphor is used as it depicts the efforts of ironsmiths engaging in laborious process of hammering the iron to make it into steel. The phrase signifies the efforts needed to turn something ordinary into something extraordinary, as well as capturing the frustrations in people’s anticipation of this playing out. In the participants’ perspective, they were perceived as analogous to unrefined metal, and their parents were convinced that applying the correct heat and pressure were necessary for their success.

Ironsmith parents place great emphasis on their children’s future as a way to bolster their own identity and status, and view their children’s path to success as way to compensate for their own inability to obtain what they wished for but could not achieve. They do not want their children to face the same regrets they as parents now face. Ironsmith parents are therefore driven to push their children to a level of education and career attainment that they themselves desire. They are generally willing to disproportionately sacrifice their time and earnings to ensure their children’s academic success. This includes investing their lifelong savings in transnational education, which they consider as a shortcut to their children’s socioeconomic success. In return, they expect absolute obedience and adherence from their children.
Ironsmith parents are cautious investors and very results focused. In order to protect their interests (investments), they usually assert great influence over their children's decision making. As a result, Ironsmith parents can have unrealistic expectations of their children, such as being determined to send their children to highly ranked universities regardless of their children's ability to cope and even if this means their children have to struggle to pass their courses. These parents are also very career focused when choosing returnee's subjects in UK universities. They expect returnees to be highly employable and in jobs as soon as they graduate to maximise their return on investments.

Furthermore, Ironsmith parents are less tolerant of failures from their children, as they are anxious that such failures will draw ridicule from being perceived by their friends and society in general as having made an unwise investment. They believe such matters will exacerbate their already wavering status and impact on their esteem recognition.

My family is the kind of family that does not have much guanxi and money that can arrange my future...they said everybody in the family will depend on me to go to good university, find a good job and marry to the right people...after university they sent me to the UK for a one-year master's course as they say I will not find a good job with only a domestic degree...after the UK it was the job and after the job it was getting married...I can't refuse, otherwise I will be seen as not fulfilling filial piety. (Taylor/Bella/Aaron)
Parents within the Ironsmith typology interpret their Confucian parental responsibility as an obligation to help their children unleash their potential, enabling their children to perform their filial piety duties adequately for the benefit of the family's collective good. Compared to the Tigers, the conditions for Ironsmith children to earn 'love' within the family are more onerous, as they are expected to fulfil the entire tripartite standards of being able to provide for their parents financially, to demonstrate that they have achieved a higher status and to earn more esteem than their parents.

6.4.1 The Consequences of Living in the Ironsmith Shadow

Ironsmith participants understand and simultaneously accept the fact that, as children living in China, they have filial piety duties to fulfil as well as the expectation to strive for their parents' personal interests and make contributions to their family collective wellbeing subsequently.

I know why they push me, and as a daughter committed to fulfilling filial piety, I need to make them happy...I think they have made a difference to me...my mother did teach me some good practices and habits and those did help me over the years...they should take some credits for my current achievements.

(Taylor/Bella)

However, unlike Tiger children who were able to appreciate their parents involvement in their life, Ironsmith children appear to hold unexpected grievances
towards their parents' involvement. These grievances are caused by four key triggers:

- Over intensity of parental interventions
- Adherence to 'setback home education'
- Playing the sympathy card
- Unrealistic parental expectations

6.4.1.1 Over Intensity of Parental Interventions

Ironsmith children have found the intensity of their parents' interventions into their lives as being unjustified and unnecessary. In their view, they were already demonstrating adequate filial piety.

I don't think they are right on this one...good exam results, famous UK university degrees, good job, good family to marry, I did it all per their request ...they knew I am good and yet they never stop pushing.

(Taylor/Bella/Aaron)
Some shared that their parents labelled them as poor scholars due to previous inadequate schooling performance, and how their parents have never relinquished earlier assumptions and stereotyping.

I was not a child who could produce good results in my earlier schooling, so my mother thinks I can do nothing right, she insists she needs to push me as hard as she can, otherwise I will not survive. (Taylor)

Gender profiling also took place, where Ironsmith sons were presumed to be ‘naughty’ by default and received more intense disciplining, while Ironsmith daughters were also heavily pressurised because they were culturally defined as ‘weak and undependable’. As Bella complained in her interview: ‘...they treat girls like boys and treat boys like donkeys, no one gets a break in this kind of family.’ The constancy of interventions left little room for Ironsmith children to make independent decisions or to pursue goals to fulfil their own desires and aspirations.

As a result, the mental well-being of Ironsmith children appears detrimentally affected, as demonstrated in one of the Taylor type participants’ account, where she described the constant pushing by her parents as feeling like they were pushing her ‘to her death.’
6.4.1.2 The Adherence To ‘Setback Home Education’

‘Setback home education’ is understood by Qifeng (2017) and Zichen and Wenjing (2010) as a way of structuring children’s upbringings, through deliberately introducing obstacles for children to encounter and surpass. Under such a concept, Zichen and Wenjing (2010) argue that parents expect that their children can achieve greater success through experiencing higher setbacks. These setbacks are seen as ways to improve resistance, survivability and adaptive capacity in later life. In the context of the Ironsmith typology, ‘setback home education’ was applied to the Ironsmith children, where the constant diminishing and criticism of their attainments was undertaken to improve their motivation. Any demonstration of emotional love and support was seen as fostering weakness (Zhang, 2007; Qifeng, 2017). However, in the interviews, all Ironsmith children demonstrated strong resentment towards their parents’ setback orientated method of family education.

Everything I did seem wrong to them...they never say well-done...they say they don’t want me to feel too good about myself, they believe I will regress if I feel proud. (Taylor/Aaron)

All Ironsmith children unanimously expressed the view that their time in the UK was one of their most successful periods of their life. They indicated that in comparison to when they were in China, their academic endeavours were adequately acknowledged by their UK universities, their individual agencies were respected and protected by the host culture and custom, their international student identities provided them with esteem particularly from their friends and others in China who
were not able to travel abroad, and most crucially when they were abroad, they have felt ‘love’ from their parents.

However, the ‘love’ they felt was not given as a result of trust or belief in their children, but rather due to parental anxiousness stemming from a lack of information and knowledge about everyday life in the UK. Ironsmith parents also lacked confidence in their children’s competency to live on their own and without immediate family support in a foreign country. As a result, they were made more explicit and forthcoming demonstrations of care and affection. Ironsmith children reported that they were gratified with the improvement in the quality of their communications with their parents, as their parents were keen to call on them as much as they could to check on their wellbeing and progress.

As a result of being homesick and emotionally distant, some Ironsmith children, such as those in the Taylor and Aaron stories, were comforted by their improved communication.

From the perspective of recognitions, I felt the only time I was fully recognised was the two years’ time I was in the UK. I didn’t really enjoy the study part as it was very hard for me, but as a person I felt free, respected, and I felt the advantages of individualism...what made me felt really good was my mother started to ask about my life and wellbeing. I know they care about me all along, but they never show that to me...we talked more than when we were living in the same house!
This newfound sense of independence, emerging from the geographical distance that diminished parental involvement in their daily lives, echoes the experiences of returnees in Kajanus's (2015) study. Living as students abroad, they experienced weakened familial ties and had to independently navigate various challenges. This often led to a sense of empowerment upon leaving China, as returnees reported a feeling they had 'gained power' from their experiences overseas (Ibid, P135).

Similarly, Martin (2022) emphasises that studying abroad provides a temporary escape from societal and familial expectations, particularly around marriage for female students. This freedom empowers these women to explore alternative life trajectories, relationships, and aspects of their sexuality, fostering a period of self-discovery and a re-evaluation of traditional norms. Studying abroad serves as a catalyst for expanding their perspectives and ambitions, challenging the conventional paths prescribed to them by Chinese society. As Kajanus and Martin articulate, this phenomenon highlights the transformative effect that geographical and cultural distance can have on the parent-child dynamic in these families.

However, improved communications did not always lead to uniformly positive results. For instance, in the case of Aaron, parental phone calls were a means of checking up on him.

My mother saw the pictures that I went to clubs with my friends from my social media, and then she used several of our weekly phone calls to lectured me about how I should focus on my study and not waste their money...that was
when I learnt how a short phone call can ruin your whole week...I blocked her from my online space and for a long time I didn’t want to speak with her.

In the context of Ironsmiths’ ‘setback home education’ approach, one of the central issues is the absence of praise and recognition that Ironsmith children experience from their parents, regardless of whether they meet or exceed expectations. This lack of acknowledgement, has left many feeling unappreciated and unworthy, negatively affecting their self-esteem.

6.4.1.3 Playing the Sympathy Card

Ironsmith children provided examples of how some Ironsmith parents played the sympathy card as a way of obtaining obedience.

They always play vulnerable by telling me how hard their life is and how weak their health is, and threaten me if I don’t work hard or obey their wishes, they will be finished. (Taylor)

Every time they say, ‘do you want me to die?’ I know they will start to repeat how much they have sacrificed to raise me this big. (Aaron)

Other than health threats, repeated reminders of the financial hardships that Ironsmith parents had to endure due to their selfless financial investments into their
children’s development, has created degrees of self-guilt in Ironsmith children. Chinese students feelings of guilt arising from accepting parental support for their UK studies, has also been captured by Gilliland's (2016). In her study, such guilt resulted in students constantly worrying that they would not achieve academic success and, in turn, not being able to repay the financial and emotional investment made by their parents and wider family. However, in my Ironsmith participants circumstances, such guilt and consequent emotional burden led to a deterioration of Ironsmith children’s psychological wellbeing during their time in the UK and also upon returning home. Additionally, it led them to feelings of inadequacy, stress and anxiety, and for many of them, this had ultimately hindered their academic and personal success. As Taylor shared:

My mother says to me all the time when I was in the UK that they have spent all they have on me and they have to eat pickles only for food...I know what she was doing, but I don’t think she understands what I have to face with the insufficient funds that they give me in the UK...I was the one who really struggled with money and tremendous guilt as I care for them...for quite a long time I was very depressed in the UK, I couldn’t concentrate on anything, I don’t know if I should keep asking them for money to pay my fees and groceries to study and live a life.

The impact of playing the sympathy card does not just affect Ironsmith children themselves, but has also impacted on the way they subsequently parent their own children. A married couple in my study whose experiences shaped my composite
character Bella and Aaron, shared how their parents’ ‘money guilt’ strategy has affected the way they are now raising their own children:

They use their money to threaten us for everything, and for that reason, we are not signing up our children to any of those expensive after school clubs or costly hobbies. We know it is not fair for them as they will be marginalised sometimes by their friends, but we don’t want them to be kidnapped by the ‘money guilt’ like what we have experienced. We are trying to ensure that we will not become like our parents.

6.4.1.4 Unrealistic Parental Expectations

Ironsmith children were often given unrealistic parental expectations to live up to since they were young. Many of them felt that such demanding parents had deprived their rights of being a child and teenager. However, Ironsmith children noted that their parents’ hopes and wishes for their attainments during their UK studies were the most problematic.

Ironsmith children reported that their study abroad experiences were the result of their parent’s persistence. They were told that their educational journey was to be ‘gold plated’ with a one-year UK master’s degree, so that they could assume an advantageous position when competing with domestic talent after their return to China. For this reason, Ironsmith children were pushed to attend what parents saw
as highly ranked universities regardless of whether they had the ability to cope. These children often had to struggle to pass their courses. They acknowledged in their interview that, in one way or another, their overseas experiences and returnee identity did not provide them with the right amount of recognition they thought they should have on returning from an overseas education, such as conveying them with advantages in the job market and life. This is because, in the perception of these Ironsmith children, they did not have the time nor the energy to engage in various activities that could have enhanced their employability while in the UK. This was mainly due to the demands of their intensive one-year master's program. Such perceptions align with Fakunle's (2021) findings that international students, particularly those from non-English speaking countries like China, have to forgo opportunities to develop their employability during their short time studying in the UK. Indeed, they must work particularly hard to catch up with their courses due to language and cultural barriers.

While these children accepted that in part this was due to the choices of courses or subject areas they made while studying abroad, they nevertheless emphasised that the parental choice to send them to highly ranked UK universities meant they had to struggle to graduate, and their parents should hold some responsibility for them not acquiring appropriate advantages for future work or life.

Although I did get 6.5 in my IELTS, but my English was not good enough for the programme...It was only one year I didn’t even have time to know every one’s name...the course was too demanding...I spent all my free time trying to
catch up...I have to re-sit quite a few exams to graduate, I didn’t really know any local students who could help me...when I came back home, my English was still not good and I don’t really have any experiences apart from what had happened in my course...It has been very hard to find a job with what I have got from the UK...I don’t regret going to the UK, but I do regret that I should have went to an easier university and stayed in the UK for a bit longer. (Taylor/Bella/Aaron)

Some shared that attendance at pre-Masters courses was a mistake, and that they only went to placate their parents.

The extra year was just a mistake, it was just a way to comfort my parents vanity...everybody knew that I was not qualified for an elite UK university, but no one can stop my mother. I had to face great pressures from the programmes that I would struggle to follow and from my parents’ unrealistic expectations of me...all I got from it now is that every time they are not happy with me, they can say I paid two years fees for your one-year degree, why you are so ungrateful. (Taylor/Bella)

6.4.2 The Realities of Living with Ironsmith Parents

The majority of Ironsmith children reported that they had all been given deadlines to find a job right after their return and, for many of them, their parents had specifically
required that international or foreign affair posts were preferred. Such family pressure experienced by the participants is consistent with previous findings (Zweig and Han, 2010; Gill, 2010; Tu and Nehring, 2020), that It is a common perception that investing in an expensive education abroad should lead to better job prospects and higher salaries, which can help justify the cost.

I studied civil engineering in my master’s and there are no international jobs for my subject area in Shenyang, so my parent’s pressurised me into taking the National Civil Servant Examination for a job at local foreign affairs office, that took me another year of studying and passing the exam. Now apart the fact that I can speak a little English, my one-year UK study did nothing for me. (Taylor/Aaron)

For the younger Ironsmith children, especially the female participants, their priority after returning home was to get married, and preferably to someone who also had study abroad experiences. Their Ironsmith parents aspired for marriages which joined them with another ‘rich’ family. Moreover, Ironsmith parents believed that their daughters were at a good age when they returned to seek a husband to marry, and that time was of the essence. This reflects the findings of Gilliland (2016) and Hu (2017), where the Asian participants reported that their overseas education experiences were viewed by parents as asset that could improve their marriage prospects.
The pressures for these students to conform to parental expectations, such as when and who to marry in order to avoid criticism or disapproval, highlights the deep-rooted influence of filial piety duty and traditional gender roles in Chinese society. This phenomenon is explored in depth by Kajanus (2015), Zhang and Xu (2020) and Martin (2022). Female returnees, having adopted more individualistic and liberal values while abroad, often struggled to reconcile these values with the collectivist and patriarchal norms of Chinese society. This tension could lead to feelings of alienation and being misunderstood or undervalued by their families and communities (Kajanus, 2015).

The challenge was particularly acute for those women who rejected the 'leftover women' discourse, which stigmatises mature, highly educated, and financially independent women as less desirable for marriage. Their new gendered perspectives, emphasising education and career over personal relationships and marriage, allowed them to challenge this societal label and empowered them to redefine what it means to be a successful, modern, educated woman (Zhang and Xu, 2020). However, upon returning to their more traditional and patriarchal home environments, these female returnees often found themselves in a delicate balancing act. Despite the broadened perspectives and ambitions developed abroad, they often succumbed to their parents' marital pressures. This situation underscores the ongoing tension between modernity and tradition, individual desires and collective norms, particularly in the context of gender roles and expectations within Chinese society (Kajanus, 2015; Martin, 2022).
In the context of my study, this was articulated by Taylor and Bella who were single and in their early twenties when they returned home from the UK, and were shocked when their parents just told them to ‘get out the house and find a husband to marry’:

I know they will ask me to do that, but I didn’t expect they want me to find someone that quick, it was like a joke to them...I was preparing my CVs at the time, my mother stopped me and said that find a better husband is better than anything...I never had a boyfriend, they never allowed it, and now I was expected to just get married ASAP...My parents asked everyone they knew to set up blind dates for me, I have met the same guy three times in a week because different people have set us up with made up personal information.

Ironsmith parents’ expectations often centre around their children’s education, career and marriage attainment, which they view as a direct return on their investment. However, these expectations often disregard their children’s individual perspectives and priorities, forcing them to prioritise their parents’ wishes over their own. What is also illuminating is that the overwhelming parental expectations and pressures, have also caused the Ironsmith children to not recognise (or at least they do not appear to acknowledge) their own aspirations and values. Constantly striving to meet their parents’ demands, these participants might have overlooked their own goals and priorities, leading to a disconnect between their true desires and the life they were living.
Unlike the children of Tiger families, Ironsmith children would appear to be left feeling dissatisfied, discontented and disgruntled as a result of over intensive parental interventions, unrealistic expectations and lack of recognition of what the children have achieved in their own right. As indicated by Aaron:

In everybody’s eyes I am a very filial piety son, as I fulfilled all my parents requests; however, only I know how my filial piety label has messed up my life. Ever since I did that UK degree, I was living in a bubble, I was staged at a high altitude, and everybody thought I should have the capability to accomplish more than usual. Therefore, the expectations people placed on me just get higher and higher, I don’t know how much I need to do or how much I can do, all I know is I am squeezing myself and there is not much me left in me.

Aaron’s feelings are echoed by others who share similar concerns and anxieties. Overall, Ironsmith children are frustrated that they are losing opportunities in work as their limited cosmopolitan competencies begin to become inadequate when preforming their ever-more demanding tasks and responsibilities. They are concerned that their current incomes and savings will not be able to provide – or perhaps more appropriately, afford – a better future for their family. Therefore, these Ironsmith children have realised that they are entering a similar middle age crisis their parents previously experienced.
6.5 Saviour Parents

Saviour parents are hardworking and pragmatic working-class people with modest ambitions. In my study, there was only one returnee, Wei, who identified herself as coming from a low socio-economic status family background. Both of her parents worked as factory workers and neither of them possessed adequate qualifications that would enable them to move up the career ladder. At work, the skills and diligence of Saviour parents are recognised but never adequately rewarded, especially financially. This has directly impacted on their status in society, as their overall contributions to their work and the general community are overlooked because of their low socioeconomic status. Therefore, the frustrations coming from a lack of societal respect and esteem coupled with the strong desire for a better life, influences Saviour parents’ expectations of their children.

Saviour parents view their children as a ticket out of their unfortunate personal financial and status circumstances. They see their children as their salvation, a route to a better family life, to better economic prosperity for the whole family, and a way of escaping current societal stigma and discrimination. To reach this goal, Saviour parents instil in their children a duty towards the family’s overall happiness and to understand that everyone’s future depends on their success. As Wei shared:

They used to say a lot to me when I was young that it will depend on me whether we can buy a car, move to a bigger flat.
However, unlike the other two parent typologies, where features such as obtaining good school results, achieving highly ranked university qualifications, acquiring better paid employment, securing suitable marriages were some of the goals to be attained, Saviour parents have tended not to impose any similar expectations. This is largely due to the acceptance that they are not qualified to give any such suggestions. Rather, Saviour parents hope for the best outcome by investing hope in their children, with the result that they are the least controlling of the three parental types I have identified.

I think my parents have never really intervened in any of my business, they are not like other’s parents, they don’t control or manage my life...They said with their limited educations and the understanding of the world, they have to leave my life with me, I am ‘free ranged’.

Saviour parents have instilled degrees of independence in their children despite their limited socioeconomic circumstances. They encourage their children to take initiatives, to be responsible for their self-development and to understand that as parents, they are unable to provide much in terms of financial assistance.

Because my parents don’t know what I should do, then I just have to help them to decide. For example, when I was young, I advised my parents how our money should be spent on what after school trainings I should go to. Moreover, unlike other children I know, I plan my own study without the supervision of my parents, and I always studied hard. I had never lost their
faces in any of the exams, even though they never required me to be that good, I just did good, for them and for myself.

Saviour parents do feel guilty that they are unable to provide as much and as a result, they often demonstrate greater support, trust and understanding of the choices their children make. Their hopes for their children coupled with their trust in their children, has led them to be willing to borrow considerable amounts of money to support international study. Saviour children in return appear to understand their situation and reciprocate with filial piety and more to raise the esteem, status and financial wellbeing of the whole family.

Since I felt a strong duty of filial piety and was very capable, they allow me to decide what was the best for our family...when study in the UK has become a trend in China, we were told that part-time work wages could compensate the majority of the fees if you chose to study at a cheaper college, so I went to Northern Ireland...My parent supported my decision even though they have to take big loans from our relatives...they agree with me that without any guanxi in China, a UK degree will give us better opportunities in the future.

6.5.1 The Realities of Living with Saviour Parents

It could be argued that in the Saviour typology, due to Saviour parents perception of their own lack of ability to guide their child adequately to secure a better life, they
have transferred the overall responsibility of being family providers to their children. Saviour children would appear to accept those responsibilities as a mark of filial piety and doing so without resentment as they have not been constrained by unreasonable parental demands. Saviour children share their parents’ goals to improve their life circumstances.

Saviour children studying abroad have had to seek employment to supplement their income. By doing so, they have often acquired cosmopolitan competencies that Tiger children have acquired by staying longer in the country they are studying or through harnessing the networks Tiger parents are able to give their children.

Because I was poor, I have to work many hours after my university time. I deliberately chose to work with local people so that I can practice my English and I want to learn more about the local culture through them too. Moreover, at the second year of my Hospitality degree, I decided to go for a placement year. I understand that my degree may not be worth that much because I can’t afford a better ranked university, but I know if I come back to China with some useful foreign skills, I will be able to find a better job.

The ability of Saviour children to be self-sufficient, generates further parental trust and, by extension, love and recognition. Saviour parents consider their children as being successful simply by going to another country to study and achieving the ability to survive there independently. The fact Wei is able to send money home becomes a bonus.
My parents support me 100% on my decisions as they know I was working hard towards our own good...because of my diligence, I got a full-time team leader job for my placement year at the restaurant I work, and I started to send money back home every month – my parents were very happy and proud of me.

Saviour parents provide an example of how recognition can be a powerful tool in shaping identity and esteem, as discussed by Honneth (1995) and Taylor (2004). The parenting approach of Saviour parents would appear not to be based on misrecognition, but rather one of affirmation and trust. Their realistic expectations have promoted filial piety accompanied by a sense of responsibility, a conscientious attitude and gratitude from their children. Saviour children come closest to fulfilling the dimension of ‘love’ in Honneth’s (1995) framework, because they have the ability to enact act upon their own agency and this in turn has enabled them to fulfil their limited parental expectations, to demonstrate filial piety and thereby bring improvements in wealth and status for the whole family.

6.5.2 The Consequences of Living Within a Saviour Family

However, there are consequences of living within a Saviour family. While Saviour parents do not impose unreasonable expectations or constrain Saviour children much, Saviour children can place a high expectation of the heights they need to achieve in order to ‘save’ their family. The one Saviour participant in my study,
placed a high tariff on herself by always feeling obligated to fulfil the targets that she set for herself. This self-imposed obligation has proven a hurdle that she has constantly had to traverse in the UK and also as a returnee. I found this participant, unlike others in my study, used the interview to offload many of the issues impacting on her. As a researcher, it was evident to me that Wei had a strong trust in me, which allowed her to express her frustrations regarding the challenges and limitations she faced while living with a Saviour identity. However, it was awkward for me as Wei has shared many personal experiences such as her relationship with her husband or her perceptions of him as a member of her family. I have only included data relevant to my study, which did not encompass participant’s intimate relationships.

While accepting she was part of the Saviour family, Wei felt she could become trapped in that identity. Saviour children run the risk of needing to feel needed and to view being needed as an achievement. Wei shared that her ‘saviour’ approach to life has now transferred from not just ‘saving’ her parents to ‘saving’ her own family, her children and her co-workers.

I was fully occupied with my work and my husband was in charge of my daughter’s education. He did a very bad job, so I have to takeover. I can’t allow my girls unfettered like that. I have the obligation to make them better, much better than me.
Wei admits that she is a strict and demanding mother and has very high expectations of her two daughters. She sacrifices her time and earnings disproportionately for their education and requires her children’s absolute obedience and adherence in every decision she made for them. Ironically, she is becoming an Ironsmith parent.

My children were too comfortable in their life, if I don't push them, they will lose at the starting line of life...When I was young, I didn't have the money to learn the things that I like. Now, I have the money, I send my daughters to learn many things, I would like to open as many doors as I can for them...I will send them to good UK universities when they grow up...they will never have to live a life that I have lived. I can help them.

### 6.6 Parenting Styles and Impact in the Workplace

For Tiger returnees, having family wealth and guanxi provided them with a sense of entitled self-confidence as they entered the workplace. The cosmopolitan competencies they acquired from being in the UK generated opportunities at work. These skills and experiences were also viewed as plusses by co-workers, attracting a degree of admiration and appreciation. The optimism Tiger children demonstrated towards their cosmopolitan competencies and guanxi concurs with Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) and Chen (2017)’s proposition that returnees with transnational skills, attitudes, and knowledge such as global cultural awareness and sensitivity,
intercultural communication skills, and broader world views, are viewed by Chinese employers as potential assets. Moreover, the social capitals they possess, such as family social connections and personal networks, are one of the main factors that pulls Chinese international students to return home for employment.

There were Tiger children who desired greater autonomy and agency, and to be less financially dependent on their family wealth. For these children, the workplace was a space that was not dominated by their parents and constituted a potential space for them to grow their own character and aspirations.

There was only one idea in my mind at that time: I want to make my own money as soon as possible...I was excited that I can finally show people that my returnee skills and ideas can provide for myself financially...they can’t control me if I don’t use their money and I am finally empowered...no one can call me ‘rich and hopeless’ anymore... I went to Beijing straight after I returned home, and I was determined that I going to find myself a good job to show my parents that they were wrong about me. (Smith)

Other were content to receive family support and help in relation to their careers. These Tiger children have used their parents’ guanxi as backup, especially if they were unable to obtain employment in their own right and exhibiting what might be termed as a safety-net mindset. As illustrated by Smith, who used his parent’s network when he could not launch his own career:
I originally wanted to work in a state-owned enterprise, when I started looking for such a job, I realised that without the right guanxi it was almost impossible to find the post that I can really show my potentials...I tried myself for a few months, I realised that I was wasting my time, and if I used my father’s guanxi to get the right job, I will have a better platform to show them what I can do, so I went to him for help

The career strategy employed by this group of Tiger children was described by Xu (2021) as a ‘waiting’ behaviour that pre-empts future benefits, either in monetary terms or better career opportunities or more autonomy to deploy time’ (page 7 and 8). In her study on how time, class and privilege intersect to shape Chinese international students’ career hopes and experiences, Xu argues that students who come from affluent family backgrounds are able to leverage their class privileges to strategically navigate the employment market, explore various career options, and invest in their long-term career development. This advantage allows them to patiently wait for more suitable opportunities that align with their aspirations and interests, ultimately leading to greater career success and satisfaction.

Moreover, the use of their guanxi privileges has also enabled Tiger children to avoid undesirable responsibilities or company politics. In relation to the workplace, being part of the Tiger family provides the children with financial safety nets, the availability of guanxi and a degree of esteem bought by wealth.
With regards to Ironsmith children, their lack of guanxi or family wealth has meant Ironsmith children have largely entered the job market and workplace having to rely on the competencies and skills they have acquired in their own right. Their lack of guanxi had meant they have not always attained the jobs that they desired.

My family has no guanxi that I can use...I became so afraid to check my emails or answering my phones, because I don't want to be selected to attend another unsuccessful interview, I was so tortured. (Bella)

In the previous chapters, I discussed that in the Chinese money-oriented society, where level of income is deemed as the main indicator of level of success (Rosen, 2004; Wang, 2005; Durvasula and Lysonski, 2010), the challenge of obtaining high paid jobs adds stress to Ironsmith children’s lives. This is against a context of knowing that Ironsmith parents expect their children to yield high returns for their initial financial investment of overseas studies. Taylor’s comments below demonstrate the turmoil and tension that some Ironsmith children faced in relation to jobs and the workplace.

I can’t let them (the parents) know that I want to apply for some easy or lower paid jobs, I will be seen as a coward, disrespectful to their investments made on my overseas’ education and the biggest disappointment in their (the parents) life. I will be most ungrateful, exhibiting unfilial piety in many people’s eyes.
For the ones who were fortunate enough to land a good job, the politics of guanxi at their workplace were described as one of their biggest hurdles to overcome in their career life. As noted by Taylor:

> You can’t get many businesses done inside or outside the company if you don’t have any good guanxi, so you need to build it yourself. When you have built some, you need to watch how you use it, and who you use it towards, as you don’t know who is under who’s protection...basically, you don’t do much of work, you do a lot of relationships building every day. (Taylor)

Taylor’s experience concurs with the assertion that anybody operating in China will be disadvantaged without useful personal connections to bypass the normal social order and gain strategic advantages Chen (2017). However, for many Ironsmith returnees, not only was this drawback ever-present, as they understood that they didn’t stand to inherit any family guanxi from their parents, but also they were surprised that their time spent in the UK simultaneously created a gap in their own personal guanxi networks. For example, one Ironsmith participant found that after six years of studying in the UK, when he returned home and needed help, apart from his family members, he realised that there were not many people in his contact list who could actually help him:

> When I came back from the UK, I realised that I don’t really have any friends after high school in China, and for those people I knew at my high school age,
I can’t really ask for any serious favours such as work-related helps, because we are not that close.

Therefore, in the workplace, when competing with those who had the ability and the opportunity to accumulate their own personal networks, or with those who have benefited from their inherited guanxi, Ironsmith returnees reported to being disadvantaged. Some Ironsmith children expressed that it would have been better to have had some work experience in China before studying abroad. This would have enabled them to develop networks that they might have been able to call upon once they returned – as Taylor indicated:

I was always daydreaming that if I could work a couple of years before I started my masters’ in the UK. In that way, I will be able to have enough time to build up my professional networks with my university classmates, make some money towards to my overseas tuition fees and living costs, and most importantly, gain some work experiences for the master’s study. It will make my life much easier as an international student in UK and as a returnee in China.

Moreover, the lack of local and personal connections has led some Ironsmith children to report being perceived as an ‘outsider’ and facing mistreatment as a result. To redeem the situation, these Ironsmith children had to compromise, which sometimes resulted in financial outlays.
I have to give gifts, treat them to expansive meals every so often to show my loyalty...I don’t make much money and yet I have to spend excessively to build up my own guanxi networks every month.

The lack of guanxi has also impacted in other ways in relation to the workplace such as volunteering for overtime, taking pressure off other colleagues and fitting into the culture of the workplace, regardless of how unhealthy it might be (e.g., a drinking culture) in order to be popular and accepted.

The one Saviour participant indicated that her ‘saving’ tendencies has shaped her personality and also her relationships at work. Due to her work experiences in the UK, the Saviour participant has never struggled to find a suitable job. However, her independent demeanour has developed in her, by her own admittance, a tendency to be overly judgemental or critical towards her work colleagues. Such behaviour had attracted criticism from her co-workers on both her personality and her returnee’s identity. The Saviour participant recognises her biases towards her peers as being unacceptable and could be seen as being unprofessional but her view of herself as being highly self-sufficient and thereby requiring the highest work quality from her colleagues (who she saw as largely flawed), has meant she has not always made friends in the workplace.

I know I should have not pointed out other’s weakness that frankly, a lot of my colleagues hated me and have called me bad names with regards to my returnee status...I do regret it sometimes, but it is who I am.
The Saviour participant is the only one that has not used any guanxi to obtain success. She believes in herself and she pushes herself: ‘...I don't beg for guanxi, I don't have any guanxi to beg, I depend on myself.’

However, while her co-workers might find her difficult to work with, her pushy behaviour, her domineering personality and her independence have been appreciated by her employers, who view the pressures she places on her colleagues as a demonstration of her proactiveness. In many instances, this push for action has resulted in positive improvements in terms of her productivity and employers’ profitability. The Saviour participant has been awarded with several promotions despite being simultaneously despised by her colleagues for using them to climb the corporate ladder. She was defensive of her approach:

What do you want me to do? I have a whole family expecting me to make big money...if they want to blame, they should blame themselves too, it was their incompetency made my skills noticeable in front of my bosses...the money I made are the rewards of my endeavours and knowledge, I deserved it. I just do my jobs I don't play games. For this reason, if they don't like me then I always feel I am sorry, but I am not sorry.
6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to outline the three parental types (Tiger, Ironsmith and Saviour) which emerged from the interviews with study participants. When I began this study, I had not anticipated that parental expectations would play such a key role in shaping the life of returnees. While I was aware of the concept of filial piety, I had made the (incorrect) assumption that individual agency and confidence derived from studying abroad would play a significant role in how study participants experienced, explained and understood issues of recognition. However, this was not the case.

Parenting types and expectations have impacted not only on how participants have experienced esteem and recognition at home but also in the workplace. The role of guanxi has also been significant and Tiger participants have been the ones most able to utilise their guanxi to progress and succeed. By contrast, the Ironsmith and Saviour participants have drawn largely on their own resources.

In the next chapter, I further discuss emerging issues within the lens of recognition, while making links to the work of Honneth, Taylor and Fraser.
7 Chapter Seven: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

Recognition is a complex concept and can be interpreted in different ways as discussed in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I draw from my fieldwork and findings to discuss how returnees experienced and understood recognition within their home, work and societal context.

In the rest of the chapter, I first delve into the complexities of parental expectations that the participants have to navigate at home. Following that, I explore the participants' respect and esteem recognition experiences in their interactions with work colleagues, peers and the broader community. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the long-standing recognition issues of social justice, gender inequality and the impact of the Chinese Hukou policy, which affected the majority of study participants regardless of their background.

7.2 Filial Piety and Parental Love

One of the big surprises I encountered in my research was the extent to which parental expectations within the context of filial piety, have influenced how returnees experienced recognition within their home and family context.
From interviewing the participants on their experiences, I found that their individual recognition attainments were shaped by a complex interplay of factors, namely parental expectations through filial piety with often unnegotiable duties to family and community. This aspect of filial piety has played a dominant role in limiting or shaping the range of agency individual participants were able to exercise, as well as how they experienced recognition. This is not to suggest that in another context, such as in a European country, that issues of social class, parental, familial, and community expectations do not play key roles; however, the concept of filial piety does not have the degree of hold that it appears to have over all the participants, regardless of social class. Compared to the West, notwithstanding the fact that the concept of ‘conditional love’ also exists in Western society, the agency and aspirations of the individual are generally expected to have reasonable if not significant degree of influence in the future direction an individual takes. While there may be variations depending on the cultural or faith backgrounds you come from, the dominant narrative in Western societies is the primacy of individual rights and needs.

The participants in my study wanted to be recognised by their parents. How this was achieved depended on the parenting type they were raised under, alongside issues of socio-economic class and the gender of participants as was discussed in Chapter Six. Participants placed their need to be recognised by parents ahead of their own aspirations, desires and dreams. This did not mean, however, they were satisfied with this arrangement, and those in the Ironsmith category in particular described the tensions and pressures they encountered as they negotiated being back in China after studying abroad. Indeed, not an insignificant number (ten out of twelve)
indicated that if the opportunity arose, they would wish to return to live and work in the West. They viewed this as a route to escape parental demands and filial piety constraints, but also a way to develop their own identity, aspirations and futures.

Ironsmith participants’ powerful desire to leave China, highlights the tensions and dilemmas they experienced as returnees. From participants narratives, it appears that achieving recognition is particularly challenging for the Ironsmith group of participants. Ironsmith participants not only face unrealistic parental expectations that heavily influence their future decisions, but they must also grapple with gaining recognition from their workplace and society at large. These challenges will be further discussed in sections 7.3, 7.4 and 7.5. Consequently, these participants were clearly distressed and their journey to recognition in general has been messy.

As mentioned in Chapter Six, Ironsmith participants come from middle-class families and are not as underprivileged. While Ironsmith participants may achieve a degree of distributive recognition as described by Fraser (2000), in terms of status, they feel they lack parity in esteem and status recognition. This view appears to have affected their participation in every living space examined in this study (home, workplace, and wider society). Many of the Ironsmith participants are perceived as ‘migrants’ moving into the big cities and face constraints relating to the Hukou system. Like many others who are not born in the big cities, they feel they have no voice in addressing their Hukou dilemmas. The constraints of the Hukou system were discussed in Chapter Three and will be further explored in the social justice section of this chapter.
In contrast to the situation faced by Ironsmith participants, Tiger participants received recognition in the home context when they prioritised their parents' wishes over their own aspirations, desires and dreams. These participants who benefit from their parents’ money and status, were better placed to fulfil their filial piety duties due to facing few financial challenges and lesser parental expectations, thus less intense pressure. In fact, after successfully completing their studies in the UK and returning home, they were already seen by their parents as dutiful ‘Tiger cubs’, earning their love and support.

With recognition from their families and their access to guanxi, Tiger participants are again better placed to build up their status and reputation in their careers and communities. Their achievements outside the family were viewed by their parents as a bonus or added value, further solidifying their fulfilment of parental expectations. Such acknowledgement not only contributed to harmonious family relationships but also bestowed respect and status upon their children. As a result, Tiger participants’ self-confidence grew significantly, allowing them to gain their autonomy from their parents and focus on their own aspirations, desires and dreams.

The recognition at home experienced by Tiger participants, which stemmed from their transnational identity transformation, is something that Ironsmith participants have not been able to enjoy to the same extent. Ironsmith parents continue to view their children as ‘raw steel’ to be tempered, even after they return from the UK with international qualifications and become adults engaging in a professional life. Taylor’s example in Chapter Six illustrates this well, where his mother insisted on
pushing him as hard as possible, believing that without her pressure, Taylor would not succeed. In fact, for many Ironsmith participants, their returnee status has led to more rigorous demands and expectations from their parents, who attempt to push them towards ever greater success.

These tensions are rooted in the Ironsmith parents’ aspiration to ensure their children are well-positioned to support them in their old age. Kajanus (2015) notes that these parents are willing to go to extraordinary lengths to offer the best possible care for their only child, and they understand that their support plays a critical role in navigating the competitive landscape of Chinese education and job markets. Therefore, sending a child abroad for studies is viewed not just as support but as a strategic investment in the family's future security and prestige. Consequently, the returnees are not only expected to excel in their professional lives but also to contribute significantly to the family's social and economic status. These student returnees are acutely conscious of their parents' sacrifices and efforts, which deeply affect them emotionally. This sense of filial duty significantly shapes their relationship with their parents, their self-perception, and how they position themselves in the world (Ibid).

Therefore, while Ironsmith participants may have established certain status and reputation at work or in their own communities, in their parents’ eyes, none have yet been recognised as fully formed ‘steel’. They remain caught in a relentless quest for parental approval and recognition. These individuals often internalise a sense of duty to repay their parents' sacrifices, a belief that can eclipse their personal
achievements and shape their identity. This continuous cycle highlights the complex interplay of professional success and familial obligation, underscoring the unique challenges Ironsmith participants face in balancing their own aspirations with deep-rooted familial expectations.

This lack of home recognition in Ironsmith participants’ lived experiences, where many of their achievements were overlooked, and their efforts, contributions and claims to be rightfully acknowledged were persistently overshadowed, aligns with Laitinen’s (2012a). He argues that ‘non-recognition of children’s normative claims at home, can disorient their sense of belonging and deprive them of opportunities to develop their capacity to navigate in public without shame. He further contends that this capacity should be considered a fundamental necessity of life (ibid). Laitinen’s (2012a) account accurately reflects the low self-confidence and self-esteem exhibited by Ironsmith participants, many of whom, like the composite characters Taylor and Aaron described in Chapter Five, expressed fear of facing new challenges and innovating in life, which further hindered their struggle for self-realisation.

Another interesting point to emerge from my study is that the one participant, Wei, who I described as being brought up within a Saviour parenting type, was the only participant who had significant autonomy to shape how their life developed. For Wei, her parents did not place expectations on her in the same way that participants belonging to the Tiger and Ironsmith parenting types did. As a result, she enjoyed being recognised for everything she achieved regardless of how big or small such
 achievements were. Wei spoke with confidence about her relationship with her parents and did not feel she had to fulfil their expectations in order to achieve family and parental recognition.

In the Saviour family, Wei appeared to experience parity of participation, as described by Fraser (2000), possessing a more equal status and voice when interacting with her family members. Her experience at home exemplifies the significance of autonomy and agency in contributing to individual success and self-identity construction. Wei's parity of participation also distinguishes her from Tiger participants, as she achieved Honneth's (1995) three-dimensional recognition dimensions on her own terms, without feeling pressured to fulfil her parents' expectations or compete with other families for social status. Wei's success is particularly noteworthy as it challenges the stereotype of the 'rich kid from a privileged family' which is often associated with returnees in China. Her achievements, despite her family's limited resources, enhanced the meaning of the recognition she received. This recognition further contributed to her self-identity construction as a self-confident, self-believing and self-competent individual.

In general, across the three typologies, the recognition of 'love' is not as unconditional as Honneth (1995) has suggested. From the participants' perspective, the parental love they seek is conditional upon the filial piety they invest in their relationship with their parents. However, there is a risk that their filial piety may not meet the standards their parents set for them, and thus not count as an adequate contribution to their collective family. As a result, in this study Tiger and Saviour
participants generally receive recognition from their parents, while the filial piety contributions made by Ironsmith participants to their families, in most cases, have not yet been deemed adequate by their parents. Consequently, they reported being insufficiently recognised, resulting in a desire amongst some of these participants to leave China and return to live in the West if the opportunity arose.

7.3 Recognition Experiences in the Workplace

Recognition in the workplace was experienced differently depending on the socio-economic background of each participant. The participants who came from a Tiger background experienced recognition by dint of their status. It is therefore difficult to assess if such recognition is genuine and earned or given due to their background.

For example, as Smith described in Chapter Five, he was praised and appreciated by his manager for his efforts in work. However, his father’s strong connection with Smith’s employer made it difficult for both Smith and his colleagues to distinguish the authenticity of such recognition. Smith is no stranger to such confusion, and although he feels frustrated, he has become accustomed to his father receiving credit for his efforts. As discussed in Chapter Six, surrendering personal aspirations to secure parental love is a common trait among Tiger participants. However, Smith also ran the risk that his family influence in the workplace could cause his colleagues to misinterpret those appreciations or acknowledgements from his manager, as obsequious and ingratiating in order to curry favour with Smith’s father.
Consequently, this perception may provoke resentment and jealousy among Smith's colleagues, leading to his marginalisation in the workplace.

On the other hand, there were many instances where the inherited wealth and status of Tiger participants positively influenced their relationships with colleagues. In particular, the relaxed attitudes Tiger participants were able to have towards money allowed them to prioritise collaboration over personal profit in the workplace, reducing any need to compete with their peers. Having financial resources also enabled them to socialise with generosity and entertain work friends, fostering stronger relationships and building additional guanxi.

Furthermore, Tiger participants were able to harness the cosmopolitan competencies they gained from years of overseas experience at work. As a result, they were often viewed by their co-workers as capable, foreign-educated individuals with generous and magnanimous qualities. This unique combination of attributes generally earned them the admiration and recognition from their colleagues, enhancing their overall professional relationships.

Nevertheless, whether working as entrepreneurs or employees, Tiger participants appeared to enjoy a degree of admiration and appreciation in their career largely as a result of the power they inherit from their parents. As illustrated by Smith and Freya in Chapter Six, they use their parents' guanxi to either eliminate competition in job hunting or avoid unwanted responsibilities and workplace politics. This comfort and convenience have blinded Tiger participants to the realities of social inequality.
Indeed, they consistently benefit from the fact that others do not have access to the same level of advantages. However, in recognising their power, Tiger participants exhibited little intention to relinquish their advantages – especially when they might threat own status and privilege (Fraser, 2000).

Ironsmith participants have not been able to utilise guanxi to gain recognition, as previously described they simply did not always have access to such resources. Therefore, to receive recognition from their managers and colleagues, they had to work extra hard or invest additional efforts to build up workplace relationships. This contrasted with Tiger participants who received recognition automatically (regardless of whether it was genuinely or superficially bestowed) from managers and colleagues.

In the lived experiences of Ironsmith participants, this lack of guanxi has had a significant impact across various aspects of their professional lives. For example, in Taylor’s case, the absence of valuable connections both in society and within his company made it difficult for him to establish his professional self-worth, ranging from customer acquisition to navigating intercompany politics. This is why Ironsmith participants, more than the other groups, prefer to gain work experience before studying in the UK. Their limited networking opportunities and the fact that studying abroad prevented them from building networks like their non-returnee counterparts, made this prior experience even more valuable.
Apart from the guanxi dilemma, another factor hindering Ironsmith participants in their quest for work recognition is parental pressure. As discussed in Chapter Six, Ironsmith parents frequently hold high expectations for their children's career success. This pressure to succeed can sometimes lead Ironsmith participants to neglect the importance of fostering genuine relationships and concentrating on personal growth. Even worse, it can push some to resort to dishonest dealings in their interactions with the job market and workplace. As evidenced in Taylor and Aaron's stories from Chapter Five, there were occasions when they felt compelled to exaggerate their career accomplishments or even engage in unethical practices at work, such as bribe their managers for better opportunities to meet their parents' expectations. Such behaviour led their colleagues to view them as solely driven by self-interest and as being untrustworthy, further exacerbating the Ironsmith participants' struggles to build connections.

For the Ironsmith participants who did achieve a certain level of admiration and appreciation at work, they still exhibited a strong sense of insecurity. They worried that their 'gold plated' foreign credentials and relatively short experiences in the UK, might not be enough to maintain their success or professional standing in the long term. This underlying insecurity makes it difficult for them to fully embrace their achievements and feel confident in their abilities. Indeed, they constantly feel the need to prove themselves, resulting in excessive stress. For some Ironsmith participants such as Aaron, this insecurity leads to behaviour which compensates for their perceived lack of self-confidence, such as blindly pleasing colleagues through taking on extra work as well as seeking to seek recognition from managers at the
expense of their personal interests through. For instance, volunteering for additional duties, regardless of how stretched or tired they already were. From my interviews, it appeared that Ironsmith participants were preoccupied with the fear of losing their hard-earned recognition.

Therefore, Ironsmith participants in the workplace are often perceived as restless. While they may be recognised for their professional hard work, the impression they convey to others may be as someone who is constantly striving and struggling to prove themselves. This incessant drive can sometimes overshadow their accomplishments and make it challenging for them to build genuine connections with colleagues and managers.

Saviour participant’s recognition at work is the most straightforward among all the participants in the study. The strong individual agency and self-confidence fostered under the Saviour family's parental culture, have shaped Wei's independent personality. Consequently, Wei doesn't believe in losing her sense of and pride in self to please others. Indeed, she resists sacrificing her own interests to make 'purposeful investments' for making friends at work. Moreover, her extensive overseas experience and skills provide her with the opportunity to demonstrate her self-worth without wading deeply into the politics of guanxi. As a result, she can afford to be herself in front of her co-workers.

In Wei's story, although her assertive personality and saving tendencies have garnered some criticism from her co-workers, her professional image in front of
colleagues, employers and business partners remains very positive in general. Her identity transformation from a disadvantaged, daughter committed to fulfilling filial piety to an independent, hardworking international student, and eventually to a self-made, successful returnee businesswoman, has earned her adequate respect and admiration from those she works with. Along with the skills and competencies she has accumulated throughout her identity transformations, Wei is perceived as very successful in her workplace. Of all the participants, Wei reported receiving recognition as a result of her own achievements and character at home and at work.

7.4 Recognition Among Peers/Society

In their social circle, Tiger participants' family backgrounds, transnational transformation identities and personal career accomplishments, have endowed them with a successful image in the eyes of their peers. This image, however, is perceived differently depending on their peers' individual circumstances.

For those who come from similar, affluent socioeconomic backgrounds, they view the successes of Tiger participants as a form of competition. In Tiger participants' stories, this group of peers primarily consists of the children of their parents' successful friends or relatives, who were also raised in other 'Tiger' families. As discussed in Chapter Six, some Tiger participants described themselves and other children in their parents' social circle as being part of a portfolio used by their parents to compete with each other for social prestige. In such a context, children from
different families within these circles perceive each other as competitors. While they may be friends due to their parents' relationships, beneath the surface, they closely monitor each other's progress, striving to improve themselves in order to earn their own parental love.

This dynamic was captured in several comments made by Tiger participant Smith. When discussing how he lived up to his father's expectations, Smith mentioned that it had become a custom for him to keep tabs on the developments of his father's friends' children and he said: 'I have to be successful to show them that I did better'. The pronoun 'them' in Smith's narratives refers to his affluent peers. By surpassing 'them', Smith believes he can help his father gain social standing among his acquaintances, thereby further earning his father's conditional love.

The perceptions of Tiger participants' peers, who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are a mix of both negative and positive responses. In most cases, these peers view Tiger participants as successful returnees, envying and admiring their backgrounds, identities and accomplishments. This is exemplified in Chapter Five through the stories of Smith and Freya, where people use Tiger participants' experiences as inspiration to strive for their own goals, befriend them due to their affluent status, or feel grateful for the opportunities provided to them by Smith or Freya's personal successes.

There were also occasions when Tiger participants' successes were doubted and questioned by the people around them, with some wondering if their achievements
are the result of their own efforts or their parents' support. This mostly occurred in the workplace among colleagues. However, as discussed in Chapter Six, due to Tiger participants’ relaxed attitudes at work, where they do not need to compete for jobs or credits, their peers do not view them as competition and by extension, Tiger participants face less resentment from their peers.

In general, Tiger participants are recognised by their peers, but it is difficult to determine if this recognition is based on their personal accomplishments alone. It is evident that people do perceive Tiger participants' affluent socioeconomic backgrounds, transnational identities and career achievements as interconnected. Therefore, it can be argued that the recognition Tiger participants receive from their peers may be superficial and might once again be the result of their inherited wealth and social status. This highlights how power and resources can significantly impact how others recognise an individual's accomplishments and success.

Tiger participants appear to have what Taylor (2004) terms equal dignity, a situation where all individuals have inherent worth and deserve equal respect regardless of their social class. It is nevertheless important to recognise that an individual's background, including their socioeconomic status, does not inherently pre-set their accomplishments. People such as Smith and Freya from affluent Tiger families can still face challenges and need to overcome obstacles – such as grappling with systemic gender disparities, which will be discussed later – just as those from less privileged backgrounds must. Recognising the complexity of individual experiences
is essential for understanding the nuances of recognition and the factors that contribute to it.

In Ironsmith participants’ lived experiences, recognition is evident in three ways. Peers with a higher status recognise Ironsmith participants as hardworking and diligent individuals but with uncertain futures. This is exemplified in Chapter Six through Smith’s attitude towards his returnee employees, where he sympathises with his Ironsmith-type employees who he perceives as having to live with intense pressures from family as well as in work. Despite this empathy, these wealthier peers cannot envision a clear path forward for Ironsmith participants. Such recognition is expressed through compassion, demonstrating a certain level of respect towards Ironsmith participants but does not necessarily accord them any social esteem.

Peers at a similar level as Ironsmith participants typically include those they work with or people who share a similar socioeconomic status. These peers perceive Ironsmith participants as competing for the same job opportunities as local people, who do not have the privilege of studying abroad. For instance, in this study some Ironsmith participants took the Chinese National Civil Servant Examination to pursue a career as a civil servant. Their chosen career paths were not well-received by certain individuals. Indeed, they were viewed as encroaching upon job opportunities intended for locals without international experience, potentially leading to feelings of resentment or animosity. This perception can create tension among peers and contribute to a xenophobic sentiment that harms societal cohesion and solidarity.
Such a sentiment aligns with the concept of misrecognition discussed by Honneth (1995), where individuals' unique skills, talents and contributions to society may be overlooked or undervalued. Consequently, this misrecognition can negatively impact a person's sense of self-worth, belonging and positive self-image (ibid).

In their stories, recognition from less successful peers has the most significant impact on Ironsmith participants' lives, particularly for those who left their hometowns to work in Beijing. Generally, these peers are Ironsmith participants' acquaintances from their hometown, such as friends, ex-classmates, or relatives like cousins. The recognitions they receive from these peers are generally very positive, as they view Ironsmith participants as successful individuals, envying and admiring their family backgrounds, transnational identities and accomplishments. In their minds, Ironsmith participants represent personal aspirations – working in high-paying jobs in the big cities and fulfilling the filial piety they aspire to achieve by bringing financial prosperity, respect and good reputation to their families. These peers provide Ironsmith participants with the esteem recognition that Tiger participants experience, and they are one of the primary reasons Ironsmith participants continue pursuing their dreams in big cities despite the stress they often suffer under, as their recognition not only pleases their parents but also brings a degree of esteem through peer recognition. However, this recognition from their hometown peers may not genuinely reflect their lives in Beijing, as these peers only see the positive aspects of these participants' lives. The darker, stressful and depressing side remains hidden away by the Ironsmith participants, kept private especially from those from their hometown.
From the Ironsmith participants’ perspective, the reason behind this remains quite simple and understandable: they are trying to live up to their parents' expectations and save face. The logic behind this behaviour is similar to those who feel compelled to exaggerate their career accomplishments or even engage in unethical practices at work to meet their parents' expectations, as discussed earlier. The difference is that these Ironsmith participants in Beijing never let the truth be revealed, as they cannot afford to lose the limited opportunities they encounter to meet their parents' expectations.

This self-deceptive approach to managing relationships with themselves and their parents, has serious consequences on Ironsmith participants’ emotional and psychological well-being. By concealing the challenges and negative aspects of their lives in Beijing from their hometown peers, they create a false image of success that they must constantly maintain. This facade takes a toll on their mental health, resulting in chronic stress, anxiety and even burnout. Ironsmith participants also feel isolated, as they struggle to form genuine connections with their parents and friends, due to the constant need to protect their image – as Aaron indicated:

In everybody’s eyes, I am a son who is highly committed to fulfilling filial piety...however, only I know how my filial piety label has messed up my life...I was living in a bubble, I was staged at a high altitude...the expectations people on me just get higher and higher, I don’t know how much I need to do or how much I can do, all I know is I am squeezing myself and there is not much of me left in me.
This quote above highlights the internal struggle Aaron faces while trying to maintain the facade of success and meet the expectations placed upon him, ultimately causing significant emotional and psychological distress and demolishing his self-esteem.

In the case of the Saviour participant, her strong individual agency, self-confidence and self-respect have led her peers to recognise her filial piety, acknowledge that she is independent, hardworking and a self-made businesswoman and a successful returnee. Furthermore, her saving tendencies has made her eager to assist those around her, further solidifying her reputation as a helpful and supportive friend. This positive perception by her peers not only validates her accomplishments, but also reinforces her sense of self-worth and purpose. In her lived experience, Saviour participant Wei, can be seen as the only participant in this study to have achieved adequate, authentic peer recognition.

7.5 Recognition As a Social Justice Matter

The way recognition was experienced by study participants was also conditioned by issues of gender, geography and social class.
7.5.1 A Gendered Experience

In this section, I discuss gender inequality as a pervasive issue that affected all participants in my study, regardless of their family backgrounds. Living in a patriarchal society like China, gender plays a decisive role in shaping the identities of these individuals, influencing various aspects of their lives including family relationships, education, career, and societal expectations. These issues manifest differently for male and female participants, with both genders facing unique challenges before, during and after their experiences studying or working abroad. Therefore, recognition as explored in my research is gendered.

All twelve male participants in my study were the only children in their families. Regardless of their family's socioeconomic status, these singletons often face higher expectations and pressures from their parents compared to their female counterparts, as they are the only sons in the family. This is exemplified in the composite biographies presented of Smith, Taylor and Aaron in Chapter Five, where male participants in these categories were raised and pressured to be their family's successors or primary breadwinners. In their lived experiences, their gender predetermined their parents' attitudes towards their social roles and duties as a son in a patriarchal society, with the obligation to fulfil a male's filial piety towards his family – as described by Taylor (1992) in his accounts of the old way of recognition in a traditional society. Such restrictive recognitional attitudes, as discussed in earlier parental typologies, have significantly impacted these only sons' mental health, growth and development. For example, Tiger participant Zhao felt his self-worth was often diminished when his father shouted at him, 'How can a person like me have a
son like you?’ when he disappointed his father in his studies. Ironsmith participant Lu perceived himself as ‘living a hard life with a returnee label’, struggling to face his parents’ pressure on him in his career: ‘in everybody's eyes, I am a very filial son, as I fulfilled all my parents' requests. However, only I know how my filial piety label has messed up my life.’

Additionally, from the male participants' own perspectives, the only son status resulted in them imposing certain expectations on themselves. This impacted specifically on participants in the older age group who are married or have children. They were brought up to accept that, in their patriarchal Chinese families, as a son, husband and father they have substantial obligations towards their parents, their spouses and children.

Taylor’s (2004) theory of identity recognition suggests that individuals need to be recognised and respected for their unique qualities, needs and contributions in order to achieve a sense of self-worth and equal dignity. However, in the case of the male participants in this study, their roles as sons, husbands and fathers are prioritised alongside society’s patriarchal norms and filial piety, which have largely overshadowed Taylor’s suggestion of the need for an individual’s unique qualities, needs and desires to be recognised in order to develop genuine recognition.

In comparison to their male counterparts, the twelve female participants in the study, based on their family’s socioeconomic status, have experienced different levels of parental expectations and pressures. In general, daughters from wealthier families,
such as those in the composite biography of Freya and the parental typology of Tiger, are less stressed than those in the Taylor and Ironsmith stories. However, beneath their experiences, there are evident instances of misrecognition which chime with Fraser’s (2000) concept of status recognition. These female participants, even Wei who largely possessed more personal autonomy than the others, did not enjoy equal status recognition to their male counterparts. This was largely due to gendered expectations and stereotypes prevalent in their patriarchal Chinese families.

For participants from wealthier families, such as participants who shaped the composite character Freya, their parents' relaxed attitudes towards them were not a genuine acknowledgment of their individual agencies, personal capabilities, growth, or needs. Indeed, as Freya noted, ‘They taught me to relax...they would not tolerate my “indolence” if I was a boy’. Instead, this suggestion by her parents stemmed from an underlying gender bias that undermines women’ capability in a patriarchal society. The parents' belief that daughters are not as valuable as sons in the sense that in the Chinese traditional culture, sons are often viewed as being able to carry on the family’s lineage, inheriting and managing family property, and taking care of elderly parents, while daughters are expected to marry and join their husband’s family.

The experiences of the participants regarding domestic gender issues align with Kajanus's (2015) findings. She noted significant pressure on male Chinese returnees to secure prestigious jobs post-graduation, reflecting societal expectations of
professional success for men. By contrast, female international graduates, while perhaps facing less direct pressure for career achievement, often see their successes constrained and defined within traditional roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. This dynamic also impacts men, whose anxieties and life goals are heavily influenced by cultural models of masculinity, encompassing roles as sons and husbands. Kajanus argues that these gender norms profoundly affect both the professional and personal lives of individuals in contemporary Chinese society (Ibid).

These gender-based perceptions extend beyond mere status recognition, representing a form of misrecognition that fails to fully acknowledge the true capabilities and worth of individuals. For women, this misrecognition impacts their experience of respect and ability to realise equal opportunities. Women from all backgrounds, like the character Bella, are often seen primarily in supporting roles, such as aiding younger male siblings. Yang from the Ironsmith family, for instance, faces familial pressure to succeed, burdened with expectations traditionally reserved for sons.

Based on Fraser's (2000) status recognition theory, social justice requires that all individuals are recognised for their unique qualities and have equal opportunity to participate in society without facing discrimination or devaluation based on their social status or identity. In this context, the devaluation of female participants' identities due to their gender has practical consequences for their lives. For example, Bella type participants were denied equal access to family resources, opportunities and support simply because they were not a son. This hindered their personal
development and limited their opportunities to participate fully in society. As Bella noted: ‘There was no place for me at home. My father said since he could not leave me with his fortune...and then I would be on my own.’

For men, this misrecognition manifests in societal and familial pressures to conform to conventional success standards, often disregarding their personal struggles or emotional needs. This can lead to a constrained exploration of their identities beyond the traditional roles of provider and successor. Such societal expectations shape both men's and women's opportunities, influencing their self-perception and sense of worth. These complexities highlight the challenging landscape navigated by both genders under the influence of deeply ingrained societal and familial gender expectations.

In the workplace and society, gender inequality has significantly impacted on the lives of the female participants. Due to traditional patriarchal gender stereotypes and social expectations, female participants from all family backgrounds reported encountering unfair treatment in job-seeking, task assigning, promotions, and pay.

Zhang and Xu (2020) observed that during their transnational migration, many Chinese female middle-class students experienced a devaluation of their middle-class status in China, primarily due to their new identity as 'racially alienated Chinese women students' in Western countries (P 1258). To counter this loss of self and regain social recognition, these students compared themselves to their less mobile peers in China. They distinguished themselves by embracing a gendered 'Western
style,’ which included Western fashion culture and feminist ideologies. This strategic cultivation of cultural capital was seen as crucial for acquiring global competency, anticipating an advantage in the Chinese job market upon their return.

However, the reality upon returning to China often contradicted their expectations. The skills and perspectives they developed abroad, which empowered them in Western contexts, were frequently undervalued, unrecognised or disregarded in China. This mismatch between their evolved identities and the traditional gender norms in Chinese society, presented complex reintegration challenges. Rather, the global perspective and gendered dispositions they acquired became sources of conflict in their professional and personal lives, highlighting the nuanced challenges faced by transnational individuals (Zhang and Xu, 2020).

Fraser’s (1995) analysis of power imbalances as a result of systematic gender inequality, provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. The unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and influence between men and women, perpetuated by entrenched social norms and practices, leaves female returnees marginalised regardless of the cultural capital they accrued home or abroad. For instance, in the case of my female participants in the workplace and society, who shaped the composite character Freya, mentioned that even with their parents' strong connections in the workplace and their strong global competency gained from their overseas study, their employer still assigned them to tasks that discriminated against them based on traditional gender stereotypes and expectations. This reflects the persistence of systemic and institutional power imbalances that marginalise...
women, as well as the lack of awareness surrounding gender-based marginalisation at work – even in situations where women have access to resources and support.

For female participants from less influential families, the power imbalance is even more pronounced. These women, represented by the composite character Bella, found that their gender identity and expectations around family and childbearing responsibilities hindered their career prospects, often beginning right at the job-seeking stage.

However, gender equality issues in the workplace and society are not limited to women. Men, while holding the upper hand in terms of power, also experienced pressure to conform to societal expectations in their roles and responsibilities. For example, composite character Aaron faced the same challenge as Freya, where he was also asked by his company to host dinner parties because he is a ‘handsome young man’. Therefore, addressing gender equality requires attention to the challenges faced by all gender groups, but within an understanding of issues of power and systemic gendered discrimination.

Interestingly, none of the participants from either gender actively compared their gender experiences between China and their time in the UK. By contrast, they did discuss other human rights issues, such as their experiences with UK social welfare, individual agency and respect for personal autonomy, which were actively compared with their experiences of the Chinese politics of guanxi, the Hukou system and their individual parental expectations. This could be due to a lack of awareness and
education on gender discrimination in the context of traditionally patriarchal Chinese society. For example, in the composite character Bella's story, Bella appeared oblivious to the fact that she was being subjected to gender discrimination during several of her job interviews. It was only when she was repeatedly asked to provide details about her planned pregnancy, maternity leave, childcare, and motherhood, and later spoke with a human resources insider, that she became aware of the issue.

Such discoveries reveal that the participants' returnee identities and overseas experiences, did not provide them with adequate awareness or tools to recognise and address gender discrimination in their lives, or perhaps they remained oblivious as survival strategy. For me, this underscores the need for targeted gender sensitivity and anti-discrimination education and awareness-raising initiatives, both domestically and abroad, to help individuals recognise and address gender discrimination. By fostering a more comprehensive understanding of gender inequality and its consequences, returnees can leverage their unique experiences and perspectives to advocate for change and promote a more equitable society upon their return to their home country.

Moreover, this finding reflects the general public's insufficient awareness and lack of due regard for gender discrimination in contemporary Chinese society. It also highlights the inadequacy of government measures to promote equality and social justice, echoing Tan (2020) and Chen's (2022) arguments that the Chinese government's current focus is on discussing justice and fairness between institutions, rather than addressing existing injustices in everyday life and how these impact on
ordinary people. This highlights the need for increased awareness, education and practical measures to combat gender discrimination at the everyday level in order to promote true social equality and justice.

### 7.5.2 Impact of the Hukou and Social Class

For the Tiger participants, Hukou can be seen as the primary manifestation of their inherited privileges and superiority. As discussed in Chapter One, acting as the key aspect of the Chinese social structure, Hukou orientates the power to determine who can access certain resources, opportunities and social benefits. Therefore, having a favourable ‘big city Hukou’ is one of Tiger participants’ greatest asset for obtaining recognition opportunities in life. For Tiger participants like Freya, who was born and raised in Beijing, her Beijing Hukou privilege is her birth right. It influences how people perceive her as superior and deserving of recognition. Freya’s privileged Hukou has facilitated her access to top-tier education and prestigious job opportunities, which have, in turn, led to increased social recognition from her peers and society at large. From Freya’s perspective, because she was born with her Hukou privilege, she takes all the benefits and advantages associated with her indigenous identity for granted, considering her ‘relaxing’ lifestyle as normal. Indeed, she was surprised and felt empathy when she learned about the challenges faced by disadvantaged migrants striving for recognition in Beijing. This realisation prompted her to share her power with some of her disadvantaged migrant friends to facilitate some parity of participation in their social lives; for example, she offered discounted
rentals on her own properties to provide affordable accommodations for her migrant friends in Beijing. In doing so, she aimed to offset some of the hindrances created by institutionalised patterns of value that undermine their social status (Fraser, 2000). Freya's initiatives were genuinely appreciated and respected by those in her circle, further consolidating her esteem recognition.

Tiger participant Smith also benefited significantly from his 'big city Hukou' privileges. However, the meaning and impact behind such superior resources and opportunities on his understanding of the concept of recognition and how society perceived him, manifested differently from Freya. Upon returning from the UK, Smith moved to Beijing. Leveraging his father's political influence, his family managed to bypass the government's resident registration application system and 'purchased' him a Beijing Hukou through bribery. His social standing, self-confidence and self-esteem associated with his Beijing-based privilege are, in fact, the result of an act of redistributive injustice. Fraser (2000) suggests that such abuse of power in society perpetuates social inequalities and contributes to a widening gap between the privileged and the less privileged. In this context, for people like Taylor and Aaron from the Ironsmith typology, Smith's privileged status is perceived as an exploitation of their rights, making it unethical, less righteous under the Confucian moral standards and less deserved. This contributes to the scepticism and resentment levelled at him by his peers, as discussed earlier in section 7.4, who believe that his success is due to his family's connections and influence, rather than his own accomplishments or merit.
Wang (2023) explores the interplay between international student mobilities and the Chinese Hukou system, highlighting how the Hukou system institutionalises social inequalities. He argues that the Hukou system plays a crucial role in recognising overseas degrees as cultural capital, thereby influencing social stratification and mobility in China. He notes that major cities like Beijing and Shanghai show a preference for overseas degrees in their local Hukou applications, effectively treating these international qualifications as valuable cultural capital. This system, however, tends to favour wealthier families, as the high costs associated with studying abroad make it less accessible for others. Consequently, the ability of a returnee to secure a big city Hukou and the associated social rights, often depends on their family’s financial capacity to support their overseas education (Ibid).

Therefore, the selective nature of the Hukou system, which favours overseas returnees in the allocation of big-city Hukou, exacerbates social inequalities. This process establishes a clear divide between these returnees and the less mobile domestic migrant population in major cities. The gap widens as returnees with new big-city Hukous, exemplified by individuals like Smith, gain access to a range of big-city sponsored social rights. By contrast, the domestic migrant population frequently finds itself excluded from these benefits. Additionally, the capacity of Smith type of returnees with overseas degrees to invest in residential properties in more developed cities, contributes to a significant transfer of capital from lower-tier to wealthier cities. This dynamic furthers socio-spatial inequalities across the country, underscoring the Hukou system’s role in perpetuating disparities based on education and economic status (Wang, 2023).
Smith's attitude towards his Beijing Hukou status is another aspect that can be problematised from an inequality perspective. In his stories, although Smith acknowledges the struggles of disadvantaged migrants in Beijing, he understands that the esteem recognition he received was influenced by how his Hukou privilege was acquired. Smith felt proud of his family's influence that has the means to purchase his access to these privileges, and viewed his Beijing Hukou as more valuable than those who were born with the indigenous identity, like Freya, since his represented his family's power, which he was due to inherit. This attitude led him to develop a sense of entitlement and a disregard for the struggles of others. In his word: ‘it may be costly, but it is affordable to me’.

In general, as discussed in Chapter Three, the Hukou system in China represents a significant challenge to achieving Fraser’s (2000) three forms of justice. Attitudes like Smith’s are clear obstacles which hinder progress toward a more just society. Such perceptions not only lead to a lack of empathy and understanding between different social groups, but also undermine the efforts of the establishment of a fairer system that emphasise recognition, resource distribution and equal participation. Smith, who believes his privileged Hukou status is more deserving than those with indigenous Hukou identities, represents a category of people in China who support the notion that some people are more deserving of recognition and opportunities based on their family background and connections alone. This belief further exacerbates social tensions and inequalities, continues to uphold the inequitable systems and reflects the urgency to promote justice, equal opportunities, and social inclusion for everyone in China.
Compared to Tiger participants, who view their Hukou status as the primary source of their esteem recognition, Ironsmith participants perceived their encounters with Chinese Hukou culture as the cause of many of their struggles. Specifically, for those who are migrants in Beijing, the injustice of the Hukou system and their inability to return to their hometowns due to pressures from their parents and peers, have instilled in them an aspiration to escape from China and begin a new life elsewhere.

In the lived experiences of these Ironsmith migrants, the impact of such lack of equal rights in Beijing can easily overshadow the sense of achievement they've accumulated through hard work in various aspects of their lives. For instance, Ironsmith participant Taylor, who is widely regarded as a successful, diligent, well-educated, and highly paid manager, often feels a sense of shame in his workplace when dealing with younger, local team members who like Freya in Chapter five, possess local Hukou status and own multiple properties, while he owns none. Furthermore, Taylor's disputes with local authorities regarding his unfair treatment in his unsuccessful attempts to obtain a Beijing Hukou, have led him to feel a loss of belonging in his home country, and that his years of striving in Beijing felt meaningless. Such a sense of insecurity, a lack of self-esteem and loss of faith once again reminded me of the flaws in Honneth’s (1995) account of equal rights, where in his view, as long as you are a person it does not matter who you are and what characteristics define you, you should have an equal share of right and respect (Honneth, 2002; Laitinen, 2014). Nancy Fraser (1995) problematises such a claim that people can only have equal access to rights on the basis of equal societal participation, otherwise in the case of the Ironsmith returnees engaged in this study,
who does not have access to the same social welfare, housing and decision making process as the locals, will always feel inferior, undervalued and under-recognised.

Ironsmith participants who remained in their hometown also grapple with Hukou dilemmas. For instance, at the time of the interview, Bella and Aaron struggled to purchase a new flat within a desirable school catchment area as their child was approaching school age. They described the society they lived in as ‘a rich people’s world, where without money and power, even with a local identity, you still cannot access the same resources as the rich people.’ Their statements further exemplify Fraser’s (2000) call for the need multiple approaches to tackling inequities (distribution, status recognition and participation) and that mere participation in society is not enough: a more comprehensive approach to address inequalities and ensuring equal access to resources, opportunities, and recognition for everyone is necessary.

For Saviour participant Wei, her choice to remain in her hometown after studying abroad, meant her local Hukou status helped secure her right to access local social welfare services. Furthermore, her successful achievements in entrepreneurship provided her with the financial capabilities to avoid potential economic inequalities and material disparities; while her strong individual agency and admired reputation in her community gave her a voice in her social circles. As a result, Wei can be seen as the only participant in this study who is living a life most closely aligned with Fraser’s (2000) three-dimensional social justice framework.
However, there is a certain degree of relativity in Wei’s life, meaning her experience of justice is relative to her specific circumstances and the context in which she lives. Hers is not an absolute or universal experience of justice that can be applied to everyone, because the social equality Wei experienced resulted from her own efforts and the confidence her parents instilled in her. In other words, she had the status, money, and voice to design her life around her own needs. However, if Wei were to move to another part of the country, such as to Beijing, she would be exposed to systematic inequalities which emerge through her lack of Hukou, impacting on her ability to access services in parity with those with local Beijing Hukou.

While it can be argued that Tiger participants also have the ability and capacity to design their lives to suit their needs and desires, it is important to note that, in the lived experiences Wei sheared, she did not take advantages of others' disadvantages, in that she did not abuse her limited guanxi connections for her own benefit. This distinction makes her more righteous within the context of Confucian moral standards, further setting Wei apart from the rest of the participants.

In general, as regards participants respect and esteem recognition in their workplaces and wider society, these returnees' experiences in China once again do not sit easily within Honneth’s theory of respect and esteem recognition. Honneth emphasises that respect for rights should be universal and not conditional on particularities or differences between people, and as long as individuals make contributions to the society, then their efforts should be acknowledged and registered, respectively (Honneth, 1995, 2002). In the case of the participants in this
study, their experiences of rights and esteem in China are shaped by cultural, political and economic factors that are unique to China, such as their family cultures, their genders, the concept of guanxi networks, and the government Hukou registration policy which have all (individually or simultaneously) significantly influenced how respect and esteem recognition are practiced and perceived in their workplace and community life.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter explored and discussed the tensions, complexities and contradictions that emerged during students’ identity transformation from their transnational experiences after they returned to China from the UK. While there are positive factors which students have gained from being able to study abroad, such as obtaining western qualifications which remain sought after, acquiring cross-cultural competencies and developing a wider world view, I found the participants were grappling with a whole range of emotions, split loyalties and identity shifts when trying to fulfil their parental expectations at home. Having to return and to work under the guanxi culture in order to maintain and advance their careers, as well as living under the government policy of Hukou in their societies, has tested their perceptions and experiences of the benefits they gained from being overseas returnees.

In general, participants from the Tiger and Saviour typologies can be seen as having achieved certain degrees of self-realisation, with their achievement of filial piety at
home, accomplishments at work and contributions to their communities being accepted, acknowledgement and appreciation from their parents, co-workers, and people around them. However, compared to Saviour participant Wei, the recognition attained by Tiger participants in their three living spaces can be seen as superficial. This is because their route to recognition was heavily assisted by their parents' financial and guanxi influences, making it difficult to determine if the recognitions they receive are based solely on their personal accomplishments. Moreover, it is evident from the data that Tiger participants consistently benefit from the fact that others do not have access to the same level playing field. While a few of them have made efforts to challenge social inequality by helping the disadvantaged, the majority's unwillingness to share power has caused their recognition as a whole to be perceived as unethical, less than deserving and less righteous under Confucian moral standards.

In contrast, Wei's accomplishments are particularly noteworthy as she was able to achieve Honneth's (1995) three-dimensional recognition of success on her own terms, which gives her an independent and righteous image of a noble character, viewed as highly desirable in Chinese culture as described by Guo (2015) in Chapter Three.

For Ironsmith participants, their experience of recognition in general remained very unclear. Due to excessive pressure from their parents, a lack of personal guanxi and the constraints of the Hukou policy in their daily lives, Ironsmith participants often struggle with pressures and stress. This complex situation leaves them feeling
overwhelmed and challenged in their quest for recognition and success. In their lived experiences, Ironsmith participants constantly face battles to achieve a balance between their own aspirations and the expectations of their parents and society. Their limited resources, combined with the challenges posed by the Chinese Hukou system and the guanxi culture, significantly impact their ability to attain recognition on their own terms. Despite these difficulties, Ironsmith participants have tried their best to overcome the obstacles faced in their life to seek and achieve a sense of recognition and accomplishment through hard work, resilience and personal growth. However, deeply ingrained social inequalities and systemic barriers often make their journey to achieving and receiving recognition, more difficult and less straightforward compared to their Tiger and Saviour counterparts.

This has led many of them to harbour aspirations to save enough money to emigrate from China and to start a new life abroad. However, the high cost of such a move makes it difficult to achieve, leaving this group of participants constantly chasing their dreams. Recognition for this group manifests in a complex and messy way in their daily lives, and is not obtainable as readily as Honneth’s framework might suggest. Ultimately, the Ironsmith participants did not report receiving the types of recognition they feel they deserve.

In general, the study’s finding alludes to is that there would appear to be broader societal changes and shifts in values for contemporary Chinese society. Factors such as wealth, social class, availability of personal connections and Hukou status (in many of the participants who decided to relocate from their hometown) are
becoming more significant in establishing an individual's societal position, level of self-respect and self-esteem rather than contributions to work and societal duty or loyalty to the state. While individual achievements and contributions can certainly be a factor in earning respect and esteem, recognition in general appears to be connected with the level of power and money people can draw upon as part of their self-realisation journey. This finding unveils a living environment that falls short of Fraser's (2000) tripartite notion of justice, wherein the privileged constantly taking advantages of their power and status and leading the less fortunate to their exclusion, marginalisation, or subordination.

Participants encounters of gender inequity was also discussed. It was evident that the participants, both as sons and daughters and as overseas returnees, have encountered various forms of gender inequity in their lived experiences. These experiences have influenced their understanding of family dynamics, societal expectations, professional opportunities, as well as their personal identities. Gender plays a part in how recognition is given and received.

As overseas returnees, the participants possessed unique opportunities to engage with diverse cultures and perspectives, which could influence their views on gender roles and expectations. However, as discussed earlier, exposure to different cultural contexts alone may not be sufficient to promote a critical understanding of gender inequalities and the importance of challenging such injustices. Moreover, according to Tan (2020) and Chen (2022), the Chinese government current focus lies in discussing justice and fairness at the institution level, rather than tackling the
prevalent injustices in daily life and how they affect the general population. The experiences of the participants in this study align with their assertions and highlight the need for injustices faced by ordinary people to be addressed at a societal level.

This study provides compelling evidence that recognition in both public and private arenas is largely determined by socioeconomic status and social class, rather than by individual merit, contributions, or potential. Those participants hailing from more privileged backgrounds were often able to leverage their wealth and guanxi to attain recognition, reflecting the systemic inequalities embedded within Chinese society. In stark contrast, participants from less privileged origins, or those lacking socioeconomic resources, encountered considerable challenges in acquiring similar levels of recognition or even accessing basic social welfare. This highlights the everyday injustices that ordinary citizens face; injustices that are currently under-addressed. Moreover, the systemic nature of these injustices is further highlighted in participants' private lives. Conditional love recognition based on adherence to traditional social roles and the gender inequality perpetuated by the traditional patriarchal ideology, are deeply ingrained within societal norms and institutions.

My study’s observations reinforce the assertions made by Tan (2020) and Chen (2022), which stress the imperative for systemic changes to achieve genuine societal fairness and justice. Thus, in the context of the experiences of student returnees from international education, I argue for the need to implement targeted education and awareness-raising initiatives – both domestically and internationally – to help this group recognise and address gender discrimination.
Chapter Eight: Conclusions

8.1 Introduction

The study aimed to explore how Chinese students who have returned to their home country after completing international study in the UK, experience issues of recognition and possibly misrecognition. In particular, it looked at these in three spaces: the recognition and perceptions received from their families, from peers in the workplace and as members of the community, and how these have impacted their lives. It then endeavoured to understand how the possession international credentials impacts on how these students perceive their social status, level of acceptance, their sense of belonging upon returning to their home society, as well as providing insights into the challenges and opportunities they face when reintegrating into their home society.

The recognition experience of Chinese returnees and its impact on their home reculturation, is an area of research that has received limited to no attention in the study of transnational education. This thesis introduces, develops and employs a culturally-sensitive recognition theoretical framework. It uniquely blends the intricate elements of Chinese cultural recognition with the influential theories of Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, and Nancy Fraser as part of its analysis and discussion.

For me, it is through engaging in decolonial thinking on the subject of recognition where the wisdoms of Eastern and Western thinkers are placed in a horizontal line to provide meaning for cross-cultural research – as has been undertaken in this study.
This integration forms a crucial part of the thesis' analysis and discussion, offering comprehensive insight into the complex dynamics of recognition that Chinese returnees encounter as they reintegrate into their home society.

As a reminder, my research questions (RQ) are:

**RQ1**: What factors have contributed most to Chinese students' different experiences of being recognised as returning international graduates?

**RQ2**: How are Chinese graduate returnees perceived or recognised by their family, work colleagues and peers in their home society?

To address the questions, I drew on qualitative methods involving semi-structured interviews with a group of twenty-four Chinese students who had completed at least one MSc degree in the UK within the last twenty years.

### 8.2 What Factors Have Contributed the Most to Chinese Students Different Recognition Experiences as Returning International Graduates?

Recognition for Chinese international returnees is influenced by a complex interplay of factors. One key factor is the depth and extent of the impact of parental expectations, rooted in the Chinese traditional Confucian concept of filial piety. For
all study participants, this often entailed non-negotiable duties to family and community.

Taylor (2004) suggests that the collapse of social hierarchies in contemporary societies has led to a preoccupation with concepts like recognition. However, in the Chinese context where the concept and practice of filial piety remains hegemonic and dominant, the traditional ways of knowing remain. In my study, I have found tradition has shaped how recognition is interpreted and understood.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Confucianism identifies three levels of filial piety in Chinese culture: the first level stresses the provision of basic needs for parents; the second emphasises avoidance of actions that bring shame or dishonour to parents; and the third requires the attainment of familial respect from others.

Confucianism espouses that in a family context, the parents, symbolising the rulers, need to be responsible and facilitate their children's development. In return, the children, being the subjects, must display duties that embody filial piety to their parents (Zhang, 2007; Huo, 2016). However, such a reciprocal orientated socio-ethical framework has proven to be based on an overly romantic understanding of patriarchal relational dynamics. The power imbalances inherent in this socio-ethical framework frequently lead parents to mobilise their power to manipulate their children. Under the guise of practicing their parental obligations, it's not unusual to witness parents ‘using’ their children as a means to achieve their personal desires, imposing parental expectations on them and requiring unwavering obedience from
their children’s filial piety practice to meet their parental aspirations. Consequently, within different family set ups, a combination of inequities can surface in their childrearing practices, often involving an interplay between redistribution, recognition and representation – concepts proposed by Fraser (2000) as spaces in which issues of justice and injustice must be considered.

For example, in the area of redistribution, parents often place financial expectations on participants, such as requiring them to contribute significantly to their family income. This can create a disproportionate financial burden on the returnees (particularly those from Ironsmith and Saviour backgrounds); as such, financial expectations often result in participants redirecting their own resources towards their families. As a result, their ability to invest in their own development or to improve their life circumstances may be compromised.

In the area of recognition, participants’ personal growth and independence are frequently undervalued or overlooked. The parenting culture they grew up in places high importance on their pre-determined social roles and the fulfilment of their filial piety duties. This lack of recognition of individual agency, desires and aspirations can leave participants feeling undervalued or misunderstood, leading them towards frustration and alienation at home. In the area of representative justice, participants’ career and life pathways are often dictated by their parents without their involvement in the decision-making process. This lack of representation violates their autonomy and can lead to feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction.
The findings of my study indicate that my participants’ parents interpreted their obligations toward their children in various ways, depending on their personal levels of knowledge, experiences, interests, and their family’s socioeconomic status. These factors influenced the ways they demanded filial piety from their children and guided them towards achieving their own goals.

To better understand this dynamic, I developed a typology comprising three distinct parental types: Tiger, Ironsmith and Saviour, which each representing a different parenting culture within which my participants were raised. Such categorisation offered a nuanced understanding of the interplay between parental expectations and children’s experiences, particularly in the context of the Confucian filial piety framework.

- Tiger parents expect their children to emulate their success and maintain the family’s elite social status in order to prevent disgrace or dishonour within their social circle. Given their substantial wealth and connections, these parents perceive their responsibility as orchestrating their children’s success. As such, the hurdles faced by Tiger children to meet their parental expectations might not be especially high. Tiger parents often possess the confidence that their life arrangements for their children will enable them to reach the goals they set.
Ironsmith parents live vicariously through their children. Therefore, these parents interpret their Confucian parental responsibility as having an obligation to help their children to unleash their potentials, so that their children can perform their filial piety duties adequately for the family’s collective benefit. This places pressure on Ironsmith children to deeply commit to fulfil their filial piety and live up to parental expectations. These expectations were described by some of the study’s Ironsmith participants as being onerous.

Saviour parents expect their children to fully engage with filial piety, but they allow them to do so on their own terms. Saviour parents interpreted their parental responsibility as supporting their children’s individual agency to the best of their ability. This approach affords Saviour children the freedom to pursue their personal and professional goals, and exercise their independence. As a result, Saviour children were able to contribute to family decision-making and pursue opportunities for personal growth drawing from personal agency, which ultimately led them to achieve success and recognition.

In my participants lived experiences, their parents expectations of filial piety and involvement in their lives have had a considerable influence on how returnees’ have received recognition in terms of love, respect and esteem. Specifically, the participants unanimously reported that their education, career and marriage
decisions, were significantly impacted by their perceived need to fulfil their parents’ expectations of filial piety as prerequisites to receive their parents’ love and support.

From my participants’ perspectives, the parental love they seek is conditional upon them acting with filial piety in their relationship with their parents. There is a slight exception in the case of Saviour participant, where parental obligations and expectations were less onerous. However, the majority of participants run the risk that their efforts at enacting filial piety may not meet the standards their parents set for them; and thus be viewed as an inadequate contribution to their collective family. I found in this study that Tiger and Saviour participants generally received recognition from their parents as their transnational, professional and societal accomplishments matched their parents’ aspirations. Conversely, the filial piety contributions made by Ironsmith participants were often deemed insufficient by their parents. Thus, Ironsmith participants generally lacked ‘love’ recognition at home.

Three further factors were also identified that influenced the nature of recognition experienced by the participants in this study: that of guanxi (social networks), Hukou (household registration) and gender. All of these factors can and do significantly influence the reputation and social status of returnees, which then leads them to receive differing levels of recognition. For example, Tiger participants face relatively fewer challenges compared to Ironsmith participants in attaining work and social recognition, due to this group possessing inherited guanxi and Hukou status. However, all participants regardless of parental backgrounds faced gender issues, such as gender-based parental and societal expectations, discrimination and
unequal treatment in the workplace. These factors were thoroughly discussed in Chapter seven.

In general, the recognition that participants in this study have encountered in China, appeared to be somewhat similar to what is experienced by those who have not embarked on international study (Jie and Anthony, 2012). I initiated this research with curiosity to understand how international study experiences and returning with an international degree, influenced the way these Chinese students experienced recognition issues. My findings suggest that participants’ returnee identity may not necessarily grant them many additional advantages. Instead, their transnational experiences have led to greater demands, particularly in relation to parental expectations. This outcome is surprising, as my initial assumption before conducting the research was that students’ international experiences would result in them being more respected and valued overall.

I initially held a preconceived notion that in the family settings, participants’ transnational identity transformation from dependent children to independent adults, their success in obtaining overseas qualifications, and their expanded personal worldviews and values, would positively impact how their parents recognised them as independent individuals. However, despite their international experiences, the level of parental expectations enacted through certain traditions, such as filial piety, have remained unchanged and are so dominant that the international experience has, in some ways, increased the need for returnees to display filial piety or obedience. For example, even in the Saviour participant's case, the socio-ethical
framework of Confucianism still has implications for how she is treated by her parents. While her parents allowed her considerable freedom, they still held expectations and aspirations for her, rooted in their interpretation of her filial piety duty. Even though these expectations were more flexible and respectful of her individual agency, they continued to exert a degree of influence over her decisions and actions. Again, higher levels of parental investment seem to lead to greater expectations placed on returnees in terms of achievement and success.

Furthermore, my participants' international experiences do not seem to have made a significant difference in terms of how they were recognised in the workplace or society either. In their stories, factors such as who you know (guanxi), your gender and where you come from (Hukou), continue to be the primary indicators of societal recognition in China.

As a result, I conclude that participants' international credentials did not grant them additional recognition, status, or privileges in family life, the job market or in society. Instead of providing a golden path, the international experience leads to more pressures and complexities for returnees. For many participants, this lack of recognition of what they consider to be their personal growth, sacrifices and success, leads to feelings of betrayal, and motivates some to consider returning to the West.
8.3 How Chinese Returnees Are Perceived or Recognised by Their Family, Work Colleagues, And Peers in Home Society?

By examining participants' stories, this study observed a transformation in how they were recognised and valued in their daily social interactions. This shift aligns with Taylor's (1992) concept of transitioning from the traditional ways of recognition towards modern approaches. The 'old ways' of recognition, as characterised by Taylor, are predominantly determined by social class, status, membership to particular social categories, and adherence to predetermined social roles and duties (Taylor, 1992). These factors largely shaped recognition in their home country for all participants in this study. Influenced heavily by Confucian moral standards, their familial recognition and respect largely hinged on their adherence to predetermined social roles as sons and daughters, and their commitment to fulfilling filial piety duties.

For many participants, the turning point in their recognition experiences came with their return from international study and the commencement of their professional lives. This transition was marked by a shift from the ‘old’ social role-based recognition to the ‘new’ one that values individual dignity, autonomy and personal identity, as articulated by Taylor (1992). However, participants' experiences of such transitions in the ways they were recognised varied, influenced by a complex interplay of factors such as socioeconomic status, personal competencies, parental expectations, and parenting culture. In this study, the one participant with Saviour parents could be said to have experienced a complete transition, in that while they
were subject to the old traditions, due to a more relaxed parenting style they were able to draw on their individuality and agency to gain respect at home, in the workplace and from their peers. Tiger participants encountered a blend of the old and new, and while they were able to obtain recognition at home, from work and their peers, it is not clear whether such recognition was authentically given or was as a result of their family status, wealth and guanxi. Ironsmith participants were caught between the old and new, where the traditional requirement of filial piety dominated. However, their desire to exercise their individuality, autonomy and voice, has led them to perceive that they are not as well recognised by their co-workers and peers as they feel they should be.

8.3.1 How Chinese Returnees Are Recognised at Home?

My study found that at home, returnees are recognised by virtue of how obedient they are to their parents and parental wishes. Therefore, across the three typologies, the perception of 'love' under the influence of Confucian filial piety culture doesn't align with the unconditional notion proposed by Honneth (1995).

In pursuit of recognition from their parents, participants often strove to demonstrate their commitment to fulfilling parental expectations. Overinvestment in their parents' desires was not uncommon, with the majority number of participants surrendering their rights and desires in order to demonstrate their obedience and adherence to meet these expectations.
In the case of the Tiger participants, their wealthy parents generally didn't expect them to provide for themselves financially nor uphold their reputation to the same extent as those from the Ironsmith or Saviour typologies. Instead, Tiger participants were simply required to obey so they would not bring dishonour to their parents’ reputation. Thus, Tiger participants faced relatively less pressure than those from the other two typologies, including to demonstrate their obedience to their parents’ wishes. As soon as they returned from the UK with their international qualifications, their obedience was recognised as adequate, and their predetermined filial piety duties associated with their roles as sons and daughters, were viewed as fulfilled by their parents. Consequently, they were rewarded with parental love.

However, from the perspective of the participants, not all their ‘overinvestments’ in parental expectations were deemed adequate demonstrations of obedience, and participants' efforts did not always satisfy their parents. This was particularly true for those in the Ironsmith category. In their case, to achieve parental recognition as returnees, Ironsmith participants were required to align their career and marital choices with their parents' preferences, and to demonstrate a capacity to secure a respected and lucrative career. This differed significantly from the standards Tiger participants had to attain: Ironsmith participants faced a lifelong quest to continually strive for parental recognition. Neither their international qualifications, nor any other of their achievements, were sufficient to demonstrate adequate obedience to satisfy their parents. Given that the recognitional culture in participants’ homes emphasised their predetermined social roles rather than their individuality, from their parents’ perspective until their Ironsmith children achieved what they considered to be a
respected and lucrative career, their obedience would not be recognised as adequate, and their filial piety duties would be considered unfulfilled.

In the Saviour typology, however, the participant willingly took on the responsibility of being her family’s provider, due to a strong sense of filial piety towards her parents. Due to this, she never felt constrained by her parents’ wishes, as they shared the same goals. Despite the expectations of her parents being more flexible and respectful of her individual agency, her obedience and adherence to these expectations still served as the criteria by which her parents assessed her success. Like the Tiger participants, the Saviour participant's obedience was recognised as adequate after her return from the UK, earning her parental love. However, the negative impacts she experienced on her sense of self and agency from investing in achieving parental recognition, was much lower as she was able to retain a degree of autonomy, voice and individual agency after she returned to China. This contrasts with Tiger participants, whose wishes were entirely subordinate to their parents’ once they returned home.

8.3.2 How Chinese Returnees Are Recognised at Work?

The recognition that participants’ received in their workplace varied significantly, largely influenced by their social class and the availability of guanxi. In their lived experience, these two factors carried significant weight in shaping their career trajectories and opportunities. Again, this finding does not sit easily within Honneth
(1995)'s theory of respect within recognition, in which he emphasises that respect for rights should be universal and not conditional on particularities or differences between people (ibid).

Participants from higher social classes, such as those in the Tiger category, often inherited an extensive and influential guanxi network from their parents. This network significantly benefited them in securing job placements, advancing their careers and gaining promotions. The prestige of their social class coupled with the privileges it inherently provided them with, often facilitated their recognition at work. Although their professional competence was often presupposed based on their social status—a form of recognition aligning with Taylor's (1992) old model of valuing individuals—their achievements were more readily acknowledged due to their strong social influence. Moreover, their high socioeconomic status also afforded them the options to choose fields in which they could exhibit their unique skills and talents. These opportunities allowed them to showcase their personal strengths and merit, leading to recognition based on their individual dignity, autonomy and personal identity. This is in line with Taylor's (1992) concept of new ways of recognition, where individuals are acknowledged for their distinctive capabilities and contributions to achieving equal recognition.

On the other hand, Ironsmith participants who were typically from lower social classes, faced a different reality. They enjoyed limited to no access to influential guanxi. This limitation presented them with significant obstacles to securing desirable job positions or achieving promotions in the Chinese professional
environment. Moreover, without the leverage provided by guanxi or social standing that the Tiger participants enjoyed, Ironsmith participants faced less sympathy and often experienced less harmony in their workplace. Their comparatively lacking social status often played a major role in their professional interactions, subtly influencing how their colleagues and superiors perceived their capabilities and contributions. For example, their work was often scrutinised more heavily than with Tiger participants, and they had to work harder to achieve recognition.

To compensate for disadvantages imposed by their status and lack of guanxi, Ironsmith participants largely chose to sacrifice their personal rights and interests, in order to be accepted and earn the opportunities that would enable them to exhibit their skills and talents. As such, they were stuck on a constantly moving treadmill seeking recognition based on their capabilities and contributions, rather than their social class – which echoes Taylor's (1992) point of the importance of individuals being able to access equal recognition.

In the case of the one Saviour participant, her situation was comparatively unique. As the primary financial hope for her family, she was motivated by a strong sense of duty and filial piety. This led her to adopt a pragmatic approach towards employment, prioritizing jobs that offered immediate financial benefits, even if they weren't traditionally prestigious. In combination with her strong cosmopolitan competencies gained overseas, she did not need to make the same personal sacrifices as Ironsmith participants had to in order to foster relationships at work. The lack of parental constraints enabled the Saviour participant’s personal qualities,
attributes and skills to sufficiently flourish, and these to a degree counterbalanced her lack of guanxi and the need to pursue reciprocity in social relationships. Consequently, she was able to achieve professional recognition. Furthermore, her social class appeared to have a minimal influence on how her co-workers perceived her. Indeed, her deprived family background and her commitment to her family responsibilities earned her respect and recognition within her professional and social circles.

8.3.3 How Chinese Returnees Are Recognised in The Society?

My data analysis found that in the wider community, recognition was accorded primarily on the basis of personal or inherited social class and socioeconomic status. This is not in accordance with Honneth's theory of esteem recognition nor traditional Chinese moral standards on loyalty. Honneth's theory posits that individuals can gain esteem recognition through their contributions to society and the social roles they play. Similarly, traditional Chinese moral standards emphasise the importance of loyalty and duty to the state, as a means of gaining respect and recognition in society.

However, this study found that in relation to participants' peers, these factors were not the primary determinants of esteem and recognition. Instead, socioeconomic indicators played a more significant role in how they were perceived by society. Participants from higher socioeconomic backgrounds such as Smith and Freya
tended to be accorded greater recognition due to their wealth, education, or occupational prestige, as these constitute privileges which are respected, admired and even envied by their friend and colleagues. Conversely, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, such as the Saviour participant and many others from the Ironsmith families, often had to struggle for societal recognition. Despite their personal achievements or qualities, their contributions and attainments were often overshadowed by their socioeconomic standing.

Moreover, the inherited aspect of socioeconomic status further exacerbated this discrepancy, as is reflected in the issue of the Hukou concept in the study. Participants such as Freya and Smith, who were born into families with Beijing Hukou or at least able to afford to ‘purchase’ one, often benefited from the advantages accrued from their socioeconomic prestige, such as superior educational opportunities, better social welfares and overall greater social capital. The narratives of the participants in this study, provide evidence that confirms that these rich returnees tread an easier path towards societal recognition.

On the other hand, participants who are not able to inherit similar socioeconomic privileges, such as Taylor and Aaron typologies who migrated to Beijing without possessing a local hukou, often faced great obstacles in their everyday lives as citizens. Even when they achieved significant personal accomplishments, their pride, dignity and self-worth were constantly overlooked or undervalued due to their less privileged socioeconomic origins.
What these findings allude to, are broader societal changes and shifts in values for contemporary Chinese society. Factors such as wealth, social class and hukou status are becoming more significant in shaping individuals pathways towards establishing their position in society and self-esteem, as compared with traditional expectations of fulfilling their societal duty or demonstrating their loyalty to the state.

Gender was also found to play a role in determining how the participants were perceived and received by society. At home and in the wider community, my findings suggest that there is a gender disparity in the normative expectations and pressures placed on individuals. Gender stereotyping and role expectations play out at home, in education, and in the workplace. This finding indicates that despite differences in family backgrounds, personal accomplishments and social standings, traditional gender roles and expectations still play a significant role in Chinese society, which can shape individuals’ experiences and opportunities. Even the one participant with Saviour parents who generally possessed more personal autonomy than the other participants, did not enjoy equal recognition for their attainments and skills as their male counterparts. Thus, she had to work harder to prove her worth.

8.4 Contributions of This Thesis

This thesis makes significant contributions to the broader academic discourse on recognition and misrecognition.
At the theoretical level, this thesis marks a critical step towards the decolonisation of theoretical frameworks, and challenges the dominance of Western-centric models of recognition, traditionally underscored by thinkers such as Honneth, Taylor, and Fraser. By examining the universal applicability of these Western theories and juxtaposing them with Chinese recognition concepts and principles, the research provides a fresh perspective on recognition experiences. This approach aligns with the broader effort to decolonise academic discourse, valuing and integrating non-Western perspectives that have often been overlooked.

The thesis introduces an emerging recognition theoretical framework that weaves Chinese cultural recognition concepts—such as loyalty, filial piety, integrity/chastity, and righteousness—into the established Western frameworks of Honneth’s three modes of recognition and Hegel’s account of three spaces of recognition. This culturally sensitive recognition framework is not only an academic endeavour but also a practical tool used to navigate through the participants' narratives, offering insights into how they construct their identities under the influence of parental expectations and societal norms.

By applying this new framework to the experiences of Chinese students in transnational contexts, the study illuminates the unique ways in which recognition and misrecognition manifest in their lives. This approach exceeds the mere application of Western theories in a cross-cultural context, fostering a dialogue between Western and Eastern perspectives. Such an approach enriches the understanding of recognition in a globalised world.
In the realm of international student experience, this study has highlighted the insufficient attention given to how returning international students experience recognition-related issues, including non-recognition and misrecognition, within their social and cultural settings. By exploring how these individuals experience issues of recognition as they reintegrate into their home cultures, it provides signposts as to how to better support those studying abroad pre- and post-study experience. Specifically, my study has filled a gap in knowledge by examining how returnee experiences of recognition and misrecognition are complex and dependent on socioeconomic background, parental expectations and the availability of guanxi. While many Chinese graduates face similar issues, this research has found that these factors are amplified for international students as a result of the financial and emotional investment made by parents to support their study abroad. This research provides valuable insights into the experiences of Chinese returnees. It explores how these individuals are perceived and acknowledged by their families, work colleagues and peers in their home society. As Chinese returnees increasingly contribute to shaping China’s economic and social landscape, understanding their experiences and perspectives has become increasingly important. My findings pave the way for developing supportive policies and programs that facilitate their successful reintegration into Chinese society.

Moreover, this study explores the impact of family dynamics, particularly parental expectations and the concept of filial piety, on Chinese returnees – an area of research previously understudied. This research therefore examined such experiences using three different typologies of returnees, namely Tiger, Ironsmith,
and Saviour. My findings illuminate how parental expectations and recognition can influence the success, self-confidence and self-identity construction of returnees. In doing so, it provides a clearer understanding of the profound impact family relationships can have on an individual's self-worth, and further explores the ripple effects these dynamics can have on returnees ability to thrive in various aspects of their life.

Additionally, this research makes a contribution to existing literature on recognition theory. Drawing on the thinking of Western recognition theorists but with due regard to Chinese ethics and frameworks as part of its analysis, it offers new ways of exploring returnee experiences of concepts like recognition. It also highlights the significance of recognition in shaping an individual's sense of self-worth and self-esteem, particularly within a Chinese cultural context.

Lastly, this study reinforces some of the aspects articulated in Honneth's framework, which highlights the role of familial recognition in shaping an individual's self-identity, and further exemplified how the lack of parental recognition can bring degrees of self-doubt and self-abasement. Drawing from Taylor's work on the impact of recognition on self-identity formation, this study also highlighted the negative impacts of unbalanced power dynamics on a person's self-perception and their capacity to succeed in personal and professional spheres. Taylor's accounts of the dialogical nature of recognition has also enabled my study to examine how the returnees' sense of self-worth and esteem is influenced not only by individual achievements but also by cultural values like filial piety. Nancy Fraser’s perspective on justice as
multidimensional has helped me frame the Chinese Hukou system as not solely a bureaucratic tool, but rather a structure that perpetuates inequality through unequal recognition and representation. This aspect of the research examines how migrant returnees, especially those without local Hukou, face systemic exclusion, impacting their recognition within society.

Moreover, Confucian recognition concepts which are deeply rooted in Chinese culture, has also provided a rich and multifaceted understanding of recognition within the Chinese societal context. Concepts such as loyalty, Integrity/chastity and righteousness can contribute positively to social cohesion and trust. These virtues foster strong, supportive networks crucial for returnees’ recognition and societal harmony. They served as a benchmark for evaluating and recognising returnees’ contributions to their community and society at large. The study explores how these forms of traditional virtues enhance the social standing and recognition of returnees within their communities, creating a sense of belonging and mutual respect.

The research also delves into the aspect of filial piety, the foundation of Chinese familial relationships, highlighting its significance beyond mere adherence to traditional norms. Filial piety represents a reciprocal and nurturing bond between parents and children, grounded in respect, care, and gratitude. This research highlights how filial piety not only enriches returnees’ lives, providing them with a strong sense of identity and self-worth, but also contributes significantly to societal recognition. Fulfilling filial duties is revered as a virtue, enhancing an individual's moral and social standing within their community.
8.5 Implications of the Thesis

This study offers fresh insights into China’s social and cultural landscape, providing valuable guidance for policymakers, educators and transnational education practitioners operating in both China and the UK. Such insights could be particularly beneficial to those preparing Chinese students for overseas studies, but also to assist higher education wellbeing services in overseas nations to better understand the multiple challenges faced by these students, and hence enhance support mechanisms for them when they study overseas.

By illuminating the difficulties returnees experience when reintegrating into their home cultures and highlighting the consequences of misrecognition they often encounter, my study can prompt institutions to address these issues more proactively. Thus, before students return home, they could be better informed to cope with the experiences they may encounter as returnees in China. In practice, the findings of this study can be used to design programs and initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs and challenges faced by Chinese returnees. Such programs can include career guidance and networking opportunities in UK universities to help them navigate the social and cultural landscape of China and build their professional and social capital before their return home. After they have arrived in China, local Chinese authorities and institutions can provide career counselling, cultural workshops and psychological support mechanisms for returnees struggling to re-integrate into their home cultures.
Moreover, the insights provided by this thesis are valuable for Western education practitioners who work with Chinese international students. Specifically, the study highlights the importance of family recognition in Chinese culture and the impact that parental expectations and pressures can have on the success of these students. Western education practitioners should be aware that Chinese students may be influenced by cultural factors that prioritise family recognition and filial piety, which can create high levels of pressure and expectations from their parents. This pressure can, in turn, impact upon their academic performances, decision making and personal success, and create challenges that need to be addressed. For example, in my previous role working as a UK university support staff member, I witnessed many Chinese international students struggling with the fear of disappointing their parents in their educational attainments while studying abroad, hence developing strong anxieties and psychological difficulties. Some of the lecturers I encountered were perplexed why Chinese students may not have wished to request extensions of study; however, they may have failed to appreciate issues of increasing financial constraints faced by the students, but even more so, concerns about disappointing their parents or admitting failure to them. Therefore, to support Chinese international students, it is important for education practitioners to understand the cultural background and expectations placed on these students. Support and guidance should acknowledge and address these pressures, aiming to foster an environment that not only encourages student growth and development, but also appreciates the influence of familial recognition and expectations on students' success and well-being.
Finally, my findings can help parents of Chinese international students comprehend the challenges their children might face due to familial pressures. Guiding parents in this way, could foster a more supportive and inclusive environment for returnees, leading to enhance their personal success and well-being.

8.6 My Reflections on This Study

Initially, I began this investigation by adopting the inductive Constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), whereby I was initially using my previous international student and returnees’ ‘insider’ perceptions to build a picture of my participants’ everyday recognition experience. I was aware that Chinese international students are expected to fulfil their filial piety duties, which involve achieving various life goals to meet their parents' expectations. I held a preconceived notion that these expectations would diminish over time as the students grew in self-confidence, especially after being exposed to western cultures. I believed this exposure would help students gain more agency in their parent-child relationships, and expected to find evidence supporting this preconception.

During the project, I gathered data from a diverse group of returnees and analysed their responses. To my surprise, I found that parental expectations remained a major factor in all participants' interview conversations, and their influence on participants' lives was deeper and more extensive than I had anticipated. Additionally, the majority of returnees reported that while their experience in the UK had assisted
them to recognise and develop their individual agency, that learning and experience
did not diminish the extensiveness of the role that filial piety and parental
expectations have played in their lives. Within the various stories shared with me by
my participants in Chapter Five and Six, regardless of the level of self-awareness
they gained from their western exposure, it proved insufficient to overcome the
original obligations inculcated through their relationship with their parents in China.

Upon reflecting upon my research project, I have realised that my preconceptions
may have influenced my research questions and expectations. Specifically, I may
have assumed I would find evidence of the positive aspects of participants'
development of agency following their return, while neglecting to consider the
potential barriers that could arise from their parents’ continued pressure to fulfil filial
piety obligations. Additionally, I recognise that the theoretical framework I initially
intended to use – Honneth’s recognition theory which leans quite significantly on the
autonomy of self and agency – may not be easily applicable in the context of
Chinese family relationships, where parents hold significant authority.

Ultimately, I learned the importance of acknowledging that international students are
not a homogeneous group. While they may share nationality, ethnicity and language,
their experiences differ significantly. I also reflected upon the significance of
decolonisation in transnational education research settings – an area that warrants
further attention in studies about international student experiences. I also must
emphasise the need for critical reflection on the application of theoretical frameworks
and methodologies, that have been developed within a Western context and may not
necessarily be relevant or applicable to other cultural contexts. In the context of this study, this would be the interface between Western frameworks for interpreting recognition and Chinese moral and ethical frameworks. It is important in studies such as mine to consider alternative epistemologies, perspectives and methodologies, and be sufficiently respectful of diverse cultural contexts and experiences.

Therefore, if provided with the opportunity to conduct this research again, I wouldn't make substantial changes to my overall approach. However, I would pay closer attention to my own preconceptions, aiming to further minimise their influence on the research process. Furthermore, I would draw more deeply on a decolonising lens to interrogate the frameworks I adopted. The lack of a decolonial perspective in transnational education research remains a major gap in the literature.

8.7 Future Research

This study provides a path towards future research. It focuses on a Chinese student returnee group in China with diverse individual characteristics and family backgrounds. One potential idea for future study could involve focusing on a specific subset of the Chinese returnee population, such as those from low family socioeconomic backgrounds, similar to the participant classified as the Saviour typology in my study. The primary aim of such research could be to examine how individuals and their families from less advantaged backgrounds, conceive of the decision to study abroad. In doing so, it could also explore the implications of this
decision for both the students’ families and the students themselves after they returned home.

Another potential research direction could focus on Chinese returnees who did not achieve their desired academic outcomes. This could include students who returned home with lower-level degrees that do not meet their nor their parents’ expectations. Such research could also include those who withdrew or dropped out of their studies. The aim of such study would be to understand the factors that influenced them to attain such results and the impact this has had on returnees’ experiences of issues of recognition upon returning to China. This research could therefore provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by Chinese returnees who failed to provide ‘acceptable’ returns on their parents’ investment in their overseas study, and highlight potential areas for institutional and societal interventions and support.
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### Appendices 1 Composite Biography type

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<th>City of residence</th>
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<th>Years returned to China</th>
<th>Job positions and employer info</th>
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 Appendices 2 Semi-structured Interview Guide

Warm up questions

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your family?
- Can you tell me about your educational background?
- What is your current occupation or job role?

Attitudes and perceptions of study in the UK and return home.

- What made you decide to study in the UK? How were decisions made- key influences/influencers?
- What were your and your families’ expectations of you from studying in the UK?
- What do families, friends or colleagues think about you coming to study in the UK?
- Have you had any opportunities to remain overseas after your graduation?
- What made you decide to return home after studying in the UK? How were decisions made- key influences/influencers?

Micro circle

- Was it your decision to return to China after your study?
- Did your families and friends have any views about you choosing not to remain in the UK/overseas after your graduation?
- How did you find readapting to life in China after your studies? For example, around your families and friends?
Meso circle – workplace

- Do you think that the knowledge and competences and experiences gained from your overseas studies have brought you any opportunities and/or challenges in your professional life / workplace?
- Are your colleagues aware that you are a returning student?
- Have you found it easy to interact with others?
- How do you find others treat you as returning international student? (Do you expect to be treated differently? In what way?)
- Have you experienced any Surprise (unexpected judgments or treatments) as a result of returning with a Western qualification?

Macro society

- How do you find life in China as a returning international student?
- Generally, in China, how do you think others view international student returnees?
- Do you think any governmental policies have brought you any opportunities and challenges when resettling in China as returning international students?

Finally…

Is there anything else you would like to add or tell me about your experiences of being a returnee international graduate to China?
Appendices 3 research Information Sheet

PhD research Information Sheet

Research Project Title

Recognition and Misrecognition: Experiences of Chinese postgraduates after their return home from the UK

You are being invited to take part in this research project. This leaflet gives you background information to my study. Please let me know if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

1. What is the project about?

This research project is a part of my PhD study with the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh.

The aim is to explore the experiences of Masters graduates returning to China having studied in the UK. In particular, the project wishes to understand the impact of a Western qualification on your everyday life. There have been many studies about the experiences of Chinese students studying abroad but very few exploring their experiences once they go home.

Therefore, this study is interested in how you as a returning international student have been received by your family, workplace, friendship/peer groups, society (including nation).
2. Why have I been chosen?

I am looking for a diverse group of participants to cover a range of the areas such as gender, age, origin, years of return to China, geography.

3. Taking part is voluntary

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to attend a face to face interview with me at your convenience, the interview will last no longer than 1.5 hour. I may request a follow-up interview (no longer than an hour) in 2 weeks times, to give me the opportunity to present you with my UpToDate research findings. If you prefer to only have one long interview, that is fine.

The interview conversations are designed with the aim to hear your voices on your social recognition experiences since return. Therefore, topics such as your expectations for return, opportunities and challenges since return home, relationships with people around you, and your experience of Recognition or Misrecognition as a result of returning with a Western qualification will be covered.

5. If you have any questions?

You are welcome to contact my supervisors Professor Rowena Arshad and Dr. Jingyi Li at Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh. Their contact details are listed at below.
6. Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The face-to-face interviews will be recorded by a digital audio recorder, and written notes will also be taken. The purpose of the recording and notes writing is to allow me to capture all the information discussed during the interview, which is important for me to analyse later. The recorded conversation will be transcribed by myself or a designated transcriptionist, and the transcripts and the written notes will be kept for 1 year after my PhD completion.

However, if you do not wish to be recorded in any way, no recording media will be used.

7. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified or identifiable in any reports or publications. Your institution/employer will also not be identified or identifiable.

8. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of the research will be used for my PhD study. The results may be used in conferences, publications that I write. You will not be identified in any report or publication.

A short briefing paper (no more than 4 A4 sides) summarizing the key findings of the research, or electronic copies of any publications published based on the research findings can be sent to you in the future on requests.
9. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the University of Edinburgh, Moray House School of Education’s ethics review procedure.

10. Contacts for further information

- Researcher: Chen Zhang, Moray House School of Education, IECS, University of Edinburgh (Holyrood Campus). Tel: +44 (0)131 651 6138. Email:

- Supervisor: Professor Rowena Arshad OBE, Moray House School of Education, IECS, University of Edinburgh (Holyrood Campus). Tel: +44 (0)131 651 6167. Email:

- Supervisor: Dr. Jingyi Li, Moray House School of Education, IECS, University of Edinburgh (Holyrood Campus). Tel: +44 (0) 131 651 6205. Email:

Thank you for taking part in this research.
PhD research:
Recognition and Misrecognition: Experiences of Chinese postgraduates after their return home from the UK

**Participant informed consent form**

*Please tick the appropriate boxes*

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Use of the information I provide for this project only.

I understand my personal details such as phone number and address will not be revealed to people outside the project. □ □

I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs but they will be anonymised. □ □

I would like my real name used in the above □ □

The pseudonym I wish to use is:

Use of the information I provide beyond this project.

I agree for the data I provide to be archived at the Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh. □ □

So we can use the information you provide legally.

I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to Mr. Chen Zhang □ □

__________________________             __________________
Name of participant   [printed]       Signature                           Date

__________________________             __________________
Researcher             [printed]       Signature                           Date