



The Impact of One-Year UK Master's Programme on the Identity of Chinese International Students: A Case Study Based on Xiaohongshu

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ABSTRACT

UK one-year master's programs offer a fast track to graduate degrees for Chinese international students. However, their market-driven, competitive nature and impact on identity formation are often overlooked. This study, using Norton's (2013) Investment and Identity theory and network ethnography on Xiaohongshu, explores identity negotiation among this student group. Results reveal identity formation as a contextualized, complex process involving pragmatic trade-offs amidst pressures from intensive coursework, compressed timeframes, high financial investments, and career anxieties. The absence of supportive structures may hinder deep integration, exacerbate vulnerability, and impact future employment. This study aims to enhance learners' navigation of high-pressure global environments and provide a proper perspective on contemporary international students in global education.

1. Introduction

Transnational higher education aims to cultivate global competence and reshape student identity through cross-cultural learning, a process central to internationalization (Knight, 2004; de Wit & Hunter, 2015). Identity negotiation, the dynamic self-construction in new environments, is fundamental to international student experiences (Marginson, 2014), multifaceted and deeply influenced by institutional, educational, and social contexts abroad (Kingerer, 2013).

Identity negotiation is extensively theorized, with foundational work highlighting investment and adaptation (Kim, 2001; Norton, 2013). Study abroad is crucial for identity development (Bethel et al., 2020). However, most studies focus on longer-term mobility, assuming linear

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adaptation (Forsey, 2013). Ultra-short, market-driven formats like one-year master's programs pose unique, underexplored identity challenges (Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus, 2014). The UK's one-year taught master's model is highly popular, especially among Chinese students, the largest non-EU group (HESA, 2023; Xu & Montgomery, 2019). This model features compressed schedules, intensive coursework, and efficiency demands (Findlay et al., 2017). While economically appealing, perceptions in China are mixed, questioning academic rigor and reflecting "diploma devaluation" (Araki & Kariya, 2022), creating a backdrop for identity negotiation.

Xiaohongshu has emerged as a vital digital platform, a living archive for students to document challenges and share evolving narratives (Xiaohongshu & Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2023). Through this online ecosystem, students form digital practice communities and engage in real-time identity-building (Kozinets, 2019). Thus, Xiaohongshu provides a unique lens to examine how students cope with one-year program intensity and negotiate identity amid conflicting perceptions.

This study explores how Chinese students in UK one-year master's programs negotiate identity via Xiaohongshu narratives, filling a gap in understanding how the one-year program structure—time constraints and market-driven logic—shapes identity formation (Darvin & Norton, 2015). It extends beyond generic adaptation models to focus on identity investment, revealing how academic, social, and emotional identities form under compressed pressures. The aim is to provide a more equitable perspective for the public and institutions on one-year master's programs abroad, and to uncover Chinese students' online identity formation and expression processes.

2. Literature Review

Identity negotiation in transnational higher education is a dynamic, relational process embedded within cross-cultural interactions, institutional frameworks, and learner agency (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Identity is socially constructed, evolving through interaction between cultural resources and host country expectations (Block, 2007; Duff, 2012). Studies indicate learner identity construction during study abroad is influenced by power asymmetries, language ideologies, and peer network structures (Marginson, 2014), potentially transforming self-perceptions.

Research traditionally centers on longer-term programs, assuming gradual adaptation (Kinging, 2013; Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010). However, the UK's one-year taught master's program is a structurally distinct form of international mobility, consolidating academic engagement, cultural adaptation, and career orientation into a singular, intensive cycle. Research highlights its accelerated nature, diminished gradual integration, and concentrated assessment (Zhang & Mi, 2010; Brooks, Waters, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). This raises critical focus on how students narrate academic selves under compressed time. Program characteristics intertwine with market-driven logic, where degrees are investments promising returns (Findlay, King, & Geddes, 2012; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019). For Chinese master's students abroad—the largest non-EU group in the UK (UKCISA, 2023)—this model unfolds amidst domestic discourses on academic rigor and degree value, exacerbating identity issues (Heng, 2019; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

Digital intermediaries are pivotal for international students' identity construction and management, transcending physical mobility. Social media platforms facilitate self-presentation, peer interaction, and collective meaning-making (boyd, 2010). Xiaohongshu's hybrid format creates a unique discursive space where academic, social, and emotional narratives converge, crucial for negotiating belonging when face-to-face community building is limited. Network ethnography (Kozinets, 2020) demonstrates the analytical value of such spaces; however, extant research primarily focuses on WeChat, Weibo, or Facebook (Zhang & Hjorth, 2017). This results in under-exploration of Xiaohongshu—a popular Chinese content platform—for observing real-time transnational student identity construction.

Darvin and Norton's (2015) work on identity and investment is particularly relevant, emphasizing material and symbolic capital's role and how structures mediate access. In accelerated, rigorous graduate education, students are constrained by stringent schedules and high-stakes assessment. Prowse and Goddard (2010) suggest transnational environments may hinder deep identity transformation, prompting pragmatic coping. While research examines emotional resilience (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015), the compound effects of time compression, market demands, and digital platform-mediated peer culture remain under-theorized. Specifically, how students narrate career-related emotions as strategic 'identity investment' in this high-pressure context warrants deeper investigation.

Building on this, the study examines how Chinese students negotiate identities through narratives on Xiaohongshu during a one-year master's program in the UK, focusing on academic, social, and career-oriented dimensions. This addresses the gap in identity construction analysis for Chinese international students in short-term, market-oriented transnational education.

3. Methodology

This study adopts netnography (Kozinets, 2010), a qualitative method adapting ethnographic principles for systematic online culture study. Immersing in Xiaohongshu, the research collects user-generated content to analyze how UK one-year master's Chinese students construct and negotiate identities, capturing authentic expressions shaped by program pressures.

The study is guided by these research questions:

RQ1. How does temporal compression influence narrative strategies for academic identity construction on Xiaohongshu among Chinese international students?

RQ2. How do Chinese master's students use social life narratives on Xiaohongshu to negotiate belonging and daily sharing during short-term study abroad?

RQ3. How does market-oriented international education shape emotional expression and identity investment of Chinese master's students on Xiaohongshu regarding future careers?

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The research is grounded in Darvin and Norton's (2015) Identity Investment model, theorizing identity construction as a strategic act for gaining symbolic and material resources. For students in costly, intensive one-year programs, Xiaohongshu self-presentations are deliberate investments in valued identity positions—e.g., diligent academic, networked professional, resilient job-seeker—anticipated to yield returns. These online self-presentations are

conceptualized as Narrative Identity Construction, where identity is enacted through storytelling. Drawing on "small stories" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), the analysis recognizes them as primary sites of identity negotiation.

Methodologically, the study employs two complementary qualitative approaches: Narrative Analysis (Bamberg's (1997) three-level Positioning Theory-informed) and Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Narrative Analysis focuses on how storytellers structure events, position themselves, and perform identities for validation. Thematic Analysis identifies recurring patterns and discourses within the dataset, mapping thematic domains like academic challenges, social adaptation, and career anxieties, while maintaining sensitivity to embedded narrative strategies.

3.2 Research Design, Sampling, and Data Collection

The study focuses on mainland Chinese students in UK one-year master's programs, facing dual pressures from compressed schedules (9–12 months) and significant financial/career investments. Identity negotiations are concentrated in academic identity, social interactions, and career expectations (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Bamberg, 1997). The study collected 60 original posts (n=60) publicly posted on Xiaohongshu (January 2023–August 2025). Xiaohongshu was selected for its dual functions, providing rich narrative texts (Kozinets, 2010). Purposeful stratified sampling was employed: academic (n=20, 33.3%), social (n=20, 33.3%), and emotional/occupational identity (n=20, 33.3%). Within each stratum, gender, institution type, academic background, and geographical location were controlled for diversity. Average comments per dimension were 118.9 (academic), 82.3 (social), and 134.1 (emotional/occupational), indicating more active discussion of emotional/career themes.

To ensure case explanatory power, each dimension was evaluated by four criteria:

Participant identification – The poster explicitly self identifies, in the post content or profile description, as a mainland Chinese student currently enrolled in, or recently graduated from, a UK one year master's programme.

- (1) Topical relevance – The post offers a substantive first person account of experiences related to academic pressures, social adaptation and belonging, or career aspirations/anxieties.
- (2) Narrative originality – Only original, reflective posts were included; commercial ads, reposted content, and institutional announcements were excluded to ensure authenticity.
- (3) Narrative form – Posts follow a "small story" format (Georgakopoulou, 2006), recounting concrete events, emotions, or reflections linked to processes of identity negotiation.

Six posts (01, 07, 28, 31, 44, 53) were selected for in-depth description and translated for analysis. This sampling prioritizes depth and context, capturing thematic concerns and interactional identity construction across the three domains.

3.3 Data Analysis

Analysis proceeds in two interlinked phases: Thematic Analysis: All 60 posts are systematically coded to identify dominant themes (e.g., ROI anxiety, time management, loneliness coping, professional networking). This maps the overarching thematic landscape of identity construction; Narrative Analysis of "Small Stories" with Positioning Theory: This study applies Bamberg's (1997) three-level positioning framework to examine identity construction

across narration layers in selected Xiaohongshu "small stories":

- (1) Within the story world. How narrators portray themselves and other characters in specific events (e.g., framing themselves as resilient "survivors" of a deadline heavy week, or as individuals constrained by systemic unfairness).
- (2) In storyteller–audience interaction. How narrators orient themselves toward Xiaohongshu readers (e.g., in travel vlogs or social posts, positioning as a welcoming guide, a peer seeking solidarity, or a newcomer requesting advice).
- (3) In relation to broader societal discourses. How narratives align with, contest, or reframe dominant beliefs (e.g., in job seeking anxiety posts, reinforcing or challenging the idea that a master's degree is a guaranteed gateway to a high paying career).

This layered approach offers insight into the interactional, cultural, and ideological work these stories perform.

3.4 Ethical Declaration

Research complies with ethical standards for online research. All analyzed content is publicly available. Identifiable information (usernames, photographs, geotags) is removed or anonymized. The study does not interfere with online activity or employ deceptive data collection. Each post is numerically coded (Post 01–Post 60) for internal reference, ensuring confidentiality.

4. Results

This chapter analyzes posts by Chinese postgraduate international students on Xiaohongshu, revealing how they construct identities across academic, social, and emotional/career dimensions. Six "key and insightful cases" (Patton, 2002) were selected for in-depth analysis (two per dimension), demonstrating high thematic representativeness and community interaction.

4.1 The Academically Narrated Self under Temporal Compression: Between Overwhelm and Reclamation

Post 01:

Reflections on the First Three Weeks of Studying Abroad: The specialized coursework is extremely challenging. As a mainland Chinese student, language barriers pose a significant obstacle. I struggle to follow lectures and feel lost when trying to study on my own. Every class this week has made me consider dropping out. To save money, I spend hours each day shopping for groceries, cooking meals, and doing dishes, leaving little time for self-study. When studying at the library, I have to carry my electronic devices with me out of fear of theft, unlike in Chinese universities where you can leave your laptop or tablet at your desk during lunch or evening breaks and easily leave the library to eat or exercise; I haven't seen any electric scooters, and I'm afraid of having my bicycle stolen. Public transportation costs 2 pounds per ride, so I rely almost entirely on walking for transportation. Living slightly farther away, the daily commute is quite challenging, and I miss the convenient campus transportation system of Chinese universities. There is no sports field on campus, making it inconvenient to run or exercise in the evening, and you have to carry your electronic devices with you at all times. As a poor international student, I dare not buy everyday items carelessly, constantly agonizing over trivial matters. It's only after coming abroad that I realized how convenient life and study were back home...

(Poster 01. Posted on 2024/10/09)

Narratively, Post 01 is a "small story" (Georgakopoulou, 2006) structured as a fragmented list, creating an oppressive textual experience. The rapid, cumulative semantics simulate cognitive overload and distress under temporal compression (Kinging, 2013). Emotionally saturated lexicon frames a crisis, aligning with culture shock models (Oberg, 1960). The poster avoids individual blame, strategically positioning as "mainland Chinese student" and "poor international student" to explain and legitimize struggles. This positioning (Bamberg, 1997) is "identity negotiation in discourse," granting emotional legitimacy within a disadvantaged group (Block, 2007).

Macro-level, the post is a negative audit of Identity Investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Verbs like "compressed," "stolen," and "internal friction" metaphorically calculate cost: study time erosion, security loss, and mental energy depletion. "Consider dropping out" warns of investment failure, revealing identity construction risks. The concluding comparison—"how convenient life and study were back home"—constructs an "idealized, remembered other," framing the current situation as "loss." This binary opposition is strategic identity negotiation, establishing a resilient academic identity despite pressure. This identity is actively "performed" (Zhang & Hjorth, 2017), reflecting digital identity construction's complexity.

Post 07:

I'm a 2022 Fall student. My dissertation just received a distinction, and after revising it myself (didn't seek polishing—just confident), I submitted it to a journal. Later, I revised it again based on the initial review comments. I was busy with it for about a month, and fortunately, it was finally published. I'm sharing this to encourage all "baozi" who chose to study in the UK to stand tall—don't assume that just because it's a one-year program, you can't achieve anything, or that a one-year master's lacks value. So, what if it's only one year? Every single day of our year as international students was spent seriously attending classes, reading literature, and conducting research. One-year master ≠ "shui shuo."(crash course for master's degree).

(Poster 07. Posted on 2024/03/13)

Poster constructs a classic counternarrative (Bamberg, 2004), challenging stigmatizing discourse. The linear narrative—distinction, independent revision, submission, response, publication—conveys academic competence and self-performance (Wortham, 2001). Assertive self-positioning ("didn't seek editing—just confident") functions as affective alignment (Zembylas, 2007). The motivational call "stand tall" shifts to collective empowerment, transforming personal success into community resource. The slogan "one-year master ≠ 'shui shuo'" is a discursive counterpunch, semantically dense discourse re-coding (Leung & Street, 2012). Asserting intense study reclaims program intensity as academic rigor. From a positioning perspective (Bamberg, 1997), the poster enacts three roles: confident "role model," empowering figure, and discourse challenger. This multi-layered positioning enhances symbolic capital and redefines academic legitimacy in digital spaces.

These cases illustrate how UK one-year master's students narrate academic identities under compressed timelines. Some use breakdown narratives for understanding; others adopt defiant counter-narratives to highlight resilience and push back against "shui shuo." These posts are

active identity performances. Through language, emotion, and structure, students redefine "legitimate" academic experience, reshaping academic worth in one-year programs.

4.2 Social Identity under Constraint

Social identity construction and belonging negotiation are crucial for adaptation. For one-year master's students, this is complex due to time pressure and the need to quickly establish networks. Negotiating social identity and daily sharing in digital spaces emerges as pivotal for psychological equilibrium and belonging. Analysis is informed by reflective-critical and proactive-constructive narratives.

Post 28

Frankly speaking, social interactions during UK Master's programs are mostly just 'dazi' (functional partners) relationships, such as study partners, assignment partners, travel partners, photo-taking partners, supermarket partners, and Haidilao partners. However, these interactions never involve sharing genuine emotions, merely serving as transactional acquaintances. Group chats are usually silent, only briefly active before outings. No one cares about your emotional struggles, only focusing on discount information and group purchases. The poster criticized some classmates, who, during outings, only focused on getting their own good photos, failed to contribute to planning, didn't help find restaurants, and even complained that photos taken by others were not good. As an INFP who needs empathy, the poster felt disappointed and began a process of 'relationship disenchantment,' no longer holding expectations. The comment section further elaborated on experiences such as a low success rate for study abroad invitations, friends graduating and returning home, a brief euphoric state of studying abroad, and an unfriendly online social atmosphere.

(Poster 28. Posted on 2024/01/24)

Post 28 is a "protest narrative" (Georgakopoulou, 2006), progressively constructing social disappointment. "Frankly speaking" sets an unfiltered tone. The assertion "social interactions... are mostly just 'dazi'" is followed by a list of six 'dazi' types, emphasizing this functional model's pervasive, utilitarian nature and lack of deep emotional engagement. Phrases like "never involve sharing genuine emotions" and descriptions of classmates' self-centered behavior ("only focused on getting their own good photos") paint a social landscape devoid of empathy, exposing instrumental interactions and confirming 'dazi' relationships' non-committal nature.

Self-identifying as an "INFP" concretizes the conflict, validating emotional expression: "felt disappointed and began a process of 'relationship disenchantment,' no longer holding expectations." This strategic positioning (Bamberg, 1997) elevates the complaint to a reflection on a collective phenomenon. "Relationship disenchantment" captures the shift from idealism to realism (Weber, 1946), reshaping social identity to accept limited, functional relationships and attribute instrumental value to "socializing." This narrative is a "negative audit" of social identity investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Initial hopes for genuine friendships diverged, resulting in emotional "loss." "No longer holding expectations" signifies investment withdrawal and social identity redefinition, negotiating self-preservation. By critiquing "dazi" culture, the narrative constructs the social identity of a "clear-sighted observer," emphasizing authenticity. This candid expression resonates with similar experiences, establishing alternative belonging in virtual communities (Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

Post 31

I've come across so many posts saying that studying abroad feels lonely and stressful, but honestly, I just can't relate—this past year my happiness has been practically overflowing. Sure, there's academic pressure, but I find it manageable. After all, I came here to study, not to play. With good time planning, the workload doesn't feel overwhelming—especially when I'm sitting by the floor-to-ceiling windows in the library, sunlight streaming in, coffee in hand, finishing my thesis. The sense of accomplishment is just so real. And the professors are incredibly nice.

Many people dislike rainy days, but I truly adore Edinburgh's rain. It feels like stepping back into the Middle Ages, with architecture and sculptures that carry such a romantic charm. Edinburgh itself feels eternal—students come and go, but the city is always there, untouched by the flow of time, like a lingering romantic illusion.

A lot of people complain about the food, and yes, I have a Chinese palate too, but discovering cuisines from around the world has been a joy! My cooking skills have improved by leaps and bounds. Going to my favorite supermarket for fresh ingredients, inviting friends over for dinner—pure happiness. Finding delicious brunch spots, savoring Spanish dishes, tucking into a hot cheese toast or fish and chips—all of it makes me happy! Of course, Chinese food will always be my favorite.

One of the greatest joys of studying in the UK is being able to travel around Europe on a whim. Back home, a single trip can cost tens of thousands of yuan, but here, once you've got a Schengen visa, you can just hop on a plane whenever you spot a cheap ticket on Trip. One day you're writing your thesis, the next you're basking in the sun in the South of France—what could be better? For a travel lover like me, these joys are enough to erase all the fatigue from studying.

Why am I so happy? Maybe because before coming, I imagined all the difficulties and worried too much, only to find things weren't so hard after all. I don't compete with classmates, I don't give in to peer pressure, and I allow myself to slow down and savor the good. I commit to doing two things well: living well and studying well. Shopping at my favorite supermarket, trying new recipes, exploring every corner of the city, smiling at strangers—tiny moments of happiness are everywhere.

(Poster 31. Posted on 2024/06/01)

This "happiness overflowing" narrative intertwines the high-pressure master's cycle with affect-laden daily life: thesis progress, Edinburgh's romantic charm, cooking joy, and travel freedom. It counters the "lonely–stressful" mainstream script, shaping an active, self-sufficient study abroad subjectivity via self-management (Andrews, 2004; Komito, 2011).

The text displays three discursive features. First, frequent high emotional valence lexis and embodied imagery (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) anchors happiness in lived detail. Second, enumerative parallelism (Page, 2018)—extended lists enhance narrative abundance and visualize emotional capital (Zembylas, 2007; Gouthro, 2014), enabling affect/cultural experience circulation. Last, pragmatic orchestration of personal reference and interactive orientation: contrastive framing and rhetorical questioning perform Bamberg's (1997) third-order positioning; shifts between first-person and direct address create Fetzer's (2014) intimate audience engagement. These are calibrations of online identity display (Georgakopoulou, 2021).

This linguistic repertoire reinforces the poster's "active integrator" positioning: self-regulation in cross-cultural contexts while cultivating belonging through micro connections and everyday sharing. This aligns with King and Lulle's (2023) emphasis on international student agency and corroborates Wellman and Gulia's (1999) findings that emotionally charged daily life display sustains emotional resources and network cohesion in weak-tie online communities. Such narratives function as happiness templates for other students, softening hardship scripts and opening alternative belonging frameworks.

In summary, Chinese Master's students in time-constrained UK programs adaptively leverage Xiaohongshu to construct social identities and belonging. Their narratives, from 'disenchantment' to 'overflowing happiness,' demonstrate proactive forging of alternative social cohesion and personal integration online, challenging conventional expectations.

4.3 Market Oriented International Education and the Emotional Identity Nexus

Under time and outcome pressures, Chinese students must convert overseas studies into labor market capital while maintaining dignity and professional aspirations. This section analyzes how students integrate emotional expression with professional identity expectations/realities on Xiaohongshu via value-reconstruction and cross-national workplace comparison narratives, endowing future careers with dual economic and emotional significance.

Post 44

I have a non-top-tier university background, but I received an offer from the University of Manchester to study in the UK, with a total cost of approximately 500,000 RMB. One year of studying abroad, the true value is not a piece of paper (diploma), but a transformation in mindset—learning to think from multiple perspectives, respect others, acknowledge one's shortcomings, and continue learning. As for 'getting your money's worth' (return on investment), it depends on the subsequent improvement and application of one's abilities. Don't just focus on the return on investment; first, clearly see the changes in yourself before and after studying abroad.

Career Development Back Home: A Master's degree from a top-ranked QS university still holds an advantage when seeking jobs in state-owned enterprises or foreign companies back in China. Most of my friends around me secured offers before graduation.

Career Development in the UK: After my dissertation results were released, I immediately applied for local positions in the UK. My first job was in sales at British Gas—the experience of going door-to-door in the cold significantly boosted my confidence, English proficiency, and market analysis skills. I have now joined a large local UK company, and with online part-time work, my monthly income is around £2,500, which is a qualitative leap compared to a year ago when I relied on my parents for living expenses.

Healthy Social Circle: Finding like-minded, proactive companions with clear goals is extremely important; these individuals are the greatest 'treasures' of studying in the UK.

Independent Capabilities: Studying abroad has taught me to be independent from my parents, to live autonomously, and to be self-driven.

This year has made me more mature, focused, and independent, and I also have a clearer

idea of what I want. If I had to choose again, I would still choose to study abroad.

(Poster 44. Posted on 2025/01/03)

Post 44 is a mutual aid, "experience sharing—advisory style" small story (Georgakopoulou, 2006). Its narrative strategy contrasts personal circumstances ("non top tier undergraduate" vs. "Manchester offer") to frame overcoming disadvantages and achieving upward mobility, re-articulating study abroad value. This critically dialogues with credentialist tendencies (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019). The narrative deconstructs/elevates market-oriented ROI discourse. Contrasting a diploma with mindset transformation casts the former as tangible, the latter as Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital. This addresses short-term economic logic and underscores symbolic, long-term returns in Identity Investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Discursively, the poster uses evaluative adjectives ("true value") and pairs quantitative data ("£2,500") with qualitative descriptors ("more confident"), forming a dual evidence persuasion strategy (Hyland, 2005). Hierarchical numbering enhances readability (Page, 2018). The interplay of linguistic/symbolic resources maximizes multimodal affordances, making the post compelling.

The narrative traces an emotional shift from economic ROI anxiety to confidence and fulfillment, understood as emotional capital accumulation (Zembylas, 2007). In "Career Development in the UK," "door to door sales during the harsh winter" underscores resilience, converting adversity into psychological/symbolic capital.

Post 53

Although the autumn recruitment season isn't over yet, here's my situation: I have a bachelor's degree in Management from a non-top tier university in China, and a Master's in Arts from a QS Top 100 UK school. I mainly applied for marketing and social media positions, both in China and the UK. I already have a remote marketing job in hand. China: Got three interviews — one rejection, one with no update, and one awaiting results. UK: Got one interview, but it requires being on site, so I might need to fly back at the end of the year.

In fact, most of the roles I've applied for are in the UK or global remote positions, and I'm less enthusiastic about China's autumn recruitment. The most tangible feeling is: being treated as a person, not a cog in the machine.

Overseas job descriptions come with enticing perks: USD 3k annual training allowance, 25+ days of paid annual leave, and a genuinely respectful tone — as if they're trying to win me over. The application process is simple: just basic info, a resume, and a cover letter — no repetitive form filling.

In contrast, in China some companies start by asking if you can accept the "996" or "big small week" schedule; even a standard five day week is treated as a privilege. The process is cumbersome, and the vibe is "take it or leave it, we're not short of applicants."

Some people might criticize me for "being picky without the ability to back it up," but being treated as a human being feels like a basic demand.

(Poster 53, Posted on 2024/11/14)

This post exemplifies a comparative workplace narrative (Bamberg, 2006), mobilizing cross-national contrasts to foreground employment culture divergences. Juxtaposing the UK's human-centric recruitment with China's efficiency-driven processes, the narrative constructs a symbolic labor market geography resonating with precarity and respect discourses (Standing, 2011). The contrast re-positions the self as an active chooser, reclaiming agency in an asymmetrical job market (Ortner, 2006). It reflects work's affective dimension by situating "being treated as a human being" as a core evaluative stance, signaling dignity and recognition's salience in transnational career trajectories. This aligns with research on emotional labor and workplace respect (Hochschild, 2012; Hodson, 2001). The UK's "perks and respectful tone" are semiotic resources positioning the candidate within a global hierarchy of desirable labor regimes.

This narrative relies on sharp binaries ("996 vs. annual leave," "cog vs. person") to intensify contrast, a common rhetorical strategy in online professional storytelling (Page, 2012). These binaries operate as critique of exploitative structures and aspiration toward humane alternatives. The effect is to reframe transnational job seeking as an evaluative commentary on systemic inequality and subjective well-being. The poster presents how Chinese international graduates discursively negotiate career identity by mobilizing comparative frames, affective evaluations, and rhetorical contrasts. The post highlights how job search narratives extend beyond employability metrics to encompass recognition, dignity, and emotional capital—a crucial dimension of global labor mobility discourses, especially in the Chinese employing market.

5. Discussion

Research findings reveal complex, multidimensional identity negotiation among Chinese international students in UK one-year master's programs. For academic identity, students use varied Xiaohongshu narratives, from "collapse narratives" conveying anxiety to "counter-narratives" showcasing achievements against stigmatization. These are proactive definitions of "legitimate" academic experiences and strategic identity performances.

In social interactions, students use Xiaohongshu to build belonging despite limited opportunities. Narratives range from 'disenchantment' with superficial connections to 'overflowing happiness' in self-cultivated fulfillment, demonstrating proactive forging of alternative social cohesion and personal integration online, challenging conventional expectations. Additionally, in the market-oriented context, students' emotional and professional identity negotiations are evident. They focus on practical career benefits and "dignity," shaping a professional identity characterized by critical selection. These narratives reveal practical employment considerations and highlight emphasis on emotional dimensions, like respect and recognition, in global labor mobility.

This study's findings offer public and educational institutions a more comprehensive understanding of one-year master's programs from international students' perspective, recognizing their agency and complexity in navigating identity challenges in high-pressure globalized environments, and providing new perspectives for supporting future international student development.

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