University of Tartu
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Institute of Cultural Research

Xingyue Yang

Chinese International Students and University Museums: Engagement and Learning at The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Master's Thesis

Supervisors:

Tiiu Kreegipuu, PhD, University of Tartu

Maria Cutajar, PhD, University of Malta

Delia Bridget Wilson, M.Ed, University of Glasgow

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Chinese postgraduate students engage with the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow. Using semi-structured interviews with 14 participants, the research explores how informal museum experiences relate to intercultural adaptation, identity, and learning. Guided by theories of third space, adaptation, and informal learning, the study reveals a complex interplay of motivation, emotion, and social context, alongside institutional and cultural barriers. While the Hunterian offers potential as an inclusive space, gaps remain in practice. The findings inform discussions on university museums, student inclusion, and heritage education.

Keywords: international students, university museums, third space

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1. Introduction

As higher education becomes increasingly internationalised, the experiences of international students have attracted growing attention from both academic research and institutional policy. Their academic achievements and economic contributions are widely acknowledged, yet their adaptation to unfamiliar cultural and institutional environments remains complex. While most support systems and scholarly discussions centre on formal academic settings, informal learning spaces such as university museums have received comparatively little attention, despite their potential to influence how students encounter, interpret, and participate in cultural life within their host institutions (Berry, 2006; Zhou *et al*., 2008).

University museums, situated at the intersection of teaching, research, and public engagement, are increasingly recognised as contributors to the *third mission* of higher education, which encompasses social responsibility and community connection (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). Beyond preserving disciplinary knowledge, they are expected to promote inclusivity, support community engagement, and encourage lifelong learning (Lourenço, 2019). These expanded expectations raise important questions about their audiences, the processes of meaning-making within them, and the kinds of learning they facilitate. For international students, whose academic lives extend beyond classrooms into wider campus and community contexts, such spaces may offer valuable yet underexplored opportunities for informal, intercultural learning and identity negotiation (Falk and Dierking, 2016; Kozak, 2016).

In the UK context, this issue how international students navigate informal learning spaces is particularly relevant given the significant presence of Chinese students. As the largest source of internationally mobile students worldwide, Chinese nationals make up one of the most visible and economically impactful international cohorts in UK higher education (Miao and Wang, 2024; HESA, 2025). Despite their demographic significance, research suggests that their participation in wider university life is often uneven, with barriers linked to cultural stereotyping, institutional invisibility, and marginalisation from non-academic activities (Moosavi, 2020a; Holliman *et al*., 2023). Existing studies have largely addressed language difficulties, academic transitions, and classroom participation, with far less attention paid to engagement with informal cultural spaces on campus (Yu and Moskal, 2018).

Addressing this gap is not only of scholarly relevance but also personally significant to the researcher, a Chinese student. With academic training in museum studies and education at four European universities including Leicester, Glasgow, Tartu and Malta, the researcher has observed diverse ways in which university museums operate and engage with their communities. These experiences have shaped the interest in exploring how such spaces function for international students, particularly those from China, within the everyday life of a UK university.

The study focuses on The Hunterian at the University of Glasgow, the umbrella name for Scotland's oldest public museum founded in 1807. The Hunterian comprises several venues, including the Hunterian Museum and the Hunterian Art Gallery, with collections spanning science, medicine, art, and global material culture. Embedded within the university campus, it plays a central role in advancing the institution's educational and civic missions. However, little is known about how international students, and Chinese students in particular, experience the Hunterian. It remains unclear what motivates or discourages their engagement, how they navigate its spaces, and what meanings they attach to these encounters.

To address these questions, this research employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with fourteen Chinese students at different academic stages at the University of Glasgow. The analysis is informed by Berry's (1997) acculturation model, Bhabha's (1994) concept of the *third space*, and Falk and Dierking's (2016) Contextual Model of Learning (CML). Together, these perspectives frame university museums not only as physical sites but as social and cultural environments where identity, adaptation, and learning are continuously negotiated.

This study investigates three interrelated questions: what are the key motivations and barriers influencing Chinese students' engagement in university museums; in what ways do Chinese international students engage with the Hunterian Museum and the Hunterian Art Gallery; and how does such engagement affect their educational and social experiences within the university context.

This dissertation is organised into six chapters. Chapter 2 reviews literature on international student mobility, cultural adaptation, and the evolving role of university museums, and outlines the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 details the research methodology, including design, data collection, analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents

the empirical findings, focusing on students' motivations and barriers, patterns of engagement, and perceived outcomes. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to the conceptual framework, highlighting their theoretical and practical significance. Chapter 6 concludes with a synthesis of the key insights and their wider implications.

2. Literature Review

University museums hold a unique role in higher education, bridging academic research, cultural heritage, and public engagement. Once viewed primarily as repositories of knowledge, many of these institutions have taken on expanded roles that align with the broader educational and civic responsibilities of universities. In this context, museums on university campuses are increasingly seen as spaces for informal learning, intercultural dialogue, and community engagement (Simpson, 2014; Simpson 2022).

Despite this shift, limited attention has been given to how students engage with university museums in everyday settings. Existing literature on museum visitor tends to prioritise formal educational programmes or public visitors, often overlooking the ways students interact with these spaces outside structured academic activities (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Chatterjee and Hannan, 2015). For international students in particular, such encounters may offer opportunities for reflection, connection, and identity negotiation during their time abroad.

Despite the significant presence of Chinese students in UK higher education, their experiences with informal learning opportunities, especially within cultural institutions like university museums, have been largely overlooked in current academic research. This literature review positions the current study within extensive discussions on cultural adaptation, museum education, and student engagement.

This chapter reviews the literature across five thematic areas. Section 2.1 introduces key concepts and theories related to international students and cultural adaptation. Section 2.2 traces the development of university museums. Section 2.3 considers their educational functions, with a focus on informal learning. Section 2.4 discusses the lack of empirical attention to Chinese students' engagement with university museums, framing the core research gap. Section 2.5 introduces the conceptual framework of the study, drawing on Bhabha's (1994) theory of the third space.

2.1 International Student: Mobility and Intercultural Adaptation

To establish a conceptual basis for this investigation, this section begins by clarifying the terminology used to describe international student mobility. Various terms such as "foreign students", "international students", and "mobile students" appear frequently in the literature,

often with overlapping but distinct meanings. To maintain clarity and alignment with international statistical standards, this study adopts the term "internationally mobile students". While the dissertation title and broader text use the more common term "international students" for readability and consistency with existing literature, the intended meaning throughout aligns with the definition provided by three major statistical bodies: the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the European Union's statistical office (EUROSTAT), collectively referred to as UOE. In 2020, UOE defined "internationally mobile students" as individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the primary objective of participating in educational activities in the destination country, which differs from their country of origin (UOE, 2020).

This study adopts the term "internationally mobile students" to clarify conceptual distinctions among related terms. According to the OECD (2023a), "foreign students" are classified by citizenship and are not nationals of the country where they study, even if they have long-term residency or were born there. In contrast, "international students" are defined by their physical relocation from one country to another for the purpose of study. While this label supports a functional understanding of mobility, scholars have argued that it can obscure diverse lived experiences and contribute to the construction of international students as a separate, uniform group, distinct from "home" populations (Lomer *et al*., 2021). The term "mobile students" is sometimes used more broadly to include regional movement within a country. However, "internationally mobile students" more accurately reflects the cross-border and education-specific nature of academic mobility, as defined in the 2019 UNESCO Global Convention (UNESCO, 2022). This study therefore specifically addresses individuals who relocate to another country for higher education.

Globally, the number of international students has expanded substantially over the past two decades. In 2022, approximately 6.9 million students were studying abroad, with the proportion of international enrolments in tertiary education increasing from 2.1 percent in 2000 to 2.7 percent in 2022 (UNESCO, 2025). Despite the disruption caused by COVID-19, these trends proved resilient: international student numbers in OECD countries grew by 18% between 2018 and 2022, reflecting universities' capacity to adapt through digital learning and revised internationalisation strategies (Mok *et al*., 2021; OECD, 2023b).

Global mobility patterns show significant regional concentration. In 2022, Europe and North America hosted over four million international students, accounting for more than half of global mobility (UNESCO, 2024). Within this landscape, the United Kingdom emerged as a major destination and higher education provider. It accounted for 21.6 percent of international tertiary students among OECD nations, ranking third behind Luxembourg and Australia (OECD, 2024). In absolute terms, the UK hosted 732,285 international students in 2023/24, representing 23 percent of its total student population and the second-highest figure on record (Bolton *et al*., 2025). Of these, 149,855 were non-EU Chinese students were enrolled in the same academic year—second only to Indian students, reflecting the substantial presence of this demographic in UK higher education (HESA, 2025). Globally, China remains the world's largest source of internationally mobile students, with more than 1.02 million tertiary-level Chinese students studying abroad in 2021 (Miao and Wang, 2024).

International students have become increasingly central to the UK's higher education system, offering both measurable benefits and intangible contributions. Their presence enhances academic diversity, facilitates peer learning, and promotes global perspectives across classrooms (Scottish Government, 2018; Lomer *et al*., 2021). These contributions are also reflected in institutional metrics: the QS World University Rankings include "International Student Ratio" and "International Student Diversity" as indicators of global engagement (Khan, 2023), while Times Higher Education (2024) considers the "Proportion of International Students" as part of its international outlook score.

Beyond their contributions to diversity, learning environments, and institutional rankings, international students play a vital economic role. In the UK, those who began their studies in 2020/21 generated an estimated £41.9 billion for the national economy (HEPI, 2023), through tuition fees, accommodation, and consumption by students and visiting families (Cannings *et al*., 2023). A substantial portion of this revenue comes from Chinese students, whose tuition fees are often significantly higher than those paid by domestic or EU peers (Weale and Quinn, 2023). Longer-term contributions also emerge through employment, taxation, and innovation, particularly when students remain after graduation (OECD, 2024). Consequently, post-study work policies are viewed as mechanisms to retain talent and economic value (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018). While such outcomes highlight the value of international students to host countries, they are ultimately shaped by the individual motivations and aspirations behind students' decisions to study abroad.

At the individual level, motivations for studying abroad are shaped by a combination of educational, cultural, and personal aspirations. According to the OECD (2024), international education enables students to develop global perspectives, strengthen language proficiency, and enhance intercultural competence—qualities that are increasingly valued in the global labour market. These diverse drivers continue to influence how students choose their study destinations, with certain factors proving particularly decisive.

Among these, language is a critical factor influencing destination selection. The so-called "Big Four" English-speaking countries—the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and Canada—remain dominant destinations. However, several non-English-speaking nations, including Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy, have become increasingly competitive by offering English-taught programmes (British Council, 2024).

While academic reputation and language remain central to destination choice, cultural and social dimensions are also significant. A UCAS (2022) survey found that 77 percent of international applicants cited academic reputation as a key factor in selecting the UK, followed by high-quality facilities (61 percent) and programme offerings (59 percent). At the same time, more than half of respondents emphasised cultural factors, including the UK's multicultural environment (53 percent), rich heritage (52 percent), and welcoming atmosphere (51 percent). These findings underscore that student decision-making is not only shaped by institutional prestige, but also by the perceived cultural and social accessibility of a destination. For example, some Chinese students described being drawn to the University of Glasgow by its Hogwarts-like architecture featured in brochures (Chu, 2022).

In terms of broader mobility patterns, regional differences remain evident. In 2022, Europe and North America jointly hosted over four million international students, accounting for more than half of global mobility (UNESCO, 2024). These regions are typically favoured for their academic prestige, professional opportunities, and extensive alumni networks (OECD, 2023b). However, the realities faced by students upon arrival can differ markedly from these broad trends.

The personal transition into a new cultural context often brings substantial challenges. Relocating to an unfamiliar academic and social environment may lead to stress, language barriers, and adjustment difficulties, particularly when local expectations and norms differ

from students' prior educational experiences (Berry, 2006; Wang *et al*., 2018). These difficulties are not isolated to a single setting but have been observed across different host countries, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of cultural adjustment.

Empirical studies have elucidated the diverse manifestations of these challenges. Smith and Khawaja's (2011) qualitative study involving international students at an Australian university revealed that participants frequently encountered difficulties in comprehending academic expectations, establishing significant friendships, and sustaining emotional well-being. Similarly, Sawir *et al*. (2008) recorded the enduring nature of loneliness, even among socially engaged and academically accomplished students. Other research highlights recurring issues such as cultural dissonance and the combined pressures of language and academic performance (Zhou *et al*., 2008; Wang *et al*., 2012). These findings emphasise the importance of targeted institutional support addressing both academic and non-academic needs to enhance student well-being and facilitate adaptation (Soheili and Lanz, 2025). First-hand accounts from Chinese students in the UK echo these concerns: many report feeling like "study machines," receiving insufficient support despite paying high fees, and lacking meaningful opportunities for local integration (Chu, 2022).

In addition to these immediate changes, such challenges can have a profound impact on students' sense of identity, belonging, and mental well-being (Marginson, 2012). Language anxiety, academic pressure, and social isolation may be exacerbated when access to culturally appropriate support is restricted (Magnusdottir and Thornicroft, 2022). Scholars have characterised intercultural adaptation as a complex and continuous process, transcending institutional confines to investigate how individuals actively pursue belonging and significance in unfamiliar environments.

Supporting students through this process requires more than administrative measures; it involves understanding how individuals adapt over time to new cultural and social contexts. One influential model is proposed by Ward *et al*. (2001), who distinguish between two interrelated dimensions: sociocultural adaptation, which involves acquiring the behavioural and social skills necessary to function effectively in a new cultural context, and psychological adaptation, which concerns emotional well-being, including satisfaction, anxiety, depression, and loneliness. This model clarifies the principal areas of adjustment but fails to delineate the strategies individuals employ to navigate these areas.

Based on this model, Berry's (1997, 2006) bidimensional acculturation model divides adaptation strategies into four groups: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation. His framework underscores the negotiation of identity and behaviour between heritage and host cultures, providing insight into the various pathways international students may pursue in response to cultural transitions. Nonetheless, both Ward *et al*. (2001) and Berry (1997, 2006) primarily concentrate on psychological and behavioural change, with insufficient emphasis on the spatial and institutional contexts of adaptation.

To address this gap, Bhabha's (1994) concept of third space introduces a hybrid zone where meanings are negotiated, rather than imposed, and where identity is continuously reworked through cultural translation. This space transcends binary classifications of "home" and "host," fostering a dynamic milieu for interaction in which various traditions coexist and mutually transform. The focus shifts from individual adaptation to the relational and contextual dimensions of adjustment.

Building on this perspective, subsequent research has explored how third spaces operate in informal, everyday contexts. Classrooms, for instance, can serve as micro third spaces, allowing students to interact with new norms while preserving aspects of their home cultures (Pitts *et al*., 2016; Aziz, 2024). Similarly, campus spaces such as student clubs, lounges, and social gatherings function as third spaces that foster peer exchange, emotional support, and informal learning (Elliot *et al*., 2016). These studies emphasise that adaptation occurs beyond formal teaching environments, extending into less apparent cultural and institutional contexts, which may encompass museums and community-based initiatives.

International students' needs frequently go beyond academic support, necessitating informal spaces that promote social connection and intercultural growth. A UK-wide report underscored the value of extracurricular activities in fostering intercultural competence, language development, and psychological well-being (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018). It documented, for instance, how Chinese students at the University of the West of England volunteered with the Avon and Bristol Chinese Women's Group to develop websites and organise English sessions for elderly community members, and how twenty Thai students collaborated with Aerospace Bristol Museum to plan and deliver workshops for isolated local residents (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018).

These examples demonstrate that informal, third-space activities outside the classroom facilitate connections between international students and the host community, while also fostering essential adaptation resources, including communication skills, emotional coping strategies, and intercultural awareness (Ward *et al*., 2001; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Students involved in the projects documented by the UK Migration Advisory Committee (2018) reported improved confidence, language proficiency, and a stronger sense of belonging. In this sense, third spaces function as spaces for cultural integration and contexts for the practice and enhancement of adaptive competencies.

Third spaces provide safe and flexible environments where international students can explore new social roles, navigate identity shifts, and develop social networks. Through such immersive experiences, they adopt creative and emotional strategies to mitigate culture shock while acquiring vital interpersonal and intercultural skills. Recent scholars have combined the frameworks of Ward *et al*. (2001) and Berry (1997) with Bhabha's third space theory to offer more integrated accounts of intercultural adaptation in educational settings (Elliot *et al*., 2016; Pitts *et al*., 2016; Aziz, 2024). These studies suggest that informal environments, such as creative or extracurricular spaces, can support identity negotiation and intercultural learning, highlighting not only how adaptation occurs but also the specific everyday contexts that make it possible.

This understanding directs attention to the cultural, spatial, and social infrastructures that shape adaptation. On university campuses, a range of physical and semi-formal environments enable such encounters. Among these, university museums hold a distinctive position, offering institutionalised spaces where learning, culture, and public engagement intersect. In doing so, they bring the abstract concept of a third space into concrete institutional practice. The following section traces their historical development within higher education, examining how shifting roles and priorities have shaped their capacity to act as bridges between academic institutions and international student communities.

2.2 University Museum: Evolving Roles Across Time

This section traces the transformation of university museums from academic repositories to socially engaged cultural institutions. It follows a broadly chronological structure, linking their evolution to wider developments in museology, educational theory, and the university's expanding more public missions. Seen in this broader institutional context, university

museums are situated within the evolving trajectories of higher education and museum history, highlighting their growing significance as platforms for inclusive learning, public engagement, and intercultural dialogue (Simpson, 2014; Lourenço, 2019).

Universities, from their earliest forms, have served as communities dedicated to the advancement and transmission of knowledge. The term *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*—a "community of masters and scholars" (Rubens *et al*., 2017)—reflects this mission. Such institutions have been established for over a millennium, with early examples including the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco (859) and the University of Bologna in Italy (1088) (Nykänen, 2018). Historically, they have accomplished two core missions: teaching and research (Ridder-Symoens, 1992). In addition to these, many universities have also embraced a *third mission*, encompassing activities that extend beyond academia to include civic responsibility, knowledge exchange, and contributions to cultural and economic development (Molas-Gallart *et al*., 2002; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). This expanded mandate emphasises the expectation for universities to actively engage with external communities, positioning their cultural assets, including museums, as strategic resources.

Within this expanded institutional framework, university museums hold a distinct position. According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2022), museums are permanent, not-for-profit institutions that research, collect, conserve, interpret and exhibit tangible and intangible heritage "with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing." As Lourenço (2019) emphasises, university museums hold a dual identity: they are both academic infrastructures supporting object-based research and teaching, and cultural organisations contributing to public knowledge and social cohesion. Their collections often span diverse disciplines across the sciences, humanities, and arts, enabling them to bridge scholarly expertise and public engagement (Boylan, 1999).

The increasing alignment of university museums with the third mission reflects a broader shift influenced by New Museology, which prioritises accessibility, inclusivity, and relevance to contemporary visitors (Vergo, 1989; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). These institutions are no longer confined to insular academic functions but increasingly serve as cultural interfaces that connect the university with diverse external audiences. This changing role is best understood

through a historical perspective that traces their evolution in parallel with broader trends in museum development.

Cabinets of curiosities, comprising private collections of rare specimens, exotic objects and antiquities assembled by European elites, are widely recognised as a precursor to the modern museum (Impey and MacGregor, 1985; Arnold, 2006). University museums share these origins but developed along a distinctive path shaped by their institutional integration within higher education (Lourenço, 2005). From the sixteenth century onwards, some universities established permanent collections for teaching and research in disciplines such as medicine, pharmacy and botany, with notable examples at the National University of San Marcos in Peru (1515), the Botanic Gardens of Padova in Italy (1545) and the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines (1611) (Nykänen, 2018).

The Ashmolean Museum, founded in 1683 at the University of Oxford, is widely recognised as the first public and university-affiliated museum (Boylan, 1999). Established by Elias Ashmole, it combined antiquities with botanical, geological and zoological specimens gathered by John Tradescant, father and son, and served both teaching and research functions. Its early curators, such as Robert Plot and Edward Lhywd, held academic posts within the university (Boylan, 1999), establishing a model that integrated collections into curricula, laboratories, and lecture spaces. This integration of scholarly and public roles provided a foundation for the significant expansion of university museums during the nineteenth century.

In this period, growing academic specialisation and scientific exchange made museums central to disciplinary training in fields such as archaeology, anthropology, natural sciences and art history (Pearce, 2017). According to Lourenço (2019), the Humboldtian model of higher education, developed in Berlin in 1810, placed research at the centre of the university and collections at the centre of research. One prominent example from the late nineteenth century is the Pitt Rivers Museum, established in 1884 at the University of Oxford following Augustus Pitt Rivers' donation of 14,000 artefacts. His stipulation for a permanent lectureship in anthropology led to the appointment of E. B. Tylor (Van Keuren, 1984). Conceived as a pedagogical laboratory of comparative material culture, its typological display system arranged artefacts by form and function rather than chronology or geography, encouraging students to trace technological development across cultures (Pitt Rivers Museum, 2025; Coombes, 1988). This pedagogical approach now widely recognised as

object-based learning (OBL) which is believed to enhance engagement, critical thinking and knowledge retention (Sabelli, 2020) and remains valued by disciplines from anthropology to medicine and art (Stanbury, 2000).

While its contributions to pedagogy were significant, the Pitt Rivers Museum also reflected the imperial ideologies of its time. The typological logic, grounded in evolutionary theory, positioned non-European societies at earlier stages of development and promoted a linear narrative of progress from "primitive" to "civilised" cultures (Coombes, 1988). Pitt Rivers himself argued for collecting the material cultures of "barbarous tribes" before their predicted extinction, framing this as scientific preservation (Evans, 2014). Such practices reinforced colonial worldviews, illustrating Pearce's (2017) argument that museum objects are never neutral but are interpreted through prevailing epistemologies. In the late Victorian period, university museums thus became sites where scientific authority and cultural hierarchy were materially constructed.

The first half of the twentieth century marked a period of transition and consolidation for both universities and university museums. Building on nineteenth-century developments, scientific disciplines continued to grow while higher education gradually opened to wider publics. In several European cities, universities offered evening lectures, extramural courses and civic outreach initiatives. As Anderson (2004) notes, these programmes sought to bridge class and gender divides by integrating elite academic institutions into everyday urban life. Although constrained by limited resources and disrupted by global conflict, they laid the foundation for the "civic university" model, in which institutions were expected to cultivate socially responsible citizens and contribute to national development (Perkin, 2003).

At the same time, museums underwent increasing professionalisation: curatorial roles were formalised, museum education posts were created, and standards for cataloguing and display became more systematic (Hudson, 1975). In Britain, the Education Acts of 1902 and 1918 legitimised museum visits as part of school curricula and encouraged partnerships between museums and local education authorities (Kavanagh, 1988; Coombes, 1988). University museums responded by embedding experiential, student-centred approaches inspired by progressive educators such as John Dewey (1938). University museums thus evolved into hybrid institutions—supporting OBL while also serving as public interpretive spaces that reflected emerging educational reforms. As Hooper-Greenhill (1991) observed, these shifts

promoted active observation and interpretation, reinforcing their dual role as academic resources and civic platforms for cultural engagement. In the United States, several university museums were designated as state museums, taking a leading role in interpreting natural history for local communities (OECD, 2001). This civic and pedagogical orientation anticipated the new museological emphasis on accessibility, inclusivity and cultural dialogue that would shape the late twentieth century (Vergo, 1989; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Black, 2012).

From the 1980s onwards, however, many university museums experienced what Warhurst (1986) termed a "survival crisis", which involved a loss of identity, purpose, recognition and resources. Structural pressures, including cuts to public higher education funding, staff shortages and institutional restructuring, led some universities to downsize or even dispose of collections (Simpson, 2022). At the same time, shifts in teaching content and research methodologies reduced the centrality of OBL (Hamilton, 1995; Lourenço, 2008). Unless curatorial teams reassessed how collections were deployed, their academic relevance risked obsolescence. Critics questioned the sustainability of university museums, especially those dependent on public funding, operating under insular, curator-centric paradigms (Sabelli, 2020).

In response to these pressures, some institutions adopted more market-oriented approaches, developing programmes that respond to public interests while presenting knowledge in accessible ways (Kozak, 2016). This repositioning aligned with a broader shift in higher education: universities were facing growing societal expectations to extend their mission beyond traditional teaching and research. Universities were thus increasingly expected to mobilise academic knowledge through public engagement, industry partnerships and policy influence (Hamilton and Margot, 2020).

These institutional shifts converged into what is now widely known as the university's third mission, referring to activities concerned with "the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside academic environments" (Molas-Gallart *et al*., 2002). Broadly defined, the third mission encompasses activities that extend beyond teaching and research to foster social, cultural and economic development, including community engagement, lifelong learning, and knowledge exchange with external partners (Molas-Gallart *et al*., 2002). At its core, it reflects an imperative for universities to

act as civic actors—developing science and improving society through reciprocal engagement with external communities (Trencher *et al*., 2014).

In this expanded framework, university museums are redefined as strategic instruments for implementing the third mission. Their capacity to connect academic knowledge with public visitors establishes them as essential intermediaries between universities and society. Lourenço (2019) posits that university museums serve as a distinctive link between formal education and informal learning, providing inclusive spaces for varied communities to interact with research, heritage, and cultural production. Opening collections for public interpretation, education, and outreach enhances institutional visibility and generates public value (Kozak, 2016). Panciroli and Macauda (2016) argue that university museums function as incubators for the convergence of scientific research, educational training, and social responsibility. University museums advance academic missions and demonstrate how higher education institutions can function as civic actors in culturally significant manners.

This repositioning was already visible by the late twentieth century. Boylan (1999) observed that university museums were evolving from static teaching displays into dynamic institutions engaged in both formal and informal learning. This transformation reflected shifting educational priorities and the growing influence of what would later be conceptualised as the university's third mission. In the early twenty-first century, this shift gained further momentum through international coordination. Major milestones included the creation of the European network Universeum (2000)[1] and the establishment of the University Museums and Collections Committee (2001)[2] within ICOM, and the OECD's *Managing University Museums* report (2001), which posed critical questions about how these institutions could balance academic and public responsibilities amid changing expectations.

In the UK context, Were (2010) illustrates how university museums such as those at University College London operate at the intersection of academic research, public engagement, and internal institutional politics. Drawing on examples ranging from scientific instrument collections to ethnographic collaborations with Solomon Islands communities, she

[1] Universeum – European Academic Heritage Network: https://www.universeum-network.eu/ [Accessed: 1 August 2025].
[2] ICOM-UMAC – University Museums and Collections: https://icom.museum/en/committee/international-committee-for-university-museums-and-collections/ [Accessed: 1 August 2025].

demonstrates that university museums are increasingly expected to function as contact zones, where knowledge is co-produced and authority negotiated among academics, curators, and external communities. Broader research on the third mission further demonstrates that universities' public engagement strategies are influenced by institutional governance, funding mechanisms, and regional priorities (Degl'Innocenti *et al.*, 2019; Lebeau and Cochrane, 2015). These elements that similarly affect the positioning of university museums within civic and cultural frameworks.

Collectively, these developments have redefined the role of university museums in higher education, establishing them as scholarly resources and socially responsive institutions. Their evolution from isolated academic repositories to inclusive cultural platforms reflects the principles of new museology, which prioritises accessibility, dialogue, and participation, and corresponds with the overarching goals of the university's third mission. In this dual framework, university museums encounter both expanding opportunities and persistent challenges as they seek to foster learning, communication, and civic engagement within increasingly diverse communities. Yet despite this evolution, university museums remain under-researched, with many studies overlooking their distinct institutional contexts and audiences.

2.3 Exploring Informal Learning: International Student Engagement in University Museums

This section builds on prior discussions regarding international student mobility (Section 2.1) and the evolving role of university museums (Section 2.2) to analyse informal learning as a crucial framework for understanding the engagement of international students with university museums. Positioned at the intersection of academic and cultural spheres, university museums balance educational, public, and third mission responsibilities (Lourenço, 2019). Their hybrid identity facilitates the integration of scholarly resources with inclusive, visitor-oriented practices, fostering environments conducive to learning, cultural reflection, and identity negotiation beyond the classroom.

Informal learning encompasses educational experiences occurring outside formal curricula, characterised by self-direction, social mediation, and individual interests (Dewey, 1938; Falk & Dierking, 2000). In contrast to formal learning, it is characterised by its voluntary nature, open-ended structure, and foundation in the learner's agency. Dewey (1938) and Hein (1991,

1998) highlight that learning is influenced by prior knowledge, cultural context, and active engagement with the environment. In museum contexts, this results in participatory and affective experiences, primarily driven by visitor curiosity rather than institutional authority (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

The significance of informal learning in museums has increased with the rise of new museology (Vergo, 1989), which questioned the concept of institutional neutrality and advocated for more inclusive, dialogic practices. Goode's (1891: 427) early conception of museums as *"nurseries of living thoughts"* instead of *"cemeteries of bric-a-brac"* anticipated the transition towards active, visitor-centred learning. New museology, influenced by postmodern critiques and cultural relativism, promotes a shift away from object-centred displays grounded in Western epistemologies (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Museums adopted audience-centred approaches influenced by Bruner's constructivist theories (Roberts, 2014), transforming into platforms for dialogue and participation (Cameron, 1971; Weil, 2002). This evolution emphasises inclusivity, relevance, and experiential engagement— principles fundamental to university museums serving diverse communities, especially international students.

For university museums, these developments have particular resonance. Historically aligned with academic research and subject-based instruction, they have been shaped by the university's third mission, which emphasises public engagement alongside teaching and research. This expanded mandate reframes visitors as active co-creators of meaning rather than passive recipients of expert knowledge (Lourenço, 2019). Informal learning in these contexts can support both intellectual exploration and intercultural exchange, providing low-stakes, informal environments distinct from the pressures of formal academic spaces, where diverse learners, particularly international students, can explore heritage narratives and negotiate identities.

This spatial reframing is significant for comprehending the engagement of international students with university museums, as it underscores how these environments can serve as sites for intercultural learning and identity negotiation. Spatial and cultural theories enhance understanding of how university museums can promote intercultural learning. Clifford's (1997) concept of the contact zone positions museums as relational spaces facilitating encounters among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, promoting collaborative

meaning-making. The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia exemplifies this through its renewal project focused on collaborative curation with Indigenous communities. Boast (2011) indicates that the initiative emphasised the museum's ability to function as a socially responsive and pluralistic space, transcending mere symbolic representation to engage communities in the process of interpretation. A pertinent and contemporary example is the Hunterian Museum's "Curating Discomfort" initiative in Scotland (see Figure 2-1). Launched in 2020 under the leadership of Zandra Yeaman and five community-based curators, the project encouraged participants to scrutinise and contest the colonial assumptions embedded in the museum's collections and interpretations (Scholten and Yeaman, 2023). Participatory workshops and critical co-curation transformed the Hunterian into a forum for reflection, dialogue, and affective learning, demonstrating the potential of contact zones to promote decolonial and inclusive practices (Yeaman, 2021). These initiatives demonstrate the potential of university museums to serve as socially responsive spaces that foster critical dialogue and multiple perspectives.

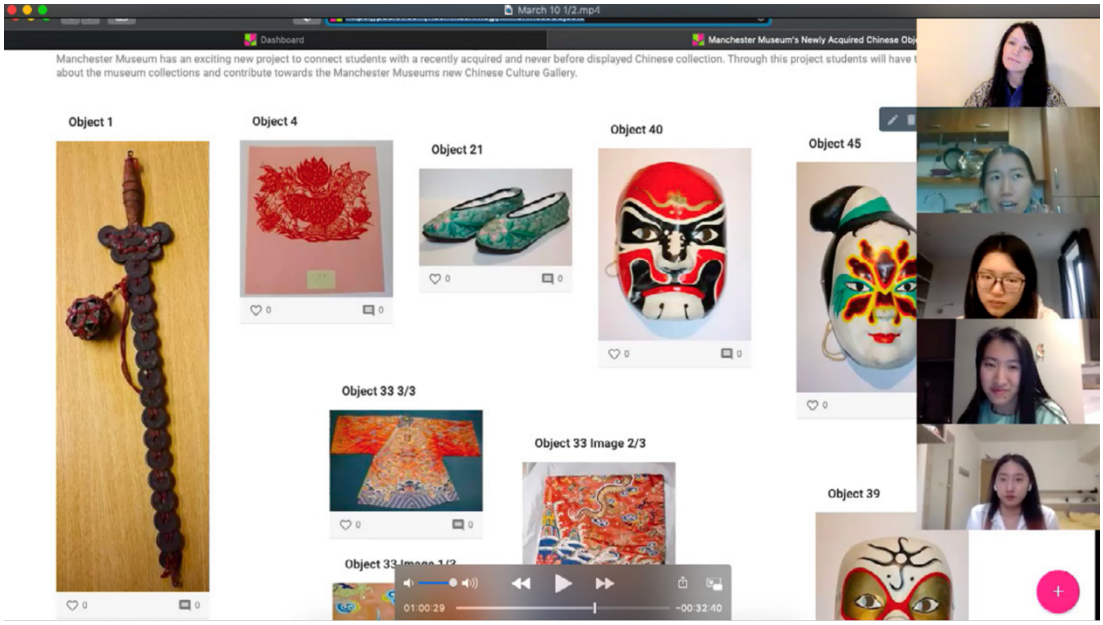
Figure 2-1. "Curating Discomfort" at the Hunterian Museum

Source: Author's photograph, May 2025

Complementing this contact-zone perspective, Bhabha's (1994) notion of the third space, extended into educational contexts by Moje *et al*. (2004), offers a complementary lens for

understanding the intercultural potential of university museums. Third spaces are non-evaluative, emotionally resonant environments where learners integrate academic discourse with personal and cultural knowledge, often as part of their everyday lives. In this way, as Oakman (2010) notes, university museums may serve as liminal arenas for hybrid identity formation, enabling students to negotiate and reframe their cultural positions. The Lee Kai Hung Chinese Culture Gallery at the Manchester Museum provides a compelling example. During its development, Chinese students participated in online co-creation workshops as part of the "Intercultural Engagement Programme", contributing ideas on representation and interpretive narratives (see Figure 2-2). This process moved them from passive spectators to active cultural agents, demonstrating how university museums, when framed as third spaces, can support identity negotiation and intercultural dialogue in ways that formal academic settings may not (Manchester Museum, 2021). Such initiatives underscore how third spaces in university museums can translate theory into practice.

Figure 2-2. Screenshot from the "Intercultural Engagement Workshop" (10 March 2021, Zoom)



***Source**: Manchester Museum, 2021, Intercultural Engagement Project Report, p. 62. Reproduced from a publicly available institutional report; no identifiable personal data are disclosed.*

While the concepts of the third mission and third space provide valuable theoretical frameworks for redefining university museums as inclusive and intercultural environments, this potential must be assessed against the realities of student engagement. International

students, as a growing and influential demographic within global higher education (UNESCO, 2022; HESA, 2025), represent an important audience whose experiences often remain marginal in institutional planning. Despite their proximity to campus museums, they are frequently overlooked in programming, interpretation, and evaluation strategies (Holliman *et al*., 2023). Their engagement is shaped by transitional identities, academic pressures, and personal aspirations, as well as the social and cultural contexts of the host environment (Rienties *et al*., 2013).

To understand these dynamics, it is helpful to revisit how learning is conceptualised in museum contexts. Falk and Dierking (2000) highlight that informal learning is influenced by individual experience, sociocultural context, and spatial setting, rather than being a solitary or purely cognitive process. This ecological approach emphasises the necessity of examining how international students either engage with or withdraw from the informal learning opportunities offered by museums. Falk's (2016) identity-related motivation framework offers a useful lens for such analysis. His five identity types—Explorer, Facilitator, Experience Seeker, Professional/Hobbyist, and Recharger—capture the diversity of visit intentions and highlight the multifaceted nature of museum-going.

Empirical research supports the idea that international students engage with museums for reasons that go beyond academic enrichment. Mokhtar and Kasim (2011), for example, found that Malaysian international students were more likely than domestic peers to cite "curiosity" and "a desire to gain knowledge" as key motivations. Others seek out museums as social or emotional spaces, using them to relieve stress, connect with peers, or foster a sense of belonging. Yorioka's (2024) study of postgraduate students in the United States shows that museum visits can serve as emotionally supportive activities, especially for those navigating cross-cultural transitions. These findings suggest that international students are active learners rather than passive spectators, with their museum behaviours influenced by intricate emotional, intellectual, and social needs.

However, access alone does not ensure participation. Hooper-Greenhill (2006) highlights that the notion of the "non-visitor" emphasises individuals who are systematically excluded from museum spaces. Low attendance frequently stems from structural exclusion rather than disinterest (Kluge-Pinsker and Stauffer, 2021). Language remains a significant barrier: interpretive content, such as exhibition texts, audio guides, and websites, is frequently created

with native speakers in mind, making museum narratives less accessible to international students. Research conducted by Soto Huerta and Migus (2015) and Stein *et al*. (2017) indicates that multilingual resources and culturally inclusive storytelling are critical for promoting equitable access and meaningful engagement.

Beyond language, cultural distance and unfamiliarity with host-country narratives can create confusion, discomfort, or alienation (DiMaggio, 1996; Brida *et al*., 2016). Restricted peer networks additionally limit participation, as noted by Kay *et al*. (2009) in their study on social capital and museum attendance. The challenges observed reflect patterns identified in immigrant communities, where marginalisation within cultural institutions has been thoroughly examined (Sandell, 2002). International students and migrants differ in legal status and duration of stay; however, both groups experience similar challenges related to cultural negotiation, marginalisation, and institutional invisibility within heritage spaces (Zhou *et al*., 2008; Oakman, 2010). Identifying these parallels allows university museums to redefine international students from peripheral or temporary audiences to active participants who necessitate deliberate, sustained, and culturally sensitive engagement.

These considerations gain further urgency when we examine specific subgroups within the international student population whose cultural distance and numerical prominence raise distinctive challenges. Despite the growing scholarly focus on informal learning in museum education (Falk and Dierking, 2016; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), the experiences of international students, especially in university museum contexts, are still insufficiently examined. Existing research frequently lumps these students into broader visitor categories, ignoring how their transient legal status, cultural positioning, and academic affiliations influence their patterns of engagement (Moosavi, 2020a). To address these challenges, it is essential to develop inclusive programming, implement multilingual interpretation, and engage in co-creative initiatives that effectively eliminate structural barriers (Stein *et al*., 2017; Spencer-Oatey and Dauber, 2017). Insights from informal learning theory and research on the lived experiences of international students can inform museum practices that effectively promote intercultural dialogue and equitable participation (Sandell, 2002; Boast, 2011). This need becomes especially salient in light of the growing presence and complex adaptation trajectories of Chinese students, whose demographic prominence in UK higher education underscores the urgency of more responsive, differentiated engagement strategies (Marginson, 2012; Moosavi, 2020b).

Within this broader international student body, Chinese students merit particular attention due to their significant demographic presence in UK higher education and their distinctive experiences of cultural adaptation and institutional recognition (Rienties *et al*., 2013; Moosavi, 2020b). Focusing on this group offers a clear lens for examining how university museums can support intercultural learning and belonging in a specific cultural context. Despite their demographic significance, Chinese students are frequently neglected as interpretive visitors or co-creators in university museums, highlighting a missed opportunity for more inclusive engagement.

Rather than viewing them as passive visitors, Chinese students should be recognised as culturally mobile learners (Marginson, 2014), actively navigating identity and meaning-making in new cultural environments (Hall, 1996). Their experiences prompt university museums to consider the inclusivity and relevance of their spaces for non-Western visitors (Black, 2012). As informal learning spaces embedded within academic institutions, university museums are well positioned to support intercultural dialogue and the negotiation of cultural identity. Realising this potential requires more than symbolic inclusion; it requires ongoing collaboration and substantial co-creation (Simon, 2010).

Ultimately, the intersection between university museums and international student engagement presents both challenges and opportunities. This section demonstrates that university museums have transitioned to more inclusive, informal, and visitor-centred methodologies due to the impact of new museology and reforms in higher education (Kozak, 2016). International students utilise these spaces to facilitate academic, cultural, and emotional transitions; however, their engagement is influenced by various motivations and obstructed by systemic barriers, including language, cultural distance, and restricted peer networks (Mokhtar and Kasim, 2011). The situation of Chinese students is particularly informative, given their substantial representation in UK universities and their complex status as both academically and economically valued individuals and culturally marginalised participants (Moosavi, 2020b). These dynamics highlight both the necessity and the potential of reimagining university museums as spaces for intercultural learning. The next section identifies key research gaps and outlines how this study aims to address them.

2.4 Chinese Students and University Museums: A Missing Connection

University museums are increasingly acknowledged as hybrid institutions that facilitate both scholarly inquiry and civic engagement. However, current literature predominantly emphasises curricular learning, institutional missions, or general audience development, with insufficient attention to the unique experiences of international students. Interdisciplinary studies in adaptation, museum education, and informal learning, have increasingly recognised the enhanced role of university museums in promoting intercultural dialogue, community connection, and public scholarship (Kozak, 2016). Their dual identity positions them as unique platforms where diverse learners encounter not only disciplinary knowledge but also alternative narratives and cross-cultural experiences.

Yet these opportunities remain unevenly theorised, especially when considering international students as specific target groups within university museum contexts. Historical accounts, such as Matthias's (1987) reflections on structured curricular visits at the Snite Museum, and Chatterjee's (2011) work on OBL at University College London, have demonstrated the pedagogical potential of university museums. More recent research further highlights their evolving third mission and participatory practices aimed at engaging broader publics (Hannan *et al*., 2013; UMG and UMIS, 2013). These developments are increasingly framed through theoretical lenses such as Falk and Dierking's (2016) CML and Bhabha's (1994) third space, which envision museums as emotionally resonant, culturally hybrid, and dialogic environments for learning.

Meanwhile, scholarship on international students, especially those from China, has grown rapidly across education, psychology, and global mobility studies. As the largest international student group in UK higher education, Chinese students have been the subject of numerous empirical studies exploring their academic and social experiences. For example, Holliman *et al*. (2023) interviewed Chinese undergraduates and postgraduates in the UK and found that despite institutional support mechanisms, students continued to face significant cultural barriers, emotional strain, and a sense of isolation. Similarly, a qualitative study by Jiang and Xiao (2024) published in *Frontiers in Education* described Chinese students in the UK as "struggling like fish out of water," highlighting language anxiety, academic pressure, and cultural distance as major obstacles to adaptation. These studies provide significant insights

into the structural and psychological pressures experienced by Chinese students. They primarily concentrate on formal learning contexts, including classrooms, examinations, and language support, while giving insufficient consideration to informal learning environments such as museums, galleries, and heritage institutions, where cultural and emotional engagement may unfold.

This is where a significant gap begins to emerge. At a macro level, scholarship on university museums continues to emphasise formal educational functions, curatorial strategies, and public-facing initiatives, while comparatively little attention is given to how students encounter these spaces in their everyday campus lives. At a meso level, even when international students are involved in museum-based initiatives, these are often limited to short-term exhibitions or symbolic inclusion efforts. Such work rarely investigates students' motivations, the barriers they perceive, or the extent to which cultural spaces intersect with broader processes of identity negotiation and adaptation (Boast, 2011; Yorioka, 2024). The gap is particularly pronounced when examining the intersection of university museums and Chinese international students in the UK. Despite their demographic significance and cultural uniqueness, there is limited research on how this group engages with, interprets, or constructs meaning within university museum environments, or how such spaces affect their processes of adaptation and belonging.

This study investigates the research gaps by analysing the engagement of Chinese international students with university museums as spaces for informal learning and cultural negotiation. It focuses on the Hunterian at the University of Glasgow—a distinctive site that combines public heritage, academic research, and student engagement. The Hunterian, Scotland's oldest public museum and a prominent member of the University Museums in Scotland (UMIS) network, provides a variety of galleries and global collections, alongside recent initiatives focused on student engagement and community involvement. The Hunterian Associates Programme and student-led tours (MUSEs) demonstrate a dedication to student engagement and the development of transferable skills (UMG and UMIS, 2013). These characteristics make the Hunterian a productive site for examining how Chinese students negotiate identity, participation, and belonging within university museum environments.

These dynamics highlight both the necessity and the potential of reimagining university museums as spaces for intercultural learning. Chinese international students, despite their

institutional visibility, are often culturally marginalised in the majority of museum engagement strategies. Attending to the intersection of informal learning, intercultural adaptation, and museum participation is crucial for enhancing the inclusivity and cultural responsiveness of university museums.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theoretical framework used to analyse the engagement of Chinese international students with university museums. Drawing on multiple disciplines, the chapter conceptualises the university museum as a third space, situated at the intersection of personal adaptation, spatial practice, and institutional context. The following sections examine each theoretical strand in turn, culminating in a unified model presented at the end.

2.5.1 The Core Lens: University Museum as a Situated Third Space

This study centres on Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, a fundamental notion in postcolonial cultural theory. The third space is not a literal or geographical location; rather, it serves as a discursive and conceptual framework where binary oppositions—such as home and host, tradition and modernity, insider and outsider—are destabilised and subject to renegotiation. This is a hybrid zone characterised by the continuous translation and rearticulation of meanings. The university museum is conceptualised as a site where various cultural logics intersect, collide, and are reimagined, rather than being viewed solely as a Western institution or entirely foreign to Chinese students.

This conceptual framework is effective for examining student engagement with cultural displays that may seem remote in heritage but are approachable through intellectual or academic perspectives. Clifford (1997) and Moje *et al*. (2004) suggest the third space serves both metaphorically and pedagogically as a site where ambiguity and difference promote learning. The university museum functions as more than an archive of academic knowledge or institutional history for international students; it acts as a cultural boundary that facilitates their negotiation of identity, belonging, and epistemic legitimacy.

By treating the university museum as a third space embedded within the physical and symbolic landscape of the university, this framework illuminates how students inhabit and interpret hybrid cultural zones. It also expands the scope of informal learning to include not

only engagement with curatorial content but also emotional resonance, spatial interaction, and cross-cultural reflection.

2.5.2 Pillar I: Intercultural Adaptation and the International Student

While Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space foregrounds cultural hybridity and symbolic negotiation, understanding how international students inhabit such spaces also requires attention to their emotional, behavioural, and psychological responses. To deepen this perspective, this study draws on two influential models of intercultural adaptation: Berry's (1997, 2006) acculturation framework and Ward *et al*.'s (2001) two-dimensional model of psychological and sociocultural adjustment. These models are considered alongside Bhabha's framework to provide a layered understanding of student agency, cultural negotiation, and informal learning in the context of university museums.

Ward *et al*. (2001) distinguish between psychological adaptation, which refers to emotional well-being and satisfaction, and sociocultural adaptation, defined as the ability to manage everyday interactions within the host society. Both dimensions are directly relevant in the context of university museums. Visiting such spaces may support psychological adaptation through moments of inspiration, enjoyment, or emotional resonance. At the same time, unfamiliar cultural references, insufficient interpretation, or language barriers may hinder sociocultural adaptation by reinforcing feelings of distance or exclusion. These challenges are particularly visible in informal, voluntary environments such as museums, where engagement depends on individual motivation and cultural familiarity rather than structured support. *Ward et al*.'s model is thus valuable for understanding the emotional and behavioural consequences of such engagement, especially in contexts where institutional scaffolding is limited or absent.

Berry's (1997, 2006) framework complements this perspective by examining how individuals negotiate the relationship between maintaining their heritage culture and participating in the host society. Based on these two orientations, Berry identifies four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation. Each carries different implications for how students relate to museum spaces. For example, students who actively engage with the museum while drawing on their own cultural background may reflect an integrative strategy, whereas those who avoid the museum may exemplify separation or marginalisation. Table 2-1 outlines how these strategies might appear in the context of university museum

participation. These orientations, however, are rarely static; in practice, they are often fluid and context-dependent, particularly in informal settings where participation is optional and shaped by personal interests and cultural comfort.

Table 2-1. Acculturation Strategies in University Museum Participation

Acculturation Strategy	Theoretical Definition	Expression in University Museum Participation	Illustrative Behaviour
Integration	Maintaining heritage culture while engaging with the host culture	Active visits, reflective cultural comparisons	Attending talks, joining exhibition tours
Assimilation	Abandoning heritage culture to adopt the host culture	Frequent visits with limited critical engagement	Following text panels, aligning with dominant narratives
Separation	Maintaining heritage culture while avoiding the host culture	Selective engagement, focus on familiar content	Viewing only Chinese objects, avoiding interpretation
Marginalisation	Disengagement from both heritage and host cultures	Minimal or no participation, emotional detachment	Passive visits, disinterest, or alienation

***Source**: Adapted from Berry (1997, 2006).*

Falk and Dierking's (2016) CML introduces a relational dimension that enhances the understanding of adaptation processes in museum contexts. The framework identifies three intersecting domains: the personal context, which encompasses prior experiences, cultural identity, and motivation; the sociocultural context, characterised by social interaction and group norms; and the physical context, defined by spatial layout, signage, and sensory engagement. This model, when applied to the experiences of Chinese international students, clarifies the interplay of emotional responses, cultural expectations, and environmental cues in shaping meaning-making within the museum context.

These three contexts align closely with the psychological, sociocultural, and physical dimensions of student adaptation. By emphasising the interplay between internal dispositions, social relations, and spatial conditions, Falk and Dierking's (2016) model strengthens the conceptualisation of university museums as lived third spaces—not merely symbolic or institutional, but actively constructed through students' situated encounters. Taken together, the three conceptual frameworks—Ward et al. (2001), Berry (1997, 2006), and Falk and

Dierking (2016)—offer a multi-dimensional lens for analysing how international students adapt to and engage with university museums. They suggest that adaptation is neither linear nor uniform, but negotiated through ongoing processes of emotional resonance, cultural translation, and spatial navigation within the university setting. Table 2-2 summarises the analytical levels and key insights of each framework, highlighting their distinct yet complementary contributions to this study.

Table 2-2. Analytical Levels of Intercultural Adaptation and Informal Learning

Level	Theorist(s)	Theoretical Model	Key Content
Individual-level	Ward *et al*. (2001)	Two-dimensional model of adaptation: psychological & sociocultural adaptation	How individuals experience emotional well-being and manage social interactions in museum contexts
Group-level	Berry (1997, 2006)	Acculturation framework: integration, assimilation, separation, marginalisation	How individuals position themselves between heritage and host cultures through strategic choices
Contextual-level	Falk & Dierking (2016)	Contextual Model of Learning (CML)	How learning is shaped by prior experience, group dynamics, and the physical environment of the museum

2.5.3 Pillar II: Institutional Possibilities of the Third Space

This section focuses on how university museums, as institutional entities, can function as third spaces for intercultural learning. Rather than tracing their historical evolution, it highlights the theoretical developments that have allowed such spaces to emerge, while also recognising the constraints embedded in current practices.

Traditionally, university museums were discipline-bound and expert-led, offering little space for cultural negotiation or audience interpretation. The rise of New Museology challenged this model by emphasising participation, reflexivity, and social engagement (Vergo, 1989; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Within universities, these perspectives gradually reshaped museum roles—shifting them from repositories of academic authority to potential platforms for affective learning, identity exploration, and cross-cultural dialogue, especially for international students navigating unfamiliar epistemic and cultural contexts.

This institutional repositioning aligns with the university's evolving third mission, which extends beyond research and teaching to include civic responsibility and cultural inclusion (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). University museums have become expressions of this mission, tasked with fostering public engagement, inclusivity, and institutional openness. When interpreted through Bhabha's (1994) lens, these developments create the potential for museum spaces to operate as third spaces—where institutional narratives and diverse lived experiences intersect, and where marginalised perspectives can find expression and negotiation.

The CML (Falk and Dierking, 2016) not only enhances comprehension of student experience but also illustrates a significant institutional transition in museum practice, moving from transmission-based methods to participatory and visitor-centred approaches. This model redefines museums as both content presenters and designers of learning environments, encouraging university museums to reconsider the spatial, interpretive, and social aspects of engagement. In this sense, it provides a theoretical foundation for the New Museology and supports the university museum's evolving third mission, reinforcing its potential to operate as a situated third space.

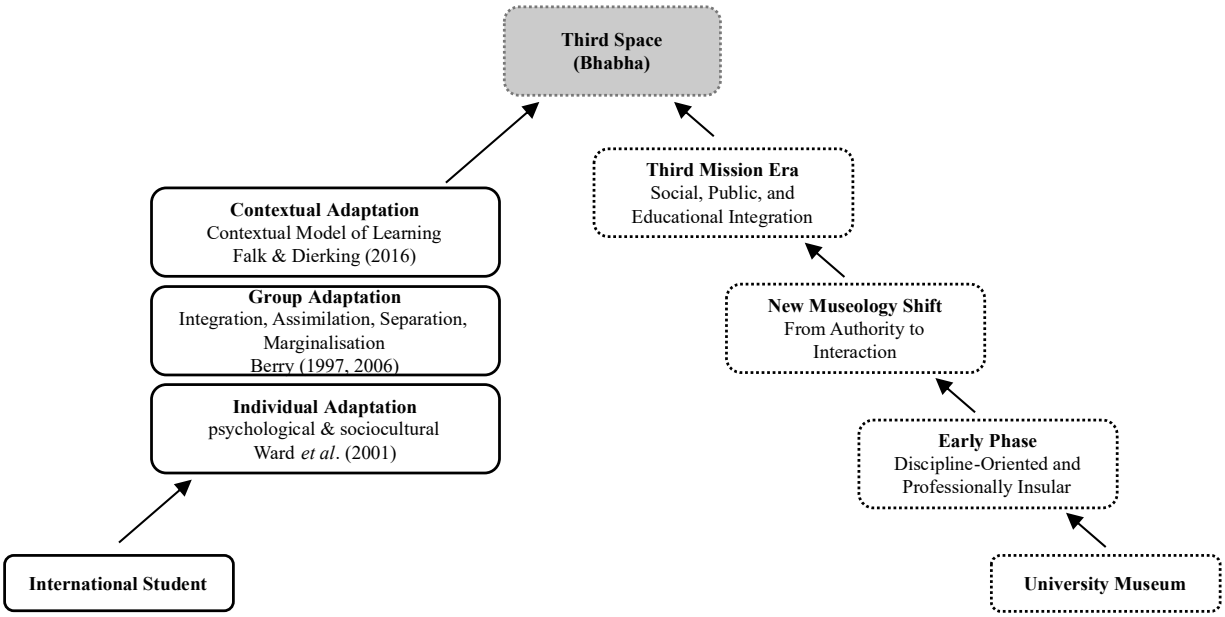
However, this potential is not uniformly realised. Institutional practices remain shaped by implicit norms, dominant knowledge regimes, and structural exclusions. Inclusive rhetoric may coexist with monolingual labels, Eurocentric curatorial frameworks, or minimal engagement with minority students. As Boast (2011) and Yorioka (2024) caution, the appearance of openness may obscure deeper asymmetries of power and voice. According to this perspective, the third space is a constantly negotiated and contingent possibility rather than a fixed state, one that is dependent on institutional willingness to redistribute interpretive authority, active recognition, and cultural translation. These institutional dynamics inevitably shape the experiences of international students, who must navigate both the promise of inclusion and the reality of epistemic exclusion in museum encounters.

2.5.4 A Unified Analytical Model

This concluding section integrates the theoretical perspectives discussed above into a coherent analytical framework for understanding how Chinese international students engage with university museums. As illustrated in Figure 2-3, the university museum is conceptualised as a third space for intercultural learning, situated at the intersection of

personal adaptation, everyday practice, and institutional structure (Bhabha, 1994). The model weaves together three theoretical strands: intercultural adaptation theory (Berry, 1997; Ward et *al*., 2001), the CML (Falk and Dierking, 2016), and museum studies literature on participatory practice and the university's third mission (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). Rather than assigning each theory to a specific research question, it interprets participation as a dynamic process influenced by cultural, institutional, and environmental forces. Engagement decisions emerge from the tensions between personal motivation and structural constraints, shaped by emotional responses, spatial conditions, and social interaction. While each perspective brings a distinct analytical focus—be it psychological adaptation, cultural hybridity, or institutional design—the third space remains the conceptual anchor, enabling a holistic reading of international student engagement in university museums.

Figure 2-3. University Museum as a Third Space for International Student Adaptation



***Source**: Author's synthesis based on Bhabha (1994), Ward et al. (2001), Berry (1997, 2006), and Falk and Dierking (2016).*

Crucially, the model redefines participation as a fluid process shaped by negotiation, ambiguity, and contestation. Inclusion and exclusion frequently coexist, and institutional openness may not lead to meaningful engagement. As both a conceptual synthesis and an

interpretive tool, this model provides a foundation for the analysis presented in subsequent chapters.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has brought together interdisciplinary perspectives to explore the potential of university museums as spaces for informal learning, identity negotiation, and intercultural adaptation among Chinese international students. It examined the evolving educational role of university museums and considered how international students engage with these spaces not merely as visitors, but as active meaning-makers navigating cultural difference and institutional frameworks.

Although museum engagement has been widely studied, few works have focused specifically on university museums as situated learning environments. Even fewer have examined the experiences of Chinese students in these settings. This absence does not reflect a lack of participation, but rather a limited understanding of how these students interpret, negotiate, and contribute to meaning-making within museum contexts.

To respond to this gap, the chapter developed a theoretical framework that brings together models of cultural adaptation, Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, principles of New Museology, the third mission of the university, and contextual approaches to museum learning. Taken together, these perspectives frame the university museum as a dynamic and negotiated space shaped by the interplay of personal, spatial, and institutional forces.

While this model provides a strong interpretive foundation, some of its core dimensions—such as cultural hybridity, emotional resonance, and third space thinking—are not easily captured through quantitative measures. To address these challenges, the next chapter adopts a qualitative research design. The framework outlined here thus serves both as a conceptual anchor and an interpretive guide for the methodological approach and analytical strategies that follow.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate how Chinese international students engage with The Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow. As outlined in Chapter 2, the research is informed by a multi-strand theoretical framework. The study does not aim for generalisability, but instead prioritises in-depth interpretation within a specific cultural and institutional context.

A qualitative, interpretivist approach was selected to capture the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of Chinese students. In contrast to quantitative methods that seek to measure fixed variables, this strategy privileges subjective accounts and narrative depth. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method due to their suitability for eliciting detailed personal reflection while maintaining thematic focus. The research design, data collection, and analysis procedures were shaped by the study's three research questions, which examine students' motivations and barriers (RQ1), patterns of participation (RQ2), and perceived outcomes (RQ3).

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research strategy to investigate how Chinese international students engage with university museums, using the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow as the primary site. Drawing on conceptual models and prior visitor studies, qualitative inquiry was selected as the most appropriate approach to examine the complex, culturally embedded, and under-researched experiences of this group. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, offering the flexibility to explore personal narratives while ensuring thematic alignment with the study's three core research questions: underlying motivations and barriers, students' patterns of engagement, and perceived educational or emotional outcomes. The interview guide was designed around these domains to facilitate both consistency across cases and space for individual reflection. By privileging meaning-making over measurement, this design enables the researcher to interpret how students navigate museum participation within broader institutional and cultural contexts.

This research employs an interpretative qualitative approach to examine how Chinese students construct meaning from their experiences with university museums. This design,

informed by the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2, conceptualises the museum as a third space influenced by students' personal adaptations, daily practices, and institutional contexts. Rather than seeking to measure fixed variables or generalise across populations, it prioritises the interpretation of subjective experiences embedded in social and cultural contexts. By filling in the conceptual gaps previously mentioned, this framework facilitates a detailed examination of what motivates students, how they react to institutional messages, and how they understand their engagement—or lack thereof—in informal learning environments.

A deductive-dominant thematic analysis guided the data collection and interpretation. The three analytical domains— motivations and barriers, patterns of participation, and perceived outcomes—were pre-identified based on existing literature. However, the initial coding phase remained open to unanticipated meanings grounded in participants' narratives. These emergent insights were refined and organised within the overarching framework, preserving conceptual coherence while incorporating the richness of lived experience. This structure reflects the theoretical model introduced in Chapter 2, which links adaptation strategies (why students engage), spatial practices (how they engage), and identity-related outcomes (what impact engagement produces).

This interpretative approach is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is co-produced through individuals' interaction with their social and cultural environments. Meaning is thus shaped by context, identity, and lived experience rather than fixed or universal (Crotty, 1998). This perspective is especially relevant for international students navigating unfamiliar institutional and cultural settings. Consistent with this epistemological foundation, the study adopts an interpretivist paradigm that emphasises understanding subjectively constructed meanings within specific contexts (Schwandt, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Rather than testing hypotheses, the study seeks to interpret how students make sense of both their engagement and non-engagement with museum spaces. This epistemological alignment supports the study's model of informal museum engagement as a lived and negotiated process, shaped by institutional, spatial, and personal factors.

Within this interpretative framework, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. This format was selected for its capacity to elicit detailed personal narratives and explore how participants make sense of their motivations, behaviours, and

experiences in their own terms (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Creswell and Creswell, 2017). It was also chosen to correspond directly with the study's three research questions, which examine the factors influencing participation, the ways students engage with university museums, and the outcomes of these encounters. Compared to focus groups or structured interviews, semi-structured interviews strike a balance between thematic guidance and conversational flexibility, allowing the interviewer to follow emergent lines of inquiry while ensuring relevance to the research aims (Ravitch and Carl, 2019).

Interviews were guided by themes developed in Chapter 2, with prompts designed to elicit reflections on students' engagement with museum spaces, including perceptions, obstacles, and emotional responses. This method enabled both comparability across participants and depth within individual accounts, making it especially appropriate for exploring meaning-making in informal, culturally situated learning environments.

Empirical data were collected at the University of Glasgow, with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery serving as the institutional setting for fieldwork. As the UK's oldest university museum, the Hunterian operates across several venues and holds collections spanning the arts, sciences, and humanities. This study focused on two key locations: the Hunterian Museum, which presents material related to the history of science, medicine, and antiquities; and the Hunterian Art Gallery, which includes both permanent and temporary exhibitions, as well as The Mackintosh House—a reconstructed domestic space. These venues form an integral part of the university's cultural infrastructure and offer a rich context for examining how students encounter museum spaces within their academic and social lives.

Interviewees were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, aiming to ensure both relevance and accessibility. The final sample included fourteen Chinese international students enrolled across undergraduate, taught postgraduate, and doctoral programmes at the University of Glasgow. This academic diversity allowed the study to explore whether students' level of study and time spent in the UK shaped their engagement with museums. Inclusion criteria specified Chinese nationality, age 18 or above, and current enrolment as an international student at the university. Prior museum visitation was not a prerequisite: both visitors and non-visitors were included to ensure a full spectrum of engagement perspectives. While snowball sampling can risk homogeneity, it is effective for

accessing peer networks within international student populations (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

By focusing on a specific demographic within a defined institutional setting, the research does not aim for generalisability but rather for interpretive depth and contextual richness. The educational backgrounds, museum experiences, and personal reflections of participants provided a multifaceted lens through which to understand how university museums might support or fail to support intercultural adaptation and educational inclusion. The design reflects a commitment to cultural sensitivity, narrative depth, and methodological reflexivity, allowing for the collection of rich, situated accounts that were central to the research's overall aim.

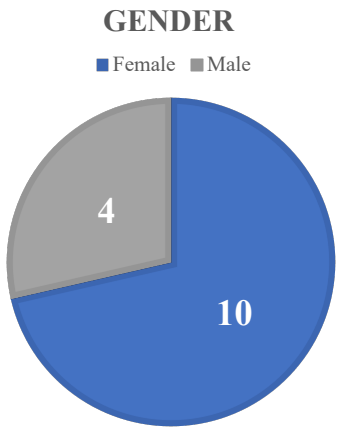
3.2 Data Collection

The data collection phase began with semi-structured interviews conducted with Chinese international students at the University of Glasgow. This method enabled the researcher to capture detailed personal narratives while maintaining coherence with the core research themes. It offered flexibility in exploring complex, individual experiences and ensured thematic consistency across cases. Depending on participants' availability, interviews were conducted either in person or via online platforms such as Zoom. Each session lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, providing adequate time for reflection without imposing excessive demands on participants.

Participant recruitment followed the purposive and snowball sampling strategies outlined in Section 3.1 but was implemented through practical outreach tools. Digital posters and announcements were shared via WeChat, Instagram, and Facebook—platforms commonly used by Chinese international students. These channels facilitated both wide circulation and personal referrals, enabling existing participants to recommend peers who met the inclusion criteria. This approach supported voluntary, peer-based recruitment and helped build trust in the research process.

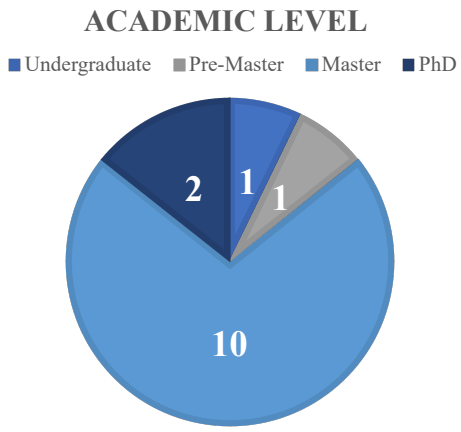
To offer a clearer understanding of the participant group, Figures 3-1 to 3-3 present key demographic characteristics of the fourteen Chinese students interviewed in this study. These include gender, academic level and school affiliation.

Figure 3-1. Distribution of Participants by Gender



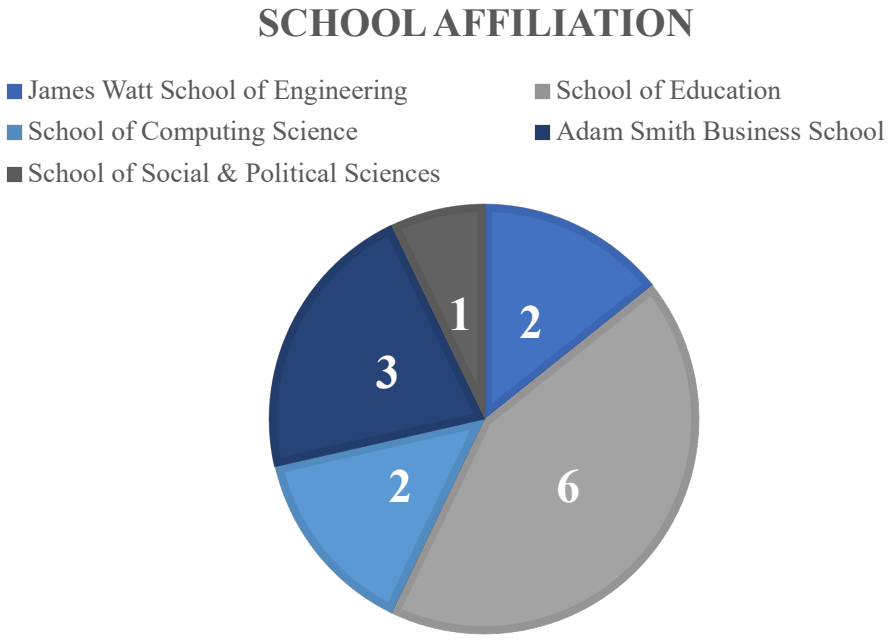
Note: *Gender is reported based on participants' self-identification.*

Figure 3-2. Distribution of Participants by Academic Level



Note*: One PhD student also held a part-time staff role but was counted primarily as a student.*

Figure 3-3. Distribution of Participants by School Affiliation



Note*: Four participants were enrolled in museum-related programmes, indicating strong relevance to the research focus.*

To ensure linguistic accessibility, participants were given the option of being interviewed in either English or Mandarin. This bilingual strategy enabled students to express themselves in the language they felt most comfortable with, particularly when discussing emotionally sensitive or culturally nuanced topics. Interviews conducted in Mandarin were translated into English by the researcher, with close attention paid to both linguistic precision and cultural meaning. While efforts were made to maintain semantic integrity, it is acknowledged that translation may lead to subtle shifts in interpretation, especially in idiomatic or affective expressions. Although initial transcripts were produced in Mandarin, coding was conducted in English to support later integration with English-language literature and to maintain consistency in thematic labelling, while carefully preserving the original meanings expressed by participants.

The interview guide (see Appendix B) was designed to ensure both thematic consistency and conversational flexibility. To support a natural flow of conversation, questions were arranged in two progressive sections. The first explored students' engagement with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, covering visit history, motivations, and perceived barriers. The second focused on learning and meaning-making, inviting participants to reflect on how their museum encounters related to academic, cultural, or personal development. This structure allowed interviews to begin with accessible, experience-based prompts before moving toward more abstract reflection. The semi-structured format also allowed the researcher to tailor follow-up questions based on each participant's responses, enabling the emergence of unanticipated but meaningful themes. To further clarify the analytical focus, the Table 3-1 below outlines how each research question was mapped onto specific interview prompts and thematic priorities during the analysis phase.

Table 3-1. Alignment between Research Questions, Interview Prompts, and Analytical Focus

Research Question	Sample Interview Questions	Analytical Focus
RQ1 – Why: What are the key motivations and barriers influencing Chinese students' participation in these university museums?	- Have you visited The Hunterian Museum or the Hunterian Art Gallery before? - What motivated you to visit or prevented you from going? - Have you visited more than once? If so, what made you return?	Thematic analysis of motivations, barriers, and prior experience
RQ2 – What: In what ways do Chinese international students engage with The Hunterian Museum and The Hunterian Art Gallery?	- What do you usually do when visiting the museum? - Do you go alone or with others? - How did you feel while being in the museum space? - Can you describe anything that stood out during your visit?	Spatial use, social context, and emotional responses
RQ3 – How: How does engagement with The Hunterian Museum and The Hunterian Art Gallery impact Chinese international students, considering both their educational and social roles?	- How have museum visits influenced your academic learning or cultural understanding? - How do you perceive the role of university museums in your overall educational experience?	Identity construction, informal learning, intercultural adaptation

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms and stored on a password-protected external hard drive. Both English and Mandarin transcripts were archived, along with post-interview fieldnotes documenting environmental cues, tone, and non-verbal observations. These supplementary notes enhanced the contextual depth of the dataset and supported later stages of analysis. As Ravitch and Carl (2019: 160) suggest, *"transcripts are more reliable than interview notes,"* and *"observations without fieldnotes are mere memories, not data."* No identifying personal information was included in the dissertation or any future publication. All consent forms and data management procedures complied with the ethical guidelines of both the University of Glasgow and the University of Tartu. The participant information sheet and informed consent form are provided in Appendices C and D for reference, with full ethical procedures discussed in Section 3.4.

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document key decisions, emotional responses, and emergent patterns. This practice

contributed to both transparency and methodological rigour by capturing the researcher's positionality and the evolving nature of the fieldwork. Reflections included the implications of the researcher's insider status as a Chinese student, moments of linguistic ambiguity, and relational dynamics during interviews. These strategies ensured that the data were not only systematically gathered but also critically contextualised within a broader intercultural research environment.

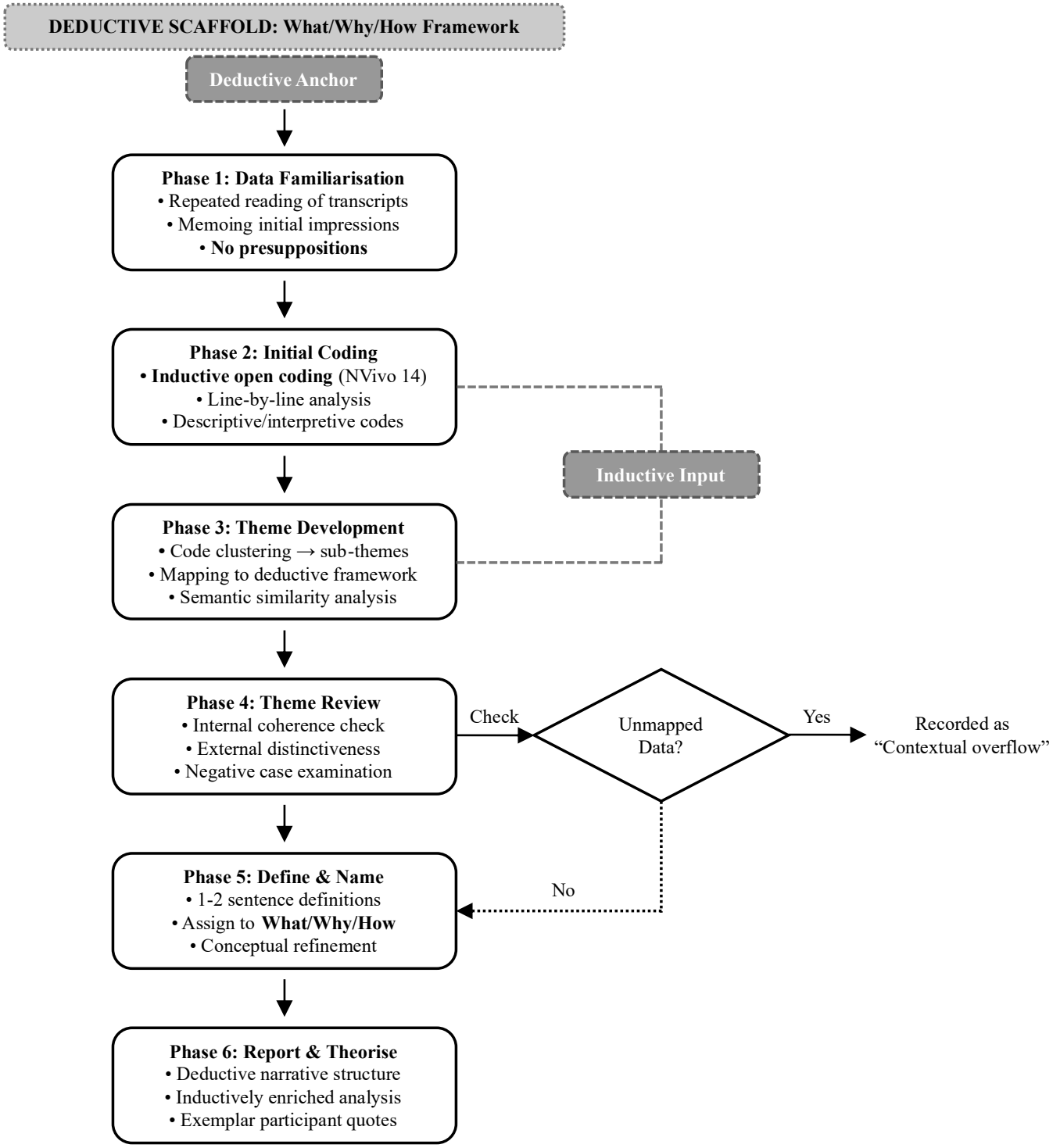
3.3 Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to explore how Chinese students interpret their museum experiences, particularly in relation to meaning-making, identity negotiation, and cultural adaptation. This approach was selected over alternatives such as content analysis or grounded theory, given the study's emphasis on narrative meaning rather than linguistic quantification or theory generation (Willig, 2014).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model was adopted for its clarity, flexibility, and alignment with constructivist epistemology, which values participant voice, cultural context, and reflexive interpretation. Thematic analysis enables iterative movement between data and theory and is particularly well suited to exploring personal narratives in cross-cultural contexts (Clarke and Braun, 2013).

Although the method accommodates both inductive and deductive strategies, this study followed a deductive-dominant design (see Figure 3-4). The initial coding structure was shaped by three predefined analytical domains: motivations and barriers (why), patterns of participation (what), and perceived outcomes (how), which were derived from the research questions and relevant literature. In the first and second phases of Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, open line-by-line coding was conducted to capture detailed insights from the data without constraining responses to existing theory. In the third and fourth phases, all codes and sub-themes were systematically mapped back onto the deductive framework, allowing the emergent content to enrich rather than challenge the predefined structure. The fifth and sixth phases focused on defining, naming, and writing up the themes through analytic narrative, ensuring conceptual clarity and alignment with the three core domains.

Figure 3-4. Thematic Analysis Procedure (deductive-dominant design)



***Source**: Methodological framework adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).*

NVivo 14 software was used throughout the analytic process to support memo-writing, code organisation, and the visualisation of theme development. This included iterative coding, hierarchical structuring of sub-themes, and real-time note-taking. A full thematic codebook outlining the final themes is provided in Appendix F.

This strategy of combining open inductive exploration with deductive structuring ensured that the analysis remained both theoretically anchored and empirically grounded, while also preserving the authenticity of participant narratives.

A further rationale for using Braun and Clarke's model lies in its theoretical evolution. Their later work (Braun and Clarke, 2013; 2019) stresses that themes are not simple labels but interpretive units with internal coherence and narrative meaning. Attention was given to thematic coherence and analytical depth, ensuring that each theme captured a shared pattern of meaning relevant to the research questions. Themes were constructed not through repetition of codes but through interpretive insight into participants' lived experience.

Given the bilingual nature of the dataset, special care was taken when translating Mandarin interviews into English. While the original transcripts were produced in Mandarin, all coding was conducted in English using NVivo 14. Coding was performed directly on Chinese-language transcripts, with all initial codes labelled in English. These codes were subsequently developed into second-order themes and ultimately organised under the three overarching research questions: why, what, and how. This bilingual approach enabled the researcher to preserve the nuance of participants' original expressions while ensuring analytical clarity. Full-text translation was not performed. Instead, key quotations were translated into English after the thematic structure had been finalised to ensure accurate and context-sensitive representation in the final writing. In line with Temple and Young (2004), the cultural sensitivity of language transfer was acknowledged. Final translation of selected quotations was supported by ChatGPT (GPT-4o model), which assisted with initial phrasing and semantic comparison. All outputs were carefully reviewed and revised by the researcher to maintain semantic integrity and preserve the authenticity of participants' voices. A sample of a translated transcript is included in Appendix E to illustrate the structure and tone of the original interviews.

To enhance analytical rigour, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria. Credibility was supported through member checking with four participants, who reviewed selected thematic interpretations and confirmed their accuracy. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through transparent documentation of the coding process and a reflexive journal capturing the researcher's positionality and assumptions. These strategies helped minimise bias and grounded the analysis in participants' perspectives.

Taken together, these analytical procedures ensured that findings were grounded in participants' experiences while remaining analytically coherent. The resulting themes illuminate the educational, emotional, and intercultural dimensions of museum participation in a UK higher education context.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study followed the ethical frameworks established by the University of Tartu and the University of Glasgow. It was additionally informed by widely recognised standards in social research ethics, including those outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA, 2021). Although the research topic itself was not inherently sensitive and participants were not classified as a vulnerable population, several protective measures were implemented to safeguard participants' rights, ensure informed consent, and uphold confidentiality throughout the research process.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Cultural Research at the University of Tartu, in line with institutional procedures and accepted by the University of Glasgow (Appendix A). The application included a research overview, interview protocol (Appendix B), data management plan, and bilingual versions of the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form (Appendix C and D). Ethical concerns such as pseudonymisation, verbal consent for online interviews, and independent recruitment were reviewed and addressed before final approval.

The final protocol ensured that participants were fully informed about the aims of the study, their rights to anonymity, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality. As discussed in Section 3.2, all participants received written information prior to taking part and provided informed consent. For online interviews, verbal consent was recorded at the beginning of each session. Audio files were stored on a password-protected external hard drive, and transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms (P01–P14). No personally identifiable data appear in the dissertation or any future dissemination.

While certain demographic details, such as gender or field of study, were retained to aid interpretation, these were included only when directly relevant to the analysis and with the participant's consent. Interview data will be retained for one year following submission for

academic review and then permanently deleted. Consent forms, transcripts, and audio files were securely archived and were never shared with third parties or uploaded to cloud-based platforms, with access strictly limited to the researcher and, if required, academic supervisors. Visual materials were likewise handled with ethical care: researcher photographs taken in public museum spaces (e.g., Figure 4-8) were anonymised by blurring visitor faces, and other images (e.g., from published reports) were properly cited.

While ethical risks were considered minimal, the study operated within several practical boundaries arising from its qualitative design and researcher positioning. As a Chinese student, the researcher occupied a dual role as cultural insider and academic investigator. This positionality facilitated mutual understanding during interviews but also required critical reflexivity to mitigate interpretive bias. Fieldnotes and a reflexive journal were maintained throughout to support transparency and self-awareness in the analysis—practices that enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The bilingual nature of the dataset also introduced ethical and methodological complexity. Mandarin-language interviews were coded in English, with key quotations translated post-analysis. Following Temple and Young's (2004) observation that translation is not merely linguistic but inherently interpretive, particular care was taken to preserve the authenticity of participant voices. A combination of OpenAI's GPT-4o and manual verification was used to support phrasing and semantic comparison. These linguistic and positional dynamics were continuously reflected upon in the researcher's fieldnotes, contributing to a transparent and critically reflexive research process.

The scope of the study was defined by practical constraints, including a small sample from a single institution. While not aiming for statistical generalisability, this design enabled context-rich insights into intercultural museum engagement. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, the strength of qualitative inquiry lies in credibility and transferability rather than generalisability. These constraints are therefore not regarded as methodological weaknesses, but as intentional boundaries that ensured the manageability, ethical coherence, and interpretive depth of the research.

Despite these boundaries, the study aims to offer valuable insights into how university museums can support international student engagement. The ethical and methodological strategies outlined above provide a strong foundation for a culturally sensitive and

trustworthy analysis. These considerations underpin the findings presented in the next chapter and inform broader discussions on intercultural learning and inclusion in higher education.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the research design employed to examine the engagement of Chinese students with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery. The study employs interpretative qualitative methods, grounded in constructivist epistemology and supported by the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. It combines purposive and snowball sampling with semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to examine students' motivations, participation patterns, and perceived outcomes.

The open, voluntary, and unstructured characteristics of university museums make them especially appropriate for the exploration of intercultural learning and identity negotiation. Participation is conceptualised as a dynamic process influenced by students' interpretations of spatial, individual, and institutional factors, rather than as a static outcome. This framing supports the investigation of meaning-making processes embedded in students' responses to the museum context.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Tartu, and the research complied with UK and Scottish professional standards (BERA, 2018; SERA, 2021). Primary priorities encompassed participant autonomy, transparency, and cultural sensitivity. The bilingual aspect of the study added complexity: interviews were conducted in Mandarin, coded in English, and translated after analysis, with careful attention to maintaining tone and intent (Temple and Young, 2004). Translation support was facilitated by GPT-4o and subsequently cross-verified manually, while reflexive fieldnotes documented the researcher's positional awareness throughout the process.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, offering conceptual and procedural guidance for identifying and refining themes. The process was strengthened through reflexive logs and member checks to ensure credibility and depth. The coding strategy combined a deductive scaffold—anchored by the study's three research questions (what/why/how)—with inductive insights emerging during theme development, resulting in a nuanced and layered interpretation of the data.

Together, these methodological strategies offer a coherent foundation for the empirical chapters that follow, where students' experiences will be analysed in relation to broader processes of adaptation, participation, and identity construction.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study, focusing on the experiences of Chinese international students at the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery. Based on thematic analysis of qualitative interview data with 14 participants, the results are organised into three sections corresponding to the research questions. The highest-level coding categories—what, why, and how—were deductively derived from the research questions, while sub-themes emerged inductively through open coding of interview transcripts in NVivo 14, using a three-level codebook developed during the analysis stage (see Appendix G). Section 4.1 examines motivations and barriers to participation, including personal and social factors, situational triggers, and structural or perceptual constraints. Section 4.2 explores patterns and modes of engagement, tracing how students integrated the museum into their social, academic, and everyday campus life. Section 4.3 considers the educational, cultural, and emotional outcomes of participation, highlighting how these experiences related to students' broader academic and social adaptation.

4.1 Motivations and Barriers of Museum Participation

Chinese students' engagement with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery was shaped by four interconnected themes: personal and social motivations, environmental and situational triggers, structural barriers, and perceptual obstacles. These themes reveal both the factors that encouraged initial participation and those that limited sustained involvement.

To provide contextual grounding for the qualitative analysis, Table 4-1 visualises each participant's length of residence in Glasgow alongside their self-reported visit frequency. While one might expect a positive relationship between time spent in the city and museum engagement, no such pattern was evident. This underscores that participation is not simply a matter of time availability, but is shaped by more complex dynamics, including individual interests, course demands, and social contexts—issues that the following sections explore in greater detail.

Table 4-1. Participant Residence Duration and Visit Frequency

ID	Length of Stay (months)	Museum Visits	Gallery Visits
P01	48	3	2
P02	8	5	3
P03	8	1	1
P04	5	5	5
P05	8	0	0
P06	8	1	1
P07	8	1	0
P08	8	1	1
P09	90	10	3
P10	42	0	0
P11	8	7	1
P12	5	2	1
P13	8	1	1
P14	4	1	1

Note: Data reflect self-reported visit frequencies as shared by participants during interviews. No significant correlation was found between participants' residence duration and their visit frequency to the Hunterian Museum ($r = 0.061$, $p = 0.836$), the Art Gallery ($r = 0.018$, $p = 0.950$), or both combined ($r = 0.019$, $p = 0.949$).

4.1.1 Subjective Motivations: Personal Interest and Social Triggers

Excluding the two interviewees who had never visited either the Hunterian Museum or Art Gallery, the remaining twelve had all attended at least once. Their reasons were most often rooted in personal interest, though the scope and depth of this interest varied. Ten described a general enthusiasm for museums and similar cultural institutions as part of exploring a new environment, regardless of subject matter. As P01 stated, *"Whenever I arrive in a new place, I like to visit the local museums and similar sites."* This reflects a habitual way of familiarising oneself with new surroundings, rather than a targeted interest in a specific discipline. Two interviewees expressed more subject-specific motivations, such as an interest in art, history, or science. P08 shared, *"I'm really interested in painting, especially Impressionism, so I visited the Hunterian Art Gallery."*

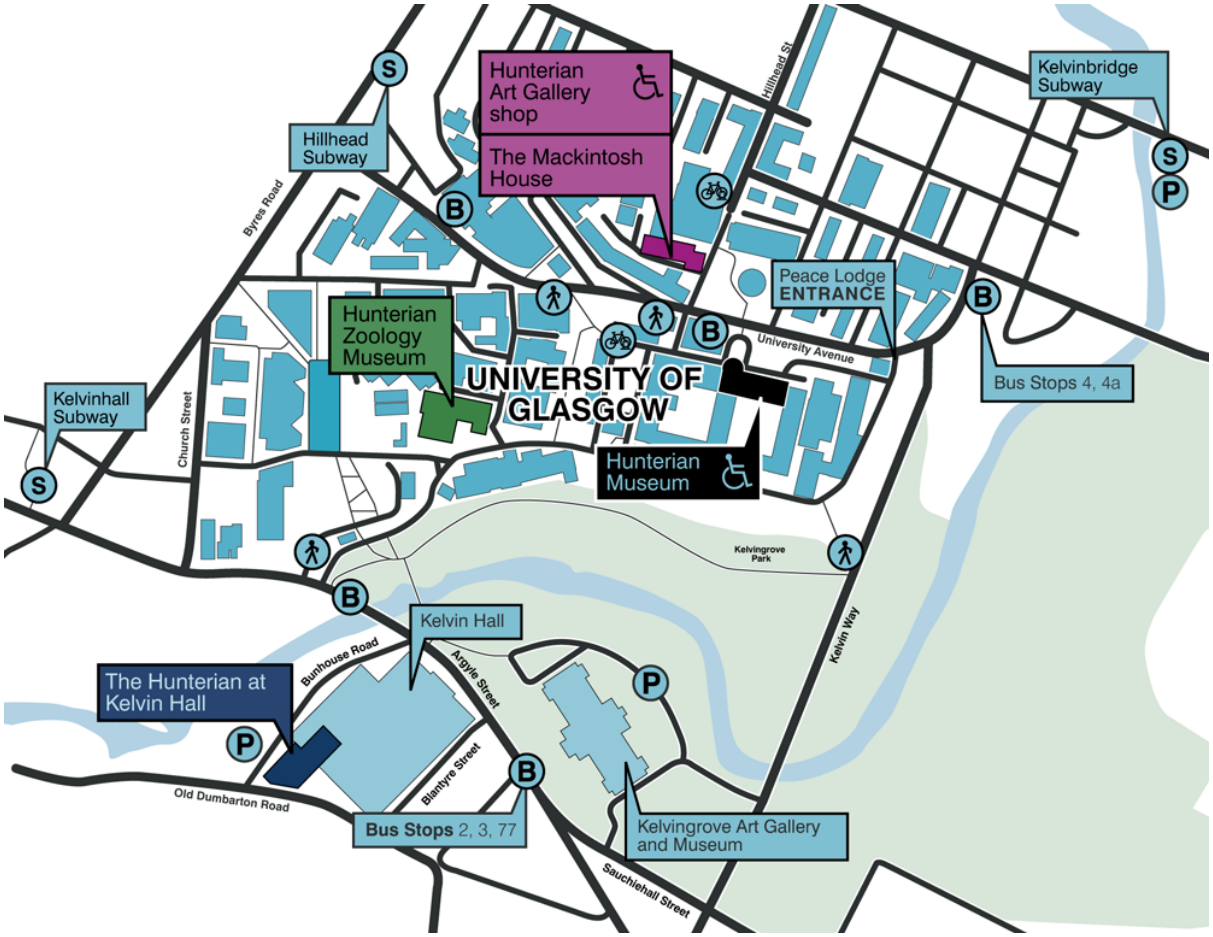
Academic background also influenced motivations. Five participants referred to academic purposes for their visits, including four from museum studies programmes who returned multiple times for classes, coursework, or research projects. P04, for example, explained, *"It's both my personal hobby and my academic background in museum studies. I always prioritise visiting local museums in a new place."* These motivations reflected not only enthusiasm, but also a sense of responsibility and intellectual curiosity. One participant from a non-related field, P14, visited the gallery with classmates for a group video project: *"Our team chose the art gallery as the subject. We explored the space together, discussing our impressions and getting inspired by the artworks."*

Beyond individual interests, social influences were also significant. Nine participants described social triggers, where their first visit was prompted by friends or classmates, often turning into a group activity. Peer influence could reinforce or even initiate such visits. P02 recalled, *"A friend told me that the university museum is really beautiful."* She first visited the Hunterian alone, later returning at another friend's request. Socially driven visits sometimes offered an entry point for those who might not otherwise have gone; for instance, P13 went to the Hunterian Museum once at the invitation of her partner with an art background, but noted, *"We talked about going again, but I just never really felt like it."*

4.1.2 Situational Motivations: Location and Visibility

For many students and visitors, the Museum's location inside the University's iconic Main Building was itself a draw. Eleven participants indicated that the geographical position or signage of the Hunterian Museum and/or Art Gallery had played a role in drawing them in (see Figure 4-1). Four participants found both sites equally accessible, while seven reported noticing the Museum before realising the Gallery was part of the same institution. Only one participant recalled encountering the Gallery first.

Figure 4-1. Map showing the locations of the Hunterian across the University of Glasgow campus.



***Source**: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, 2025. Available at: https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/visit/our-venues/museum/*

The Main Building is a landmark on campus and a popular destination for both students and tourists. The presence of the Hunterian Museum and its visible signage within the Main Building made it easy to discover and enter, as illustrated in Figure 4-2. P11 recounted, *"When I was walking around campus for the first time, I wandered near the Main Building and discovered there was a museum. I walked in by accident."* Similarly, P02 described their first encounter during Welcome Week after browsing the Main Building's gift shop: *"I saw a big sign for the Hunterian. Since I was already there, I thought I'd take a look."*

Figure 4-2. Signage of the Hunterian Museum in the Main Building

Source: Author's photograph, May 2025

These accounts illustrate how the Museum's location within the Main Building, combined with visible signage, often encouraged casual or serendipitous visits. In contrast, the Art Gallery was less likely to attract such unplanned encounters, as several participants first discovered it only after repeated trips to nearby facilities such as the library.

4.1.3 Structural Barriers: Low Engagement and Information Gap

Alongside the influence of location, interview data revealed several structural barriers—external, institutional, or design-related factors that limited opportunities for sustained engagement. Unlike perceptual barriers, which stem from personal interest or interpretive experience, these constraints were rooted in the museum's visibility, communication strategies, and exhibition design.

While the Museum's location in the Main Building facilitated chance encounters, this advantage did not always extend to the Art Gallery. Only one participant considered the Gallery highly visible and easy to find, while most—including regular library users—remained unaware of its presence or function for some time after enrolment. P04, a museum enthusiast, admitted, *"I really enjoy visiting the library, but I didn't know there was a gallery*

nearby." P07 remarked, *"The Gallery doesn't feel as open as the museum across from the gift shop."* Others only discovered it during special events, suggesting that visibility and wayfinding cues were insufficient to attract casual visitors. As P10, who had never visited, explained, *"If there were posters at the entrance showing events, or student works being shown, I might feel more interested."*

Beyond spatial visibility, an information gap further limited engagement. Apart from four participants in museum-related fields and one museum enthusiast, the remaining seven first heard about the Hunterian from friends rather than through official university channels. P10 noted, *"I'd heard of the museum before, but only from classmates. I don't remember ever hearing about it from the University or teaching staff."* P05 added, *"We get wellbeing emails from the school, but I don't recall ever seeing anything about museums or cultural events."* While these comments do not prove the absence of official communications, a review of the researcher's student email archive (August 2023–August 2025) found only eight newsletters mentioning Hunterian exhibitions or events. All appeared as short entries within broader monthly updates from Internal Communications, with no dedicated announcements, and the coverage was irregular. The fact that none of the participants remembered these messages indicates a shortfall in targeted institutional outreach.

Even after a positive first impression, repeat visits were relatively rare. Only four participants had visited both the Museum and the Art Gallery more than once, while the remaining eight had visited either site just once. As illustrated in Table 4-1, this pattern reveals selective engagement: some participants returned multiple times to one venue while visiting the other only once or not at all. The most frequently criticised aspect concerned the exhibitions, which several described as outdated in design, lacking interactivity, and offering limited emotional resonance. P09 observed, *"The displays in the two museums haven't changed. Nothing new was added."* Similarly, P12 commented, *"I didn't see anything new or exciting, so I just walked around quickly."* For P11, a student in a museum-related field who had interned at another Hunterian site, these shortcomings stood out in comparison with museums beyond the university: *"Other museums (*outside the university*) have interactive or immersive technologies. The university museum doesn't use those."* A small number of participants (P05 and P14) also mentioned time constraints due to academic workloads, which reduced opportunities for museum visits, though they expressed interest in returning when possible.

4.1.4 Perceptual Barriers: Disinterest and Interpretive Challenges

Beyond the structural issues discussed above, a second set of obstacles emerged that were more subjective in nature. These perceptual barriers concerned the ways in which students' personal interests, emotional responses, and interpretive experiences shaped their willingness to engage. They were not about physical accessibility, but about how students related the museum to their own interests, identities, and ways of making meaning. Such barriers became evident through recurring themes in the interviews where participants described difficulties in connecting with the museum's content or presentation, even when opportunities to visit were available.

The first strand concerned a lack of interest, mentioned by eight participants, which appeared in two forms. For some, the disinterest reflected a general indifference to museums rather than a rejection of the Hunterian specifically. P10, who had never visited, remarked, *"I don't usually pay much attention to museums. They don't really appeal to me. I'm more into hiking or outdoor activities."* Others directed their disengagement more specifically towards the university museum. P13, who had visited museums in many Scottish cities but was less interested in Glasgow's university museum, commented, *"I wouldn't recommend the gallery. I just didn't feel anything from it."* Disciplinary background also influenced relevance; for example, P05, a computer science student, found the gallery's art focus unfamiliar and outside their usual academic interests.

A second strand related to language and interpretation, cited by eight participants. The style, clarity, or language of interpretation often made it difficult to sustain engagement. P05 noted, *"Part of it is the language barrier. Many Chinese students don't have strong English skills."* P06 reflected, *"I found myself wondering what they were writing about, but I couldn't understand anything. The descriptions were too broad and lacked focus."* Similarly, P04 felt that *"there was an English explanation, but it wasn't engaging,"* while P14 described having to use a translation app just to get through the labels. Even participants who made deliberate efforts to follow the displays reported fatigue; as P12 explained, *"There were too many paintings and too much text. I couldn't take it all in. By the end, I felt tired."*

The third strand could be described as content distance—a perceived gap between the displays and students' own cultural frames of reference or sense of temporal proximity. Four participants mentioned this. For some, the absence of culturally relevant mediation reduced

accessibility. P04 observed that students outside museum-related programmes rarely had opportunities for classes or guided tours in the museum, and that *"there was no one who both understands Chinese culture and speaks Mandarin"* to engage Chinese students. Others highlighted the remoteness of historical material. P06 remarked, *"Some of the museum objects are too 'cultural'—things from 1,000 or 2,000 years ago feel far removed from our lives,"* using "too cultural" to mean formal, symbolic, and antiquated rather than referring to present-day cultural differences.

Summary

The motivations for Chinese students to visit the Hunterian included curiosity, academic interest, peer influence, and the museum's visibility on campus. Nonetheless, these motivators were often offset by structural barriers, such as outdated exhibitions, limited interactivity, and inadequate institutional outreach, alongside perceptual challenges such as language differences, cultural unfamiliarity, and low personal relevance. The obstacles frequently overlapped, resulting in a complex decision-making context where the inclination to visit was coupled with uncertainty or disinterest. Although many participants demonstrated initial interest, their actual visitation behaviour was influenced by the interplay of enabling and inhibiting factors within their university experience.

4.2 Patterns and Modes of Engagement

Building on the previous section, which examined the motivations and barriers influencing participation, this section focuses on how Chinese international students engaged with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery after their initial encounters. Interview data revealed three broad but interconnected patterns: participation trajectories from single visits to repeated engagement; the influence of social and organisational contexts; and everyday spatial practices that incorporated the museum into campus life.

4.2.1 Participation Trajectories: From Single Visits to Ongoing Engagement

Chinese students displayed varied patterns of participation, ranging from one-off exploratory visits to sustained, repeated engagement. Figures 4-3 and 4-4 offer an overview of this diversity, showing the self-reported visit frequencies to the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery respectively. While several participants visited only once, others engaged more frequently, revealing distinct levels of interest, accessibility, and relevance.

Figure 4-3. Distribution of Participants by Hunterian Museum Visits

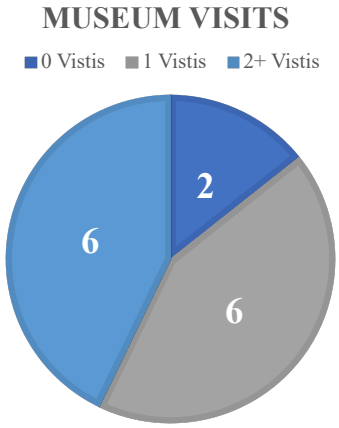
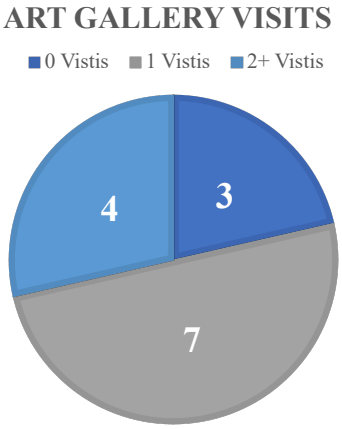


Figure 4-4. Distribution of Participants by Hunterian Art Gallery Visits



Among the twelve participants who had visited the Hunterian Museum or Art Gallery, five had only done so once despite having lived in Glasgow for more than six months. They were aware of the locations and general content of these institutions, but did not revisit. For some, the first encounter was an isolated event. P06 recalled, *"I arrived early and the classroom wasn't open, so I explored the museum with a classmate for about twenty minutes."* Such short, incidental visits left fleeting impressions without leading to further engagement. P13 similarly commented, *"I haven't returned to the gallery because the exhibitions don't really appeal to me. Even though they change sometimes, it's not enough to make me plan another visit."* Reasons for not revisiting included a lack of novelty, limited personal relevance, or competing leisure interests.

In contrast, six participants moved from casual first encounters to more regular or repeated visits. P02 described visiting the museum five times and the gallery three times over the past year, often bringing friends who had never been before and finding it enjoyable to observe their reactions. P11 revisited the Hunterian Museum several times but attended the Art Gallery only once, citing a preference for its traditional displays and for the preservation of a historical atmosphere, which they felt was less common in other galleries. For some, repeated visits were tied to academic purposes. P04, a museum education student, visited both the museum and the gallery more than five times, both for classes and to examine specific objects used in multiple course assignments, as well as to explore the Mackintosh House in detail over several visits.

Accounts from four participants extended beyond the two core sites examined in this study. These were classified as unmapped data, referred to in the coding framework as "contextual overflow" (see Figure 3-4). They capture engagement with other venues within the wider Hunterian network, such as the Zoology Museum and Kelvin Hall. For example, P03 visited the Zoology Museum on more than three occasions through activities organised by the Japan Society, while P10, who had never visited the Museum or Art Gallery, frequently encountered small changing displays at Kelvin Hall because several of his classes were held in the same building.

Institutionally organised events also prompted participation and, in some cases, repeat visits. P09, a doctoral student and part-time teaching assistant, attended evening events at the gallery through staff invitations, including private tours of the Mackintosh House. These opportunities offered privileged access, yet did not always lead to long-term engagement. As P09 reflected, *"After the first visit, I only go back with friends. I'm very thorough the first time, but there's not much new to see afterwards."* P02 and P09, while engaging with different venues, both demonstrate that special events can lead to repeat visits; however, this engagement is sustained only when experiences are novel, relevant, or socially significant.

4.2.2 Social and Organisational Contexts of Participation

Analysis of the interviews identified two recurring contexts that shaped participation: social contexts, in which visits were embedded in interactions with friends, classmates, or partners, and organisational contexts, in which visits took place through university-organised activities such as course assignments, group projects, or themed events. These settings not only determined when and how students visited the Hunterian, but also influenced the depth and focus of their engagement.

Among the twelve participants who had visited the Hunterian, only four made their first visit entirely out of personal curiosity. The remaining eight were either invited by someone in their social network or participated as part of an organised activity. Social contexts often served as both the initial trigger and a motivation for return visits, lowering the psychological threshold for participation and encouraging shared exploration. P02 recalled her first encounter with the Hunterian Art Gallery: *"My flatmate was really into paintings and strongly suggested I go to the gallery with him, so he took me there."* In other cases, students were the ones extending invitations. P01, who frequently visited the museum to view the *Kunyu Quantu*, a

seventeenth-century Chinese map and a significant artefact of cultural exchange between East and West as shown in Figure 4-5, explained: *"When a sociologist friend visited, we went just to see this map. Our discussions were much richer with a companion who shared a professional interest."* These examples illustrate how social visits could transform an individual interest into a richer, shared experience.

Figure 4-5. *Kunyu Quantu* on display at the Hunterian Museum

***Source**: Author's photograph, May 2025*

Drawing on the revisit experiences of five participants, three from museum-related programmes and two from other disciplines, this study defines organisational contexts as university arrangements that organise or facilitate participation. These settings played an important role, particularly in encouraging return visits. Examples included class visits, course assignments and themed events, which often provided a clear purpose for attending. P04, a museum studies student, explained, *"For one class, we visited the Hunterian Museum, and a staff member gave us a talk about social engagement. Afterwards, we had to create a new interpretive label for an exhibit. This hands-on task made me think about museums in a new way."* Similarly, P12 attended a museum night with live music, games, and challenges to find specific exhibits: *"We worked together, searching for objects we'd never notice on a*

normal visit. When we found a display of animal foetuses, everyone gathered around, amazed by something we'd usually overlook."

4.2.3 Spatial Practices: Everyday Uses of Museum Spaces

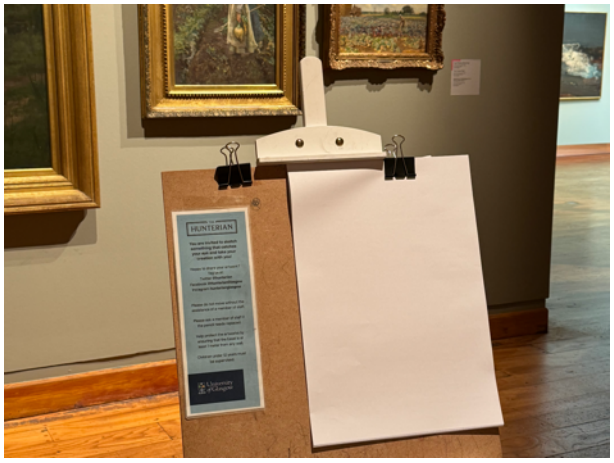
Chinese students showed adaptability in how they used the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, often incorporating these venues into their daily routines as spaces for rest, social interaction, or creative activity, rather than limiting them to sites for viewing exhibitions.

Two interviewees described using the museum as a place to rest between classes. P08 explained, *"I had a class nearby, and when I had time to spare, I'd go to the Hunterian Museum and sit for a while. I didn't have any particular intention to view the exhibits; it was more about finding a quiet place to rest."* Another participant observed that the museum included areas catering to families with children, such as suggestion forms and toys, which she considered a thoughtful feature, even though it was not designed for student use.

Another two participants, P04 and P13, highlighted the sketching station (see Figures 4-6 and 4-7) as a source of personal engagement. P13 recalled a visit with her partner: *"I was especially impressed by a corner where visitors could sketch. My partner drew something while we were there, which made the visit memorable."* Such encounters illustrate how the gallery can foster personal connection and creativity beyond formal learning.

Figure 4-6. Sketching Station in the Hunterian Museum

Figure 4-7. Sketching Station in the Hunterian Art Gallery



***Source**: Author's photographs, June 2025*

Five participants engaged with interactive elements that encouraged informal exploration, including sketching activities in the Art Gallery and creative stations in the Museum's public

education area. P03 recalled finding a table with drawing materials and Lego, which she described as a light and enjoyable way to spend time. These interactive features, whether artistic or playful, shifted the perception of the museum from a space of passive observation to one of informal experimentation and discovery.

Summary

Chinese international students engaged with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery through varied patterns shaped by social and organisational contexts. Social invitations often initiated visits, while course-linked tasks and themed events provided a clear purpose and encouraged returns. Beyond formal exhibitions, students integrated the museum into daily routines as spaces for rest, creativity and informal interaction. Occasional engagement with other Hunterian sites reflected similar trends. These contexts lowered barriers to participation, diversified motivations and expanded the museum's role within campus life.

4.3 Cultural, Emotional, Social, and Educational Outcomes

Engagement with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery generated a spectrum of outcomes for Chinese international students. These ranged from strengthened cultural identity and emotional resonance, to expanded social networks and concrete educational benefits. Based on interview data, this section examines four interrelated dimensions: cultural identity, emotional responses, social participation, and educational engagement.

4.3.1 Cultural Belonging and Institutional Identity

Twelve students who had visited the Hunterian recognised how their visits deepened their sense of belonging to the University of Glasgow and, in some cases, to the city. Thirteen participants, including one who had never entered the Hunterian but was familiar with its architecture, commented on its distinctive design and compared it with museums in China. P14 remarked that it *"matched my stereotype of a British museum, so English, so British"*, while P02 observed that the spacious galleries and high ceilings conveyed a distinctly Western atmosphere.

This sense of cultural connection often extended to the institution's history, as illustrated in Figure 4-8, which shows the campus model and archival photographs display that helped students visualise the university's long heritage. P11 explained that seeing the model gave her *"my first real understanding of its hundreds of years of history"*. Others found significance in

local paintings, such as depictions of Glasgow Green (P08), which linked everyday experiences with the city's past.

Figure 4-8. Campus model of the University of Glasgow, on display at the Hunterian Museum.

***Source**: Author's photograph, June 2025. Audience faces have been anonymised to protect privacy.*

In addition to architectural and historical elements, five students noted that the Hunterian increased their awareness of notable alumni such as James Watt, Lord Kelvin, and Charles Macintosh. For an engineering student (P09), these names reinforced the university's scientific heritage. P14 similarly remarked that learning about such figures made her more motivated in her own studies. These responses suggest that cultural belonging extended beyond emotion to include aspirational identification with the university's legacy.

These encounters suggest that the Hunterian functions as a cultural anchor—a space where students can situate themselves within both the university's narrative and Glasgow's urban heritage.

4.3.2 Emotional Responses to Cultural Artefacts

Alongside cultural identification, encounters with familiar Chinese artefacts provoked layered emotional responses. Nine participants described a mixture of pride, nostalgia, and discomfort when seeing Chinese objects in foreign museum contexts. These reactions often began with moments of uncertainty. For example, three students mentioned seeing blue-and-white porcelain in the Art Gallery's exhibition "The World in a Teacup" (see Figure 4-9). They initially questioned whether the pieces were genuinely Chinese, but once they recognised the familiar patterns and forms, their emotional responses became more pronounced. This process of recognition often intensified feelings of cultural connection as well as concern.

Figure 4-9. "The World in a Teacup" display at the Hunterian Art Gallery, featuring blue-and-white porcelain and Chardin's a Lady Taking Tea (1735).

***Source**: Author's photograph, May 2025*

P14 described *"a mix of pride in our craft and concern about these objects being outside China,"* while P11 remarked that such encounters could feel *"always emotional… as if something precious was taken away."* P12 also reported discomfort when encountering artefacts that might have been removed during sensitive periods in history, especially those linked to conflict or colonial expansion.

One particularly resonant exhibit was the Qing-era *Kunyu Quantu* world map, recalled by six participants. For P04, it attracted the attention of both students and visiting relatives, some of whom recognised it from Chinese textbooks. Although its aged format and language made it difficult to fully interpret, the map drew considerable attention. P03 described introducing it to an international friend, using it to share Chinese and Korean history. This suggests the map held both personal and intercultural significance.

Some participants also commented on the limitations of interpretation. While they appreciated the respectful display of Chinese artefacts, several felt the explanatory labels were too basic or lacked contextual depth. P11 noted that compared to museums in China, the Hunterian Museum provided *"less detail about the stories behind the artefacts,"* which left certain expectations unmet.

Overall, Chinese artefacts, particularly the *Kunyu Quantu*, provoked emotionally layered responses that included personal memories, national pride, and occasional discomfort. These responses reflected students' prior cultural knowledge as well as their evolving perspectives during their time abroad.

4.3.3 Social Outcomes

For many students, the Hunterian was also a site of social connection. Seven participants recounted bringing friends, classmates, or visiting relatives to the museum—often as part of informal campus tours. These acts of hosting expressed pride in their university and created shared experiences that strengthened peer bonds.

Cross-cultural interaction was another common outcome. Students invited not only Chinese peers but also international friends and visiting scholars. In these contexts, exhibits sometimes served as conversation starters about shared or comparative histories, contributing to a sense of global engagement.

Such visits transformed the museum from a static display environment into a participatory social space, reinforcing its role in building community and shared memory.

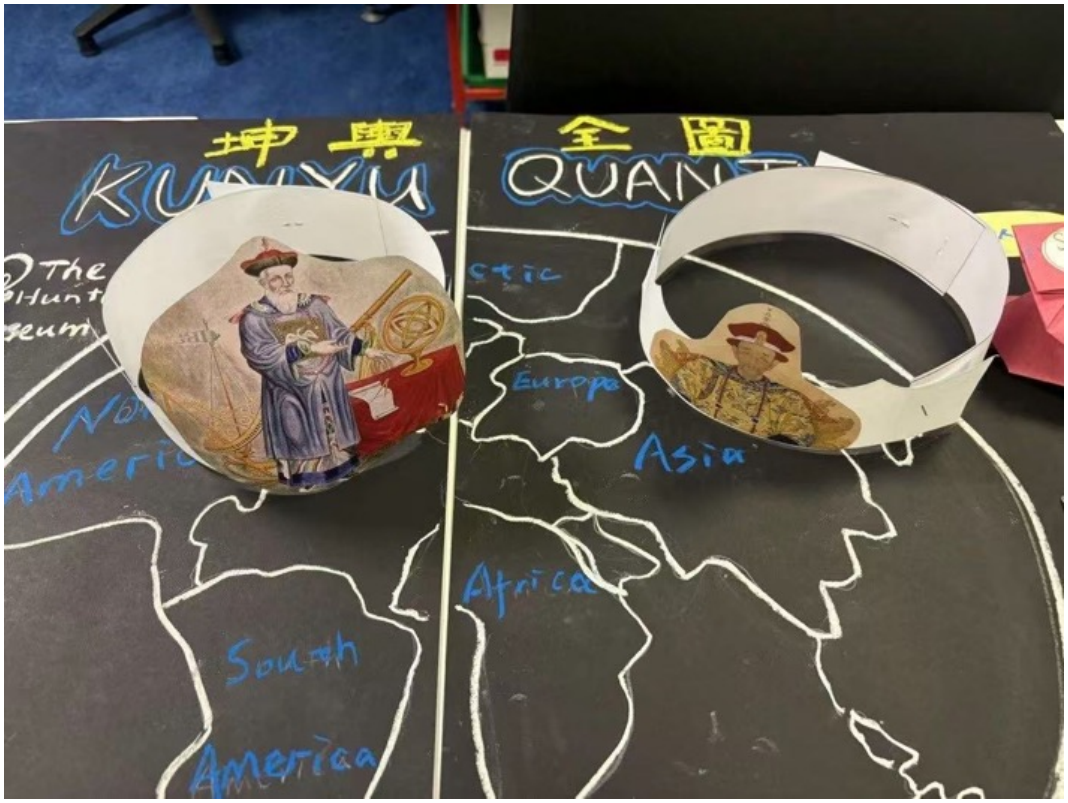
4.3.4 Educational Engagement

The Hunterian supported two main forms of educational engagement. First, general knowledge acquisition: participants described how the museum broadened their understanding of diverse subjects, from British industrial history to global material culture.

P06 was struck by the variety— *"stele, medals, coins, medical devices, anatomical models, even a mummy"*—which encouraged exploration beyond their own disciplines.

Second, subject-specific academic research: for students in museum studies or related fields, the Hunterian served as a valuable academic resource. P02 drew on it for essay examples, noting that its familiarity to instructors made it a useful reference point. For P04, the museum's collections inspired a creative classroom activity centred on the *Kunyu Quantu*, resulting in the poster and artefact replicas shown in Figure 4-10.

Figure 4-10. Coursework poster inspired by the *Kunyu Quantu* at the Hunterian



***Source**: P04's photograph, December 2024*

These examples show that the museum functioned as both a general learning environment and a specialised research site, with impacts that extended into coursework, comparative analysis, and, in some cases, the development of cross-cultural perspectives.

Summary

Chinese international students' engagement with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery generated layered outcomes, from strengthening cultural identity and emotional bonds to encouraging social interaction and supporting both knowledge expansion and academic

research. While the depth and durability of these experiences varied, they collectively show how a university museum can function as a meaningful environment for adaptation, connection, and reflective learning within a cross-cultural academic setting.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Chinese international students engaged with the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, focusing on their motivations and barriers, participation patterns, and perceived outcomes. Some visited only once, while others integrated the museum into their routines—as a space for academic inspiration, social interaction, or cultural reflection. These encounters were shaped by a complex interplay of personal interests, peer influence, institutional structures, and emotional responses.

However, participation was often constrained by structural limitations, including static displays, low interactivity, and a lack of multilingual or culturally relevant interpretation. These barriers contributed to inconsistent engagement and at times undermined the museum's role as a welcoming environment.

Despite these limitations, the Hunterian proved to be more than a heritage site. It functioned as an informal learning space, a site of cultural negotiation, and a setting for identity construction. These findings suggest that university museums hold underutilised potential in supporting international students' academic and social adaptation.

5. Discussion

This chapter critically analyses the findings from Chapter 4 through the lens of the previously established theoretical framework. University museums are regarded as third spaces (Bhabha, 1994), wherein emotional, cultural, and educational experiences are influenced by spatial, institutional, and social factors. The discussion is also informed by theories of cross-cultural adaptation (Ward *et al*., 2001; Berry, 1997), contextual learning (Falk and Dierking, 2016), and inclusive museology (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Sandell, 2007). Rather than reiterating the findings thematically or by research question, this chapter offers a layered interpretation of student motivations, patterns of engagement, and learning outcomes as an interconnected process. It begins by connecting motivations, engagement, and outcomes in students' museum experiences (5.1), followed by a reflection on the institutional role of the Hunterian as a third space (5.2), and a discussion of its theoretical and practical contributions (5.3), before outlining the study's limitations and directions for future research (5.4).

5.1 Connecting Motivations, Engagement, and Outcomes

Falk and Dierking's (2016) museum learning model posits that motivation to engage with the Hunterian Museum is influenced by identity-based factors. Academic relevance, visual appeal, and peer recommendations primarily drive Chinese students. Their prior cultural experiences and their desire to connect with the host university's academic and visual culture shape these motivations. For instance, one student (P09) went to the museum more than fifteen times and saw each visit as an opportunity to learn more about the university's cultural and intellectual environment. This kind of emotional and mental investment reflects Ward *et al.*'s (2001) concept of psychological adaptation, which emphasises emotional resonance as essential to intercultural adjustment.

Yet these motivations often encountered friction. Even though interveiwees could easily get into the museum, they felt excluded because there were no Chinese labels, guides, or translations that reflected their culture. Such absences exemplify Berry's (1997) notion of structural acculturative stress, in which institutional environments fail to recognise or accommodate the needs of culturally diverse groups. One participant described the experience as a "wall of silence," signalling not overt rejection but a lack of cultural recognition, echoing Ahmed's (2012) critique of institutional speech acts that profess inclusion while enacting exclusion.

The museum's visual aesthetic offered a double-edged impression. Several students said the Hunterian Museum, located in the university's main building, felt "very British" or reminded them of "Hogwarts." Others were drawn to the art gallery's stylish layout and colourful interiors. These impressions initially stimulated curiosity but did not guarantee cultural access. As Bennett (1995) notes, the interpretive codes embedded in museum display design often assume a culturally fluent viewer. When these codes go untranslated, students unfamiliar with Western museological conventions are left without interpretive anchoring.

This sense of distance reflects Bhabha's (1994) idea of a "hybrid" or "unhomely" space—a place where cultural exchange is possible but not supported. Chinese students were positioned as cultural translators rather than recipients of interpretation. They were tasked with bridging epistemic gaps through emotional and cognitive labour, highlighting the burden of adaptation in an asymmetrical institutional setting. This burden also extended to language. Students were not merely visitors negotiating unfamiliar collections but interlocutors in a space that did not fully acknowledge them as interpretive equals.

The results indicate a variety of deliberate practices, including occasional visits and frequent utilisation of the museum for reflection, socialising, or creative exploration. These behaviours underscore that participation was not uniform. Falk and Dierking's (2016) model remains instructive here: engagement is contingent on the interplay of identity, context, and experience. While some students embedded the museum in their everyday routines, others visited once or not at all. Engagement was often shaped by students' ability to find academic or emotional relevance within the space.

By learning about Glasgow history at the museum and making connections to their own culture, some participants used integrative strategies. This pattern aligns with Berry's (1997) acculturation typologies. The *Kunyu Quantu* world map, for instance, evoked pride and familiarity but also disorientation, given its lack of contextualisation. Such moments of emotional dissonance reflect Bhabha's (1994) notion of "unhomeliness," in which recognition of one's culture within an alien frame produces not comfort but estrangement.

Learning outcomes, although informal and unscripted, were widely reported. Students described expanding their understanding of British academic culture, refining their communication skills, or drawing connections to class content. Others incorporated museum elements into creative tasks or academic writing. As Dierking (2002) asserts, museum

learning does not occur solely through didactic channels but through reflective, spatial, and social modes.

Chinese students found themselves navigating a space that was physically open yet intellectually imbalanced, emotionally demanding, and culturally ambiguous (Moosavi, 2020b). Their experiences reveal both the promise and the limits of the university museum as a third space—a site that invites participation but withholds full recognition. Engagement was not the result of open access alone. Rather, it necessitated adaptive strategies, selective engagement, and emotional investment, frequently without institutional reciprocity.

5.2 The Hunterian as a Third Space: Opportunities and Limits

The Hunterian presents itself as a symbolically open and culturally rich environment. Yet this openness belies complex negotiations of power, representation, and belonging. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, this section considers how the museum mediates intercultural encounters for Chinese international students, functioning as both a site of informal learning and a zone of symbolic exclusion.

Students' ability to appropriate the museum space for personal or academic use affirms its potential as a third space. Some used it as a refuge between classes, a conversation starter with friends, or a site for creative inspiration. These practices resonate with Moje *et al.*'s (2004) expansion of third space as an educational concept: a space that is neither home nor school, where learners negotiate identity in hybrid and emotionally resonant ways. These acts of informal participation suggest that the museum can facilitate not just knowledge transfer but identity work and cultural reflection.

However, this potential was rarely supported institutionally. While the Museum hosted student-focused events such as late openings (P12), the Art Gallery offered fewer participatory opportunities. Initiatives like *Curating Discomfort* and *Artist: Unknown*, which aimed to critically address colonial legacies, were largely unfamiliar to the interviewees and appeared disconnected from the wider exhibition experience. As Hall (1996) and Hooper-Greenhill (2007) argue, representation is not simply about objects on display but about how knowledge is constructed and for whom. Without structural visibility and engagement, such projects failed to realise their inclusive intent.

Recover Community (2024), a university-run podcast hosted by Les Back and Zandra Yeaman, exemplified a more transparent institutional dialogue on discomfort, emotional labour, and decolonisation. Its intellectual alignment with inclusive museology (Simon, 2010) was notable, yet none of the students interviewed were aware of it. This disconnect underscores the gap between institutional discourse and student-facing communication. As Ahmed (2012) suggests, gestures of inclusion that lack practical accessibility risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Even forward-looking proposals such as Anderson's (2024), which call for transparency and community participation in collection development, remain peripheral to most students' lived experiences.

These actions reflect what Sandell (2002) describes as the potential for museums to involve marginalised visitors in interpretive processes and meaning-making. Yet this agency was often exercised without institutional support, limiting its transformative potential. While some students engaged actively, their interpretations remained unrecognised within curatorial or pedagogical frameworks. This absence of reciprocal engagement reinforces Hooper-Greenhill's (2007) argument that museums often privilege certain modes of knowledge production, sidelining those perceived as informal or affective.

The institution's failure to embed inclusive practices also raises concerns about how "cultural participation" is operationalised. As Simon (2010) contends, participation must be more than occasional access or symbolic gestures; it must be built into how museums think, plan, and act. Chinese students' experiences illustrate the limitations of a model that invites attendance without curatorial involvement, and promotes openness without translation or dialogue.

The visual and architectural qualities of the museum, including its layout, language, and signage, were also implicated in shaping accessibility. Without multilingual interpretation or cultural framing, students were left to perform acts of cultural translation themselves. This not only mirrors but intensifies the "affective burden" of minoritised individuals described by Moosavi (2020b), whereby the labour of inclusion is outsourced to the very communities it intends to reach.

These barriers are in tension with the Hunterian's stated goal of "engaging wider perspectives" and the University of Glasgow's vision of building "one Glasgow community" (Hunterian Museum, 2025; University of Glasgow, 2025). Ultimately, the Hunterian's claim to be an inclusive university museum remains aspirational rather than fully realised. While

Chinese students found moments of connection, these were episodic rather than embedded, personal rather than systemic. A more inclusive future would involve co-created content and sustained dialogue between curators and international communities. Such changes are essential not only to address historical imbalances but also to support the museum's relevance in an increasingly diverse academic environment.

5.3 Contributions

This research augments the current literature on international student adaptation, museum engagement, and the transforming role of university museums. The contributions are both theoretical and practical, with value across the fields of museum studies, higher education, and intercultural communication.

This study applies Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space to the context of a university museum. It offers a novel perspective on understanding the experiences of Chinese international students. Bhabha's theory, while extensively studied in migration and formal education studies, is relatively rarely used in research on museums as informal learning environments. This study takes the concept beyond the classroom and into the daily context of the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow. It explores how students use the museum for social interaction, rest, and informal learning. The findings show how university museums can act as spaces for cultural negotiation. These spaces can support, but also sometimes limit, the process of adaptation and identity formation. This adds empirical insight to an area where more research is needed. By conceptualising the museum as a hybrid cultural space, the research aligns with broader discussions on how university infrastructures support—or hinder—the wellbeing and integration of international students (Leask, 2009).

The research further develops current models of intercultural adaptation by highlighting the role of cultural space. Berry's (1997) and Ward *et al.*'s (2001) theories primarily concentrate on psychological or social processes. They often overlook how spatial and institutional factors shape the student experience. This study's three-part structure, which addresses motivations and barriers, participation patterns, and learning outcomes, provides a potential lens for future cross-cultural research in both educational and cultural institutions. This spatial approach contributes to recent calls for more integrated internationalisation strategies in higher education, where informal learning environments, such as university museums, are

increasingly recognised as sites of identity negotiation, emotional resilience, and cross-cultural dialogue (Montgomery, 2010; Marginson, 2014).

To support this structure, a theoretical framework was developed. It outlines how personal, spatial, and institutional elements interact in student experiences. The three-part model connects what happens (adaptation outcomes), where it happens (the museum as a third space), and how students respond (adaptation strategies). This model can be used in future studies to analyse how cultural institutions mediate intercultural learning. This spatial approach contributes to recent calls for more integrated internationalisation strategies in higher education, where informal learning environments, such as university museums, are increasingly recognised as sites of identity negotiation, emotional resilience, and cross-cultural dialogue (Marginson, 2014).

The findings offer insights for museum scholars, professionals, and university staff. While many institutions express a commitment to diversity, the research shows a lack of ongoing outreach, multilingual access, and culturally sensitive interpretation. The study highlights the need for university museums to focus on inclusive communication, co-curation with diverse participants, and consistent visibility—especially during student welcome weeks and support services. These practical implications align closely with the third mission of universities, which calls for engagement beyond research and teaching to include social responsibility, community relevance, and cultural accessibility (Laredo, 2007). University museums, situated at the intersection of these missions, can play a pivotal role in realising this vision.

The experiences of Chinese students underline the importance of emotional recognition and inclusive messaging. These students do not expect customised exhibitions. They understand the position of being international learners. What they seek is to feel seen, acknowledged, and invited into the meaning-making process. Chinese students often visit university museums for various purposes, such as bringing friends, taking a break, or seeking creative inspiration. These behaviours indicate that there is still room for improvement in the way space supports a sense of belonging and informal learning. University museums can make these functions more purposeful by providing comfortable seating, encouraging open visits, or supporting student-led activities. Such micro-level gestures, when embedded within institutional frameworks, can contribute to broader goals of social inclusion (Sandell, 2007), particularly

when supported by multilingual interpretation, culturally diverse programming, and active student involvement in curatorial processes.

Overall, this study encourages university museums to rethink their role—not just as educational sites, but as intercultural platforms. It provides a student-informed perspective to guide this transformation. By recognising international students not merely as temporary visitors but as integral members of the university community, museums can become active agents in promoting intercultural understanding, emotional wellbeing, and structural inclusion.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several acknowledged limitations. First, the sample comprised 14 Chinese students from a singular UK university. Although all participants engaged voluntarily and purposive sampling guaranteed relevance to the research questions, the sample does not reflect the full diversity of international student experiences. In particular, later participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which introduced some background similarity. For instance, four participants had received academic training in museum-related fields. These overlaps may have influenced their engagement and interpretation, and the findings should therefore be read with caution.

Second, the researcher shared an insider identity with participants as a fellow Chinese student. This helped build trust and encouraged open dialogue. However, it also introduced a degree of subjectivity. The researcher's academic background in museum studies may have influenced the prioritisation of certain themes during interviews and analysis. To reduce bias, the researcher adopted an open-ended coding approach, remained grounded in participant narratives, and later incorporated relevant literature to balance interpretation. A small-scale member check was conducted with four participants to confirm the accuracy of key findings. Reflexive notes, an audit trail of coding decisions, and supervisory feedback further helped maintain critical distance.

Third, the study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews, which limited the observable dimensions of behaviour and non-verbal experience. Interviews provided comprehensive narratives; however, they may inadequately represent the embodied, emotional, or intuitive dimensions of museum experiences. The bilingual nature of the data added further

complexity. During the analysis, meanings may have changed when translating from Mandarin to English, even though care was taken to be accurate.

Future research can explore these themes from alternative angles. Comparative studies among cultural groups or institutional contexts would facilitate a broader validation of the findings. Expanding the scope to include all Hunterian sites or other UK university museums would offer insights into institutional variation. Incorporating the perspectives of curators or education staff could further reveal how professionals understand and respond to international student engagement.

Methodologically, subsequent studies may integrate interviews with observational research or survey-based approaches, such as accompanied visits, to capture both student discourse and behaviour. The incorporation of quantitative methods may enhance mixed-methods designs, providing a more holistic understanding of informal learning and emotional engagement within museum environments. This would help make university museums more open, responsive, and intentional.

6. Conclusion

Building on the theoretical discussion and empirical findings presented in previous chapters, this concluding chapter brings together the key insights of the study. It investigates how Chinese international students engage with university museums, with a focus on the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow. It explores three related questions: what factors motivate or hinder their participation; how they engage with the museum and gallery; and how this engagement influences their educational and social experiences within the university. A qualitative interview approach was used, centred on students' lived experiences. While the study does not claim to represent all Chinese students, it provides rich and context-specific insights into how museum engagement connects with adaptation, identity, and belonging in a transnational academic environment.

The findings show that participation is neither uniform nor passive. Instead, it results from a complex combination of personal motivations, social connections, and institutional conditions. Students were motivated by academic interest, curiosity, aesthetic appreciation, and the desire for social interaction. However, these motivations were often challenged by structural and perceptual barriers, such as static displays, a lack of multilingual support, and the absence of follow-up after initial contact with the institution.

Participation took diverse forms, ranging from one-time visits to regular use of the museum as a quiet, reflective, or social space. For some students, the museum became part of daily campus life, while others remained distant due to limited relevance or communication. Although the Hunterian is physically accessible, its integration into students' academic and cultural experiences was often fragmented. Its symbolic visibility and emotional resonance varied significantly among participants, resulting in uneven and often discontinuous engagement.

Interactions with the museum also shaped broader aspects of student life. They prompted moments of cultural reflection, emotional connection, and identity negotiation. However, in the absence of tailored interpretation or inclusive narratives, students often had to carry out cultural translation themselves. This phenomenon, in which the interpretive labour shifted from the institution to the visitor, revealed how inclusive intent could be undermined by the lack of structural support. The gap between inclusivity as a stated value and as an

experienced reality became particularly visible through these acts of individual meaning-making.

This study contributes to the existing literature by drawing attention to a rarely examined dimension of international student experience: their engagement with campus museums as sites of informal learning and cultural negotiation. It introduces an integrated framework that brings together cultural adaptation theory, third space theory, and museum learning scholarship. This model challenges linear or programmatic understandings of participation and instead emphasises its contextual, emotional, and negotiated nature, shaped by personal histories, institutional dynamics, and cultural representations.

At a practical level, the findings suggest that university museums must move beyond the assumption that openness and accessibility are sufficient for inclusion. Instead, deliberate and sustained strategies are needed to support international students as active cultural participants within university life. This includes addressing language barriers, strengthening multilingual and intercultural interpretation, enabling co-created content, and maintaining consistent outreach beyond initial orientation. By responding more sensitively to the symbolic, linguistic, and emotional needs of diverse student communities, university museums can become more relational and inclusive environments.

The researcher's positionality as both a Chinese student and a museology student shaped the research design, data collection, and interpretation. This insider perspective facilitated trust and cultural resonance during interviews. At the same time, methodological reflexivity was maintained through inductive coding, engagement with theoretical frameworks, and member checking with selected participants. Reflective journaling supported awareness of interpretive bias and contributed to the transparency and credibility of the research. While subjectivity is inherent in qualitative inquiry, this study approached it as a strength when paired with methodological integrity.

Future research could expand on these insights by comparing student engagement across different institutional or national contexts, or by using longitudinal designs to explore how patterns of participation shift over time. Including the perspectives of museum professionals such as curators or educators may further clarify institutional intentions and constraints. Participatory approaches that involve international students in exhibition development and

interpretation could open new paths toward institutional responsiveness and shared ownership.

Overall, this study suggests that university museums are not only places of knowledge, but also emotional and cultural spaces that shape how international students relate to their academic environments. Their capacity to support dialogue, reflection, and belonging depends not only on their content or design, but also on how they respond to symbolic visibility, interpretive accessibility, and emotional resonance. To realise their civic and educational roles, university museums must move from symbolic openness to meaningful participation. Supporting students not only as visitors but as co-participants in cultural life is key to making these institutions truly inclusive within the evolving landscape of global higher education.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Ethics Approval Evidence (Email Screenshot)

Vs: Ethics approval KU1-7/KU/427

[redacted]@ut.ee>

Tuesday, May 6, 2025 at 11:20

To: [redacted] Cc: [redacted] (student)

Saatja: [redacted]
Saadetud: [redacted]
Adressaat: [redacted]
Koopia: [redacted]
Teema: Ethics approval KU1-7/KU/427

Dear [redacted]

I am pleased to inform you that The Ethics Committee of the Institute of Cultural Research has approved your research project Chinese International Students and University Museums: Engagement and Learning at The Hunterian, University of Glasgow. Please find the Committee's decision attached.

We have, however, a couple of recommendations which we expect to be followed:

1. **Anonymisation and pseudonymisation are distinct, mutually exclusive processes. We strongly advise utilising pseudonymisation only (https://wiki.ut.ee/spaces/dataprotection/pages/199674586/3.3.+Why+and+how+to+pseudonymise+personal+data) and updating all the documents accordingly.**
2. **"Potential Ethical Issues & Mitigation Measures" section in the Application mentions the possibility of obtaining verbal consent at the beginning of the recorded Zoom interview. This option needs to be mentioned also in 4. Project description/ "Methodology", 5. Consent and Data Protection/" How will consent be obtained?".**
3. **Remove museum staff from recruitment process: see "„All recruitment processes—for both students and staff—will be conducted in a transparent and voluntary manner, and participants will retain the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence."**

We hope you can collaborate to ensure that these final critical fixes are made before you begin your fieldwork. There is no need to submit a new version of the application.

With kind regards,
[redacted]

[redacted]

Appendix B. Interview Guide

Part 1: Engagement with The Hunterian

Have you visited The Hunterian Museum or the Hunterian Art Gallery before?

If yes, what motivated you to visit the museum?

Have you visited more than once?

If so, what made you return?

If not, have you thought about visiting? What has prevented you from going?

Part 2: Reflections on Experience and Learning

How did you feel while being in the museum space?

Can you describe anything that particularly stood out to you during your visit?

In what ways have your museum visits influenced your academic learning or cultural understanding?

As an international student, how do you perceive the role of university museums in your overall educational experience?

Appendix C. Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

You are cordially being invited to take part in a research project about how Chinese international students engage with university museums. Your perspectives would be greatly valued. This information sheet explains how and why it is being carried out and what it involves for participants. Please take some time to read this information.

Project Title: Chinese International Students and University Museums: Engagement and Learning at The Hunterian, University of Glasgow (Master Thesis for EDUMaH)

Purpose of the Study:

This research explores how Chinese international students engage with university museums, specifically The Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow. The study aims to understand students' motivations, barriers to participation, and the educational and social impact of their museum experiences. Findings will contribute to improving international student engagement strategies in university museum context.

Participation Requirements:

- Participants will be asked to take part in interviews.
- Participation is estimated to take approximately 30 to 45 minutes.
- Participation is entirely voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

Confidentiality and Data Protection:

- Participant responses will be recorded; recordings will be kept confidential and securely stored on a password-protected external hard drive owned solely by the researcher.
- Personal identifiers will be pseudonymised to ensure participant privacy.
- Access to the data will be limited to the principal researcher; if necessary, supervising academic staff may access the data for purposes of academic guidance and assessment.
- All data will be stored for one year and then securely deleted or archived in accordance with ethical guidelines.

For any questions regarding this study, please contact:

Researcher Name:
Email:
Phone Number:

Name of the Supervisor:
Email:

By agreeing to participate in this study, you confirm that you have read and understood the information provided above.

Appendix D. Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Project Title: Chinese International Students and University Museums: Engagement and Learning at The Hunterian, University of Glasgow (Master Thesis for EDUMaH)

Researcher Information:
- Name:
- Institution: University of Tartu, University of Malta, University of Glasgow
- Email:
- Phone Number:

Purpose of the Study:
This research explores how Chinese international students engage with university museums, specifically The Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow. The study aims to understand students' motivations, barriers to participation, and the educational and social impact of their museum experiences. Findings will contribute to improving international student engagement strategies in university museum context.

Participation Details:
- My participation in this study is voluntary.
- I will be asked to take part in an interview.
- The estimated time commitment is 30 to 45 minutes.
- The interview will be conducted in English or Mandarin, depending on my preference.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason, and any collected data about me will be deleted if I withdraw.

Confidentiality and Data Protection:
- I understand that my responses will be recorded, the recordings will be kept confidential and stored securely password-protected external hard drive owned solely by the researcher.
- I understand that my personal identifiers will be pseudonymised to protect my privacy.
- Only the principal researcher will have access to the data, if necessary, supervising academic staff will have access to the data for the purposes of guidance and assessment.
- Data will be stored for one year and then securely deleted or archived according to ethical guidelines.

Consent Statement:
By signing this form, I confirm that:
- I have read and understood the provided information.
- I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- I understand that I can withdraw at any time without consequences.
- I consent to the collection and use of my data as described above.

Participant's Name (Printed): Participant's Signature: Date:	Researcher's Name (Printed): Researcher's Signature: Date:

For any questions or concerns about this study, please contact
Researcher's (Supervisor) Contact Information:

Appendix E. Sample Interview Transcript (Translated from Mandarin)

Translated excerpt from Interview P01 (original in Mandarin)

This translation was generated using GPT-4o and has been manually verified for accuracy and clarity.

Interviewer: Do you know how many museums are affiliated with the University of Glasgow?

Participant: I know there are two—one above the main building and one near the library.

Interviewer: Right. Those are the Hunterian Museum and the Hunterian Art Gallery. They both carry the Hunterian name but are different spaces.

Participant: Yes, they're clearly separate. But I've also seen the Kelvingrove Gallery—does that belong to the university?

Interviewer: It's not owned by the university, but we do have collaborations with them. The two you mentioned earlier are the main ones affiliated with us. Oh, and there's a small zoology museum near the biology department.

Participant: Ah, yes, I've seen that one too.

Interviewer: How long have you been studying at the university?

Participant: I enrolled in 2020, but due to the pandemic, I only arrived in Glasgow in 2021.

Interviewer: So you've been here for four years now. Have you visited the two museums on campus?

Participant: Yes, I've been to both.

Interviewer: Do you remember when your first visit was?

Participant: My first visit wasn't in 2021—it was earlier. I actually visited Glasgow once in 2019, before officially starting my studies. During that trip, I went to both museums, but the memories are a bit fuzzy now.

Interviewer: What brought you to Glasgow in 2019?

Participant: I joined a summer school programme.

Interviewer: Was the museum visit part of the programme, or did you go on your own?

Participant: I went by myself. Whenever I arrive in a new place, I like to visit the local museums and similar sites. These two were easy to spot—one's in the main building, the other next to the library. I walked past them often.

Interviewer: Did you see any promotional materials?

Participant: Not really. I just noticed them naturally because of their locations.

Interviewer: How long was your summer school programme?

Participant: I don't remember exactly—maybe around six weeks, but definitely over a month.

Interviewer: After you returned to start your studies in 2021, did you visit again?

Participant: Yes. I went back once at first just to refresh my memory, and then once or twice more with friends who were new to Glasgow. It's something I'd do when showing people around.

Interviewer: Were these friends all Chinese?

Participant: Yes—some were students, others were visiting scholars or faculty.

Interviewer: So you've visited both alone and with others. Across all those visits, was there anything that really stuck with you—something you found memorable?

Participant: A couple of things, actually. First, the grand staircase near the entrance really impressed me. It's not part of the museum itself, but the classical British design—the carpet, the railings—felt special. It's where people often take graduation photos.

Second, there's an old world map in the museum that I find fascinating. It's a traditional Chinese-style map with decorative drawings and annotations. I enjoy looking at maps in general, and this one is so full of detail—it's like reading a story. I always try to spot places I recognise.

Interviewer: How did you find out about that map?

Participant: I think I came across it during my first visit. Later, I went again with a visiting scholar who was really into maps. He was actually a member of a geographical society and pointed out a lot of details.

Interviewer: What about your experience at the art gallery?

Participant: Honestly, I don't remember much—it just felt like a quiet, open space. A typical gallery atmosphere.

Interviewer: After visiting multiple times, do you think the museums had any impact on your studies or life here?

Participant: I wouldn't say they helped directly with my studies, but they did spark my curiosity. Some exhibits showed equipment used in experiments from different departments, including medical instruments and anatomy models. It gave me a sense of the university's academic history.

Interviewer: How about in terms of social life or understanding British culture?

Participant: Visiting museums became part of how I socialised—something to do with friends. I also learned more about the university's past, like how former students worked, what tools they used, and their achievements. It made history feel more concrete and closer.

Interviewer: So overall, what role do you think university museums play in your educational journey?

Participant: Maybe this sounds a bit abstract, but I think it adds a sense of connection. It's not just about studying here—you also become part of the university's story. Visiting the museum made me reflect on the past, present, and even future. It doesn't help directly with research, but it changes how I think.

Interviewer: Do you think museums like this help international students feel more connected to the university?

Participant: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Would you still bring friends to the museum in the future?

Participant: Definitely.

Appendix F. Thematic Codebook

Name	Description	Sources	References
HOW	RQ 3: How does engagement with The Hunterian Museum and The Hunterian Art Gallery impact Chinese international students, considering both their educational and social roles?	14	276
Cultural Identity and Belonging		14	120
Aesthetic and emotional response		13	39
Cultural belonging		14	50
UK–China cultural comparison		12	31
Educational Engagement		13	90
Coursework and academic use		8	17
Cross-disciplinary thinking		8	14
Knowledge expansion		13	59
Emotional Responses to Cultural Representation		12	45
Chinese object response		9	21
Identity reflection		10	24
Social Interaction and Community Building		11	21
Social bonding		11	21
WHAT	RQ2: In what ways do Chinese international students engage with The Hunterian Museum and The Hunterian Art Gallery?	13	97
Engagement	Guided vs self-directed	12	33
First visit	intentional vs accidental	12	25
Revisit	repeat visits vs no return	9	19
Visiting mode	solo vs group	10	20
WHY	RQ1: What are the key motivations and barriers influencing Chinese students' participation in these university museums?	14	167
Barriers		14	81
Cultural distance		4	8
Information gap		9	12

Name	Description	Sources	References
Lack of interest		8	13
Language and interpretation barriers		8	12
Low engagement		10	18
Spatial discomfort or exclusion		5	12
Time constraint		2	6
Motivations		14	86
Academic purpose		5	10
Curiosity		6	9
Location and visibility		11	24
Personal interest		12	22
Social triggers		9	21

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