



A Multi-dimensional Rhythm Framework for Intercultural Experiences in Higher Education

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Abstract: This article explores the experiences of Chinese postgraduate students in a UK university using the lens of rhythm analysis. This study goes beyond intercultural interactional moments and examines how intercultural experience is organised through temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms. The data were generated through narrative interviews with four students, and narrative rhythm analysis was employed for analysis. Findings show that students' interconnected temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms shape and regulate their choices regarding participation and exposure to intercultural experiences. This article provides a multi-dimensional rhythm framework consisting of temporal, spatial, and emotional dimensions for analysing how institutional time, lived space, and emotional experiences shape when and how intercultural experience becomes desirable, possible, or less important for students (e.g., students tended to engage in intercultural activities that are more likely to align with these three rhythms). By shifting the focus from the development of intercultural communication competence to the underlying rhythmic conditions that govern participation, this framework explicitly advances critical intercultural paradigms by theorising time, space, and emotion as integrated, dynamic conditions rather than as contextual backdrops. This approach extends existing critical scholarship by arguing that participation is rhythmically negotiated across multiple dimensions, both prior to and beyond interactional moments, offering a distinct analytical lens for understanding and supporting international student experiences. The article concludes by discussing implications for more rhythm-sensitive support structures for international students (e.g., reducing misalignment between institutional and personal rhythms to encourage intercultural participation) and specifying future research directions.

Keywords: Critical Intercultural Approach, Narrative Rhythm Analysis, Temporal Rhythm, Spatial Rhythm, Emotional Rhythm, International Students, Conditions for Intercultural

1. Introduction

This study explores the intercultural experiences of Chinese international students who undertook a one-year MA programme in a UK university. Existing approaches for researching students' intercultural experiences often examine the development of intercultural communication competence (e.g., Wu et al., 2024; Naidu, 2023) or outcomes of intercultural learning (e.g., Chen, 2025). While these studies provide valuable insights into competence development, they tend to view time, space, and emotion as the backdrop of the research. There is limited attention to how these dimensions interact as conditions shaping students' participation in intercultural communication activities. Thus, this study aims to examine how students' intercultural participation is organized through the interaction of temporal and spatial, and emotional rhythms in UK higher education. To do so, this study proposes using Lefebvre's rhythm as a conceptual framework for understanding three dimensions (temporal, spatial, and emotional) of Chinese international students' intercultural experiences, and focuses on the rhythmic conditions under which intercultural participation becomes possible, limited, or desirable.

Importantly, the proposed multi-dimensional rhythm framework is not only conceptual but is operationalised analytically to guide this study. In practice, this framework guides the coding and interpretation of narrative data to identify and classify patterns of temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms in students' stories. Through systematic narrative rhythm analysis, temporal references (such as pace or duration), spatial references (locations, movement, confinement), and emotional shifts (anticipation, anxiety, or release) are coded and analysed as interconnected rhythms. This analytic strategy allows for tracing how these dimensions combine to shape the conditions for students' participation, availability, access, and willingness within intercultural activities. By previewing how each rhythm will be identified and related in the analysis, the framework advances methodological rigor and analytic depth.

However, the coding process also involved certain challenges and ambiguities, particularly in distinguishing between rhythm types. For example, emotional and temporal references often overlapped within the same narrative segments, such as when feelings of anxiety were directly linked to time pressures or deadlines. Similarly, spatial descriptions sometimes carried emotional weight, making it difficult to determine whether a narrative passage should be coded as primarily spatial or emotional. In these cases, segments were initially double-coded to capture their multi-dimensional character. To resolve overlaps, I developed the following decision rules: (1) the segment was assigned to the rhythm type most central to the participant's narrative intent or the contextual focus of the passage; (2) if the emotional component was an evident response to a temporal or spatial event but the narrative focus remained on the event, the coding prioritised temporal or spatial rhythm; (3) if emotional expressions were not simply reactions but central

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to organizing the student's choices or actions, the emotional rhythm was prioritized; (4) overlapping codes were retained only when both dimensions were equally salient for interpreting the meaning. These criteria were consistently applied through reflective discussion and iteration, ensuring clear resolution of coding overlaps and supporting methodological rigor and replicability. This transparency regarding coding difficulties and resolution strategies aims to further strengthen the methodology's rigor and trustworthiness.

This study develops a multi-dimensional rhythm framework comprising temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms, which repositions intercultural studies by shifting attention to students' processes of negotiation regarding when and how they choose to participate (or not) in intercultural activities. This approach speaks to and extends the critical intercultural communication scholarship (e.g., Huang, 2020; Huang, 2022; Holliday, 2025) that critiques deficit models of researching international students' experiences by recognising students' knowledge of their own experiences. The article begins by first discussing using Lefebvre's theory of rhythm for intercultural studies before showing the methodology. Next, I present narrative data of students' temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms. Finally, I discuss the implications of a multi-dimensional framework for intercultural research and the limitations of this study. By exploring how time, space, and emotion simultaneously function as conditions that organise intercultural participation, this study addresses the gap that arises from viewing these dimensions as background or contextual factors in intercultural experiences.

2. Literature Review

My use of the term Chinese international students is to explain students' nationalities and their educational contexts, rather than seeing them as a homogeneous group, i.e., an essentialist view (Holliday, 2011). This section provides a critical understanding of competence-based approaches in intercultural communication research, elaborates on the research gap, and explains the rationale for using Lefebvre's rhythm as a framework to address it.

2.1. Critically Understanding Intercultural Research

Intercultural research often follows competence-oriented approaches, which sometimes risk essentialist understandings of cultures, such as explaining people's behaviours based on their nationalities (an essentialist view) or equating culture with country (Holliday, 2025). Intercultural scholars increasingly critique essentialist approaches and call for transforming Intercultural research from reliance on paradigms that view culture as static to exploring dynamic, critical intercultural approaches. As Huang (2022) points out, researchers need to focus on individuals' agency to foster epistemic justice. Specifically, Holliday (1999) proposes a small culture approach to demonstrate that intercultural experiences are shaped by situated academic norms or institutional practices rather than by fixed cultural differences. Huang's (2022) work has further consolidated this, and she points out that students' intercultural experiences are shaped by institutional and epistemic conditions such as academic practices. Although existing critical intercultural scholarship highlights the epistemic and institutional conditions that shape intercultural experiences, time, space, and emotion are often treated as background, viewed as outcomes, or explored in isolation (to be elaborated below). Such practices ignore how time, space, and emotion interconnect in shaping intercultural experience. Thus, this study proposes an integrated framework using Lefebvre's theory of rhythm to address this gap.

2.2. Emotion Existing Studies in Relation to Time, Space, and Emotion

Research on international students' temporal experiences has examined topics such as transitioning or adaptation. For example, Naidu's (2023) study of Australian international students in Indonesia demonstrates how students navigated the academic pace (specifically, a slower pace of life) at an Indonesian university. Some studies focus on how the length of the programme affects intercultural learning outcomes or the development of intercultural communicative skills (e.g., Waters, 2022; Lin et al., 2025; Gonzalo & Escamilla, 2025). These studies illustrate that the time dimension is significant not only in relation to the duration of intercultural experience, but also in how time is experienced or managed. Furthermore, scholars call for attention to the temporal dimensions of students' experiences (e.g., Naidu, 2023; Shahjahan et al., 2024). However, time is often treated as a contextual background or descriptive feature in these studies, which provides limited insight into how institutional time shapes the possibility and choice of students to participate in intercultural experiences.

Spatial dimensions of international students' experiences have explored how different campus spaces, such as classrooms or buildings, shape students' intercultural experiences (Davies, 2023). Xu et al. (2023) present spatial complexities Chinese international students experienced at home during COVID-19, and their study shows that while students stayed in China, they were simultaneously engaged in virtual academic spaces. They felt a sense of lack of embodied movement through campus spaces, which normally created a sense of belonging to the academic communities. Huang and Cockayne's study (2025) demonstrates postgraduate MA students' experiences through photography and their creative portrayal of students' place-making (e.g., a desk in their dorm; nature) and sense of belonging in higher education contexts. However, space is often viewed as a symbolic container rather than as a condition that regulates students' exposure to and opportunities to participate in intercultural experiences.

The emotional dimensions of students' experiences focus on describing different types of emotions in intercultural contexts. For example, Chen (2025) finds that Chinese international students at an English-as-a-medium-of-instruction university in Malaysia experienced positive emotions (e.g., satisfaction, expectation, happiness) at the start of their studies and negative emotions (e.g., insecurity, anxiety) due to limited English proficiency. Shahjahan and Zembylas' (2025) concept of clock time-as-affect allows for understanding emotional experiences (e.g., anxiety, urgency) as mechanisms through which institutional time shapes students' capacity to participate. However, most studies foreground the challenges students face while studying abroad and view emotions as outcomes of intercultural experiences, thereby ignoring how emotions function as dynamic forces that regulate intercultural engagement over time. This section discusses examples that show how existing studies provide valuable insights into the temporal, spatial, and emotional experiences of international students. However, existing studies often examine each dimension separately and use each as a research context. Thus, this article provides a framework consisting of temporal, spatial, and emotional aspects to explore how they function as conditions that actively shape and organise students' intercultural learning. To do so, I introduce how I adopt Lefebvre's theory of rhythm to form such a framework.

2.3. A Rhythm Framework

Here, I explain why I draw on Lefebvre's concept of rhythm for exploring how temporal, spatial, and emotional dimensions shape and organise intercultural engagement. In this article, I use the plural form of the term rhythm: rhythms to highlight the plurality of students' rhythms of experiences. Lefebvre writes that "everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm" (2004, p. 15) and "rhythm implies repetitions and can be defined as movements and differences within repetition" (2013, p. 96). Rhythmanalysis is a way of researching rhythm (Lefebvre, 2004), analysing space, time, and everyday life, and revealing how multiple rhythms form individual experiences (Christiansen & Gebauer, 2019). Building on Lefebvre's rhythm and rhythmanalysis, rhythm can serve as an approach to understanding time, space, and emotion as interconnected dimensions.

Rhythmanalysis has been employed across various fields, including health, art, and urban studies, to explore time, space, and emotion (Lyon, 2021). For example, Hartong et al. (2025) focus on the time aspect by theorising how predictive governance in education produces new temporal regimes through digital systems. Rezaei (2025) foregrounds the space element by exploring how urban environments such as Tajrish Square in Tehran contain co-existing rhythms, i.e., different people visiting the same space (Tajrish Square) experience it differently, affected by their religions. Nash and Lyon's study (2023) exemplifies how rhythmanalysis can be used to understand emotional experience, examining boredom during COVID-19 and people's meaning-making regarding the affective dimensions of time during lockdowns. However, these studies emphasise one dimension of rhythmanalysis at a time. In summary, the theoretical gap is that each group of studies (temporal, spatial, and emotional) remains fragmented or relegated to the background, leaving how these dimensions work together as the conditions of student intercultural participation under-theorised. To address this gap, this article advances rhythmanalysis as an integrative lens for exploring how temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms interact as conditions that shape students' participation in intercultural activities.

To illustrate the value of this integrative approach, consider the following example: A Chinese postgraduate student in a UK university is faced with a heavy assignment deadline (temporal rhythm) and, as a result, spends much of her time moving between her dormitory and the library, limiting her physical exposure to wider campus life or the city (spatial rhythm). Simultaneously, she feels rising anxiety and a sense of isolation (emotional rhythm) due to academic pressure and reduced social contact. In this scenario, the intersection of compressed academic time, confined spatial routines, and heightened emotional tension shapes not only the student's academic behaviour but also her willingness, availability, and openness to participate in intercultural activities. This integrative perspective demonstrates how all three rhythms simultaneously condition the possibilities for intercultural engagement by organising, enabling, or constraining participation before students even enter explicit intercultural encounters. The framework thus allows scholars to analyse the dynamic interplay and co-constitution of time, space, and emotion in the organisation of intercultural experiences, moving beyond studies that examine these domains in isolation.

3. Methodology

This study is part of a larger qualitative study about the intercultural experiences of Chinese international students in a UK university. An analysis of the same dataset using a different analytical lens is presented in Zhao (2026). The participants are four Chinese international students (see Table 1 for an overview of participants), and I recruited them through purposive sampling by selecting "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2015, p. 265). Inclusion criteria were: 1) adults; 2) identified as a Chinese international student; 3) interested in narratively sharing their stories. Students who had already graduated or had not yet started their studies were excluded, as the study aimed to capture students' past experiences prior to their arrival, present negotiations in the UK, and future anticipations.

Table 1: Participants' Overview

Participants Pseudonyms	Gender	Time of interview	Year of study	Course	Nationality	Age	Prior International Experience
Yi	Female	Semester 2 March 2023	2022- 2023	MA International Education	Chinese	30-34	Worked at an international school in China as an English teacher
Xia	Female	Semester 2 April 2023	2022- 2023	MA International Education	Chinese	23-25	None
Rui	Female	Semester 3 June 2023	2022- 2023	MA International Education	Chinese	23-25	Interned at a Japanese company in China
Hu	Female	Semester 3 June 2023	2022- 2023	MA International Education	Chinese	23-25	None

Source: by the author

The original data (see Table 2, summary of data) consist of four narratives obtained through narrative interviewing, which encourages students to "tell a story about some significant event in their life and social context" (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 3). The narrative session consisted of Preparation, Initiation, Main narration, Questioning, and Concluding talk, with the big question of "What are students' narratives of their meaning-making?" and the recruitment question of "Can you tell me about your studying abroad experience?" The guide was developed in English, based on Eckerdal's model of narrative interview stages (2013) and Josselson's (2013) guidelines for narrative interview questions to foster an encouraging environment.

Table 2: Summary of data

Method	Aim	Data generated
narrative interview	To generate students' meaning-making narratives in a UK university	Five hours of audio recordings of four narratives of students

Source: by the author

3.1. Researcher Positionality

I adopted an in-between insider and outsider positionality to maintain attachments to different worlds to respect participants' inner truth while also preserving a non-attachment for critical development (Humphrey, 2007). I also come from China, and I speak Mandarin Chinese as a native language. I have also studied for an MA as an international student in the UK, where the medium of instruction is English. It defends the researcher's experiences as both an insider and an outsider in intercultural communication contexts. This helped me to build rapport with my participants. An outsider position was also because I started my MA studies in a different university, and at a different time. Such a position helped me be aware not to assume my participants' experiences and their feelings when articulating them. Overall, an in-between insider and outsider positionality shaped the research questions, moments of resonance during the narrative interviews, and the interpretation. Crucially, this positionality also impacted my analytic process: during coding and theme development, my experience allowed me to be sensitive to cultural and linguistic nuances, particularly when interpreting participants' choices of words or metaphors. At the same time, I maintained reflexivity by questioning my assumptions and seeking interpretations grounded in the data, which helped avoid over-identification or projecting my own experiences onto the narratives. Engaging in regular memo writing supported transparency in tracing how my positionality influenced analytic decisions, theme refinement, and interpretations. Reflecting critically on this process enabled me to foreground participants' distinct voices while also situating my perspectives within the analysis, thus deepening transparency and analytical rigour.

While my positionality provided certain insight and resonance, it also introduced limitations. My familiarity with the participants' cultural context may have led to certain interpretive blind spots, such as overlooking experiences or meanings that might appear more visible to researchers positioned further outside the context. There is also the possibility that my shared background could have resulted in unconscious assumptions about shared understandings, potentially influencing the ways I posed questions or interpreted responses. Recognising these limits, I sought to counterbalance potential biases by engaging in ongoing reflexive practice, yet I acknowledge that some interpretive boundaries remain. Specifically, I adopted several concrete reflexive strategies throughout the research process to enhance transparency and trustworthiness. For example, I maintained detailed memoing after each interview and coding session, systematically documenting my reflections, questions, and any assumptions that arose. These memos provided a record for tracking how my interpretations developed and for challenging any automatic or taken-for-granted readings. Additionally, I engaged in regular peer debriefing with a colleague outside my immediate research context, sharing samples of coded data and analytic decisions for critical feedback. This external input helped me to identify potential biases, draw attention to alternative interpretations, and avoid over-identification with participant perspectives. Together, these reflexive strategies aimed to mitigate the influence of my positionality on the research process and to promote greater analytic rigor. These positionality-related limitations, and the steps taken to address them, should be kept in mind when considering the scope and interpretation of the findings.

3.2. Data Generation

I used Zoom for all narrative interviews due to practical constraints, and audio was recorded for each session. The narrative interviews were conducted in Mandarin based on participants' preferences. Although rhythm analysis is often viewed as an embodied research practice, which involves the body as an instrument, data generation is not limited to the direct involvement of rhythms (Lefebvre, 2013; Lyon, 2019). Building on Lefebvre (2004), Lyon (2019) proposes using other forms to capture rhythms, such as films and textual or narrative materials, i.e., the "body insufficient" approach. Nash and Lyon's (2023) study of experiences of boredom during the pandemic, using written texts, demonstrates that rhythms can be captured using body-insufficient data collection, i.e., without being physically present. Similarly, using Zoom created environments for students to articulate their experiences abroad. Thus, this study prioritised narrative to capture rhythm when it was not feasible to access students' lived rhythm through the body as a central method.

3.3. Data Analysis

I conducted narrative rhythm analysis: using rhythm analysis for the narrative data. I adopted the method of "reading to identify key rhythms" (Nash & Lyon, 2023; Christiansen & Gebauer, 2019). The analysis was guided by a hybrid coding approach, which involves a reflexive, iterative analytic process between theory-informed expectations and inductive engagement with the data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Therefore, the analytic process remained theoretically informed by the method of rhythm analysis while also open to new themes from the data to enhance both analytic flexibility and conceptual depth.

Narrative analysis requires researchers to focus on both the stories being told and their meanings (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Riessman (2008) presents four main approaches to narrative analysis: thematic, structural, dialogic / performance, and visual. This study adopts a thematic approach, focusing on the meanings participants conveyed through their stories. The unit of analysis is the narrative segment within interview transcripts that organizes experience in temporal and emotional terms. Thematic analysis in this study is not viewed as a content-analytic technique; instead, narrative segments were analysed as contextualized and temporally unfolding accounts to preserve narrative coherence. This narrative analysis is then combined with rhythm analysis to capture students' experiences of time, space, and emotion across four narratives while maintaining participants' storied meaning-making.

The analysis (Table 3, an example of coding and analysis process) consisted of a 4-step coding protocol (adapted and modified from Aslam et al., 2023) to ensure iterative and reflexive engagement with narrative data. Step 1 was to read the transcripts repeatedly and then code inductively for narrative expressions related to time, space and emotion; step 2 involved comparing codes and grouping to identify recurring patterns and rhythms across narratives; step 3 grouped codes into rhythm categories (temporal, spatial and emotional) through theory-informed and inductively refined analysis; step 4 was to reflectively interpret through repeated movement between narrative segments, emerging categories and my own researcher positionality.

Table 3: An example of the coding and analysis process

Narrative	Analytic process
<p>Extract: 那两个月真的是过得提心吊胆, 其实我爸妈也很担心, 但是他们都不跟我说, 就说我们再等一等, 不要着急, 你趁这个功夫可以自己出去放松。他们也不给我提就业的压力。直到我等来了第一份 offer 以后, 我爸妈才觉得松了一口气。我记得他们跟我说其实他们心里也很着急, 只是不敢跟我说, 然后第一份 offer 来了以后, 就是你终于有了学可以上了, 心里一块石头落地, 这时候才知道他们比我可能还着急。 (Xia)</p>	<p>Step 1: Initial codes 提心吊胆 (Feeling nervous and worried) 着急 (anxious) 松了一口气 (relieved) 心里一块石头落地 (a weight off my mind)</p>
<p>English translation:</p>	
<p>During those two months, I felt very nervous and worried. In fact, my parents were also very worried, but they didn't tell me. They just told me that we can wait a little longer and not to worry too much. Then they said I can go out to relax by myself during this time. They also didn't mention the pressure of finding a job at that time. After the first offer came, I finally had university and could go to school, and it felt like a weight off my mind. After I received my first offer, I remembered that they had told me that they were actually very anxious. It was then that I realised they were also anxious, probably more so than I was.</p>	<p>Step 2: Grouping codes Emotional tension; Emotional release;</p> <p>Step 3: Categories of rhythms emotional rhythm: tension and release</p> <p>Step 4: reflexive and iterative interpretation refine codes consolidate categories check consistency</p>

Source: adapted and modified from Aslam et al. (2023)

For identifying temporal and spatial rhythms, the same analytic process was applied. For temporal rhythms, I coded narrative segments that relied on expressions of time, pace, and interruption, and I focused on movement and places for spatial rhythms. For all three dimensions, the codes were inductively generated through thematic analysis (adapted from Aslam et al., 2023) and then organised into categories of rhythms through the same analytic process and logic. The researcher's positionality informed analytic sensitivity throughout the coding and interpretative process.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the university research ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent. The Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet, which were designed and distributed in English in accordance with the university's compliance. To ensure students' anonymity, pseudonyms (Yi, Xia, Rui, Hu) were used for all the participants. Any potentially identifying information, including university names and company names where students interned, was removed from both transcripts and findings. Participants' information, such as age, was reported in age ranges to reduce the risk of indirect identification. Regarding translation quality, I adapted Khilji and Jogezi's model (2024). 1) I took an interpretative epistemological stance; 2) I conducted the literal translation, adding my own interpretations when needed to make sure that the translated text makes sense; 3) I responded to cultural terms by using verbatim translation along with my explanation. To address cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions, I conducted the analysis using the Mandarin Chinese version and translated the relevant quotations into English for data presentation. When culturally specific expressions were used, I kept the original expression by using Pinyin and then provided an interpretive explanation in English.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Rigour

Following a narrative approach, trustworthiness was established through transparency of contextualized interpretations, rather than through claims of objectivity or neutrality (Dahal et al., 2024). Analytic rigor was ensured through a clearly exemplified unit of analysis and multi-step coding protocol, along with sustained engagement with narrative segments across cases. Credibility was enhanced through iterative coding and repeated engagement with participants' narratives.

4. Findings

Based on my analysis, I present three dimensions of rhythm: students' temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms. The organisation of findings is aligned with the analytic process using narrative rhythm analysis. For each dimension, illustrative quotations, along with my interpretations, will be presented to show how these rhythms were experienced and narrated across students' stories, and what they mean for understanding intercultural experiences.

4.1. Students' Temporal Rhythms and the Condition of Availability for Intercultural Participation

This dimension presents three temporalities: the duration of a one-year MA course; the semester time provided by the university; and the future-oriented time (i.e., students' imagination of how they would look back on their time abroad in the future). Through these lived experiences, this section explores how temporal rhythms function as the condition of availability for participation in intercultural contexts. Below, I first focus on students' narratives that reveal how they experienced the temporality of their one-year Master's programmes through multiple, sometimes conflicting rhythms.

4.2. One-Year MA Programme: Compressed yet Fulfilling

Students reflected on the overall duration of their study and viewed it as an efficient use of time. For example, Rui emphasised that it is cost-effective:

Studying abroad is very cost-effective as I can use one year to complete a degree that requires three years in China. It saves a lot of time.

This excerpt shows that the duration of a one-year MA course is viewed as highly compressed, which, however, was perceived as a positive and advantageous aspect of studying abroad. Similarly, Xia appreciated this dimension as well and associated the duration of a one-year programme with her future life:

Since the program was short, I could return home after a year. By then, I would still be at a suitable age to look for a job.

These narratives suggest that compressed time is experienced not as a constraint for students but as a resource or strategy that could yield future benefits, such as employment and life progression. Within such temporal rhythms, intercultural participation seems implicitly postponed, as future-oriented returns and benefits guide students' actions (e.g., what to do, how to spend their time) during their time abroad. In other words, the temporal rhythms of their one-year study period indicate that present intercultural engagement or participation becomes secondary to working towards future benefits. In Hu's narrative, she challenged the label of "Shui Shuo" (a master's degree that lacks quality or deep learning due to its short duration):

Many people say that a master's degree in the UK is just a "Shui Shuo". I really don't agree. I believe that during this one year, you gain things you could never get from spending two or three years on a master's program in China. You broaden your horizons, experience different cultures, visit new places, and see how people live in other countries, which simply can't be learned from a program back home.

Hu rejected the term 'Shui Shuo' as she adopted a different perspective on the one-year period abroad; specifically, she used experience density as a measure rather than the calendar duration of one year. In this sense, short and compressed time does not represent a lack of value. Hu emphasised that the experiences within this one year cannot be gained in a two- or three-year program in China, indicating that compressed time is not time loss but a unique temporal experience. Such a perception of compressed time, as a result, justifies and legitimises the present intercultural engagement (e.g., experiencing different cultures and seeing how people live their lives in other countries) within a highly compressed one-year temporal structure.

The above narratives show that the compressed temporal structure of one year does not simply reduce the importance of intercultural engagement or participation. Instead, intercultural participation may tend to become secondary or not be prioritized under the future-oriented temporal rhythms. Thus, temporal rhythms potentially shape "when" intercultural participation becomes possible, i.e., when students choose to engage in intercultural interaction or defer such activities. Even if students choose to postpone intercultural participation in practice, they simultaneously legitimize it as a meaningful aspect of their one-year time abroad. Having presented how the duration of a one-year programme shapes students' temporal orientations, the next section explores how students experienced and lived with such compressed time within the rhythms of their semester.

4.3. Busy Semester Time

This section shows students' narrated experiences of the semester. Although students provided positive comments towards the compressed one-year MA programme, their lived semester time suggests a misalignment between institutional time and personal rhythms of adjustment. For example, as Rui shared, during her first semester:

I was still getting used to the living environment and hadn't yet quickly adapted to postgraduate study. It felt like time just flew by before I had even figured out how to properly write an assignment; it was already time to hand in the final paper.

Rui's personal rhythms of adjusting to the study life in the UK were misaligned with institutional time: her pace appeared slower than the institutional pace. Similar misalignment of rhythms was also evident in Xia's story:

In China, I got up around 6:00 or 6:30 am, took a nap at noon, and then studied in the afternoon. But things were quite different here. At first, I found it hard to adjust because there was no midday break. Since most of my classes were scheduled around midday, I had to get used to having no nap. Now I've already adapted to staying up late, usually writing assignments or reading papers at night.

Xia compared her daily schedule in the UK with the one in China and shared that she had to adjust to the new schedule (without a nap) to keep up with the institutional timetable. In this example, Xia went through the process of making bodily adjustments to the institutional time through repetition. Similarly, Yi described her experience with the assignment deadlines:

... in mid-January, we had to hand in 4 papers. That gave me about a month. By the time I got to the last two, I was really exhausted, my mood wasn't great, and my study efficiency was low. Toward the end, I didn't even feel like reading literature anymore. I just wanted to get the papers done.

Yi had to work on her academic assignments during her Christmas holiday, and 4 deadlines at once led to fatigue. As a result, she practiced finishing the tasks rather than deep or critical engagement. Hu also experienced such intensity: "I had to finish four assignments at the same time, and it was overwhelming. Even though I tried my best to plan ahead and often stayed up late, I still felt there wasn't enough time." Taken together, these narratives show that institutional temporal rhythms (e.g., semester arrangement, deadlines, class schedules) often outpace students' rhythms of adjustment, and as a result, they felt time was short and fast. This further raises the question of where students could possibly place the intercultural participation or interaction when the institutional rhythms often outpace their own rhythms of adjustment. In other words, how the institution structures time regulates students' availability for the possibility of intercultural participation. It seems that using their energy and time to work on their deadlines and academic assignments is a more sensible and practical choice. Having demonstrated students' temporal rhythms over the semester, the following section examines how students held a future perspective towards their present lives in the UK.

4.4. Future-Oriented Time: Worthwhile, Useful, Memorable, and Precious

Students projected their present experiences into the future, i.e., viewing their present one-year time in the UK from an imagined future time dimension. This perspective leads to re-valuing time and participation while they were still in the UK. For example, Rui described the one-year abroad as a unique period of time, which was relatively pressure-free campus life before her entering the workplace, and she articulated present enjoyment and anticipation of future recollection:

When I look back on my life in the future, I want to have something to hold onto. This year has been very precious and has become an unforgettable memory. This year felt very relaxed because I didn't have financial burdens. It's also my final year of campus life, which feels relatively simple and pure. Right now, as a student, the pressure I feel is quite low - almost none, apart from the usual academic stress like meeting deadlines.

Rui shared an imagined future perspective, which made her realise that the one-year abroad was a unique, one-time experience. Unlike students' positive comments towards the compressed one-year programme when linking it with their future life progression, which is more about future planning, such as their careers (see 4.1.1), this future-oriented positioning led to re-valuing their present life abroad. Specifically, using this lens, the present time abroad was no longer a period of accelerated time; instead, it became a precious and unforgettable memory for their future selves. Such future awareness also shaped how students organise their present time. For example, Hu shared how she planned her weekend time:

On weekends, I now make sure to set aside at least one day to see the scenery and explore. I've already been here for more than half a year, and in another half year or so, I'll be going back to China. That makes me really value every single day here. I like to visit different small towns and observe their architectural styles. You never know if you'll see the people you meet again. Each place gives you a unique feeling and memory.

As Hu mentioned, realising that she only had half a year left in the UK, she purposefully set aside at least one day on weekends to for exploration and leisure activities. This illustrates that intercultural engagement is not spontaneous, but temporally reasoned and organised. In the meantime, participation is not only for the present experience, but also for them to remember in the future. As Rui shared:

I usually record my study abroad life through videos. When I go traveling, or recently, when many classmates were taking graduation photos, I would help them shoot. I also share my study abroad life and travel experiences on social media. For me, it's about having something to look back on in the future. I really want to leave something behind to remember this time.

Through this, Rui preserved the rhythm of the present for future time reflection. These extracts suggest how students actively engaged in creative temporal practices to expand, capture, and prolong the meaning of their compressed and short study time abroad. Their narrative shows a future awareness of both living in the present and anticipating the future, producing a rhythm of temporality that was worthwhile, memorable, and precious.

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that intercultural participation is rhythmically navigated and negotiated in relation to compressed one-year MA course duration and future-oriented temporal structures. From this perspective, rather than contradicting the compressed rhythms of one-year time, this future-oriented positioning works with them by transforming acceleration into purposeful and meaningful organizations of time. Most importantly, these temporal rhythms reveal that time is not simply a background to intercultural experience (e.g., how intercultural communicative competence accumulates over time); instead, time is an active condition that determines students' availability for intercultural participation. In other words, these findings reveal that time often regulates students' intercultural participation. Specifically, a compressed one-year programme, a busy, fast-paced semester, and academic deadlines lead students to prioritize academic tasks over intercultural interaction, delaying or limiting opportunities for intercultural participation. Thus, intercultural participation becomes temporally conditional, occurring only momentarily for students. These temporal rhythms interact with spatial and emotional conditions to shape students' intercultural participation. The following section will focus on students' spatial rhythms and how they shape students' intercultural exposure.

4.5. Spatial Rhythms of Campus and the Outside World, and the Condition of Access to Intercultural Exposure

This section explores how students' spatial rhythms enable or constrain students' exposure to intercultural encounters. Instead of being neutral settings where intercultural participation occurs, spatial rhythms are lived experiences that structure students' intercultural encounters (e.g., where they encounter others, how often, under what conditions, or even whether they have access). Below, I present two spatial rhythms: campus spaces and the outside world (non-campus settings) in relation to intercultural experiences.

4.5.1. Campus Spaces: Classroom, Campus, and Dormitory

Campus spaces include classrooms, dormitories, and libraries. The classroom emerged as a meaningful site where academic rhythms intersected with personal aspirations. Rui described her excitement on entering the first lecture hall in the UK:

During my first class, I felt as if I had returned to school after a long time, which is a feeling of being back on campus again. I had already been working for a year as an intern, so I'd been away from the classroom for a while. Walking into the classroom, I really felt, this is campus life and I was almost like reuniting with something I had missed. I think I had been looking forward to studying abroad for so long, and I just loved the feeling of being a student again, sitting there and listening to the lecture.

The classroom, then, was not only a physical space but also symbolised a long-anticipated return to student identity after her gap year. Rui's experience at her first class in the UK also reactivated her identity as a student. In this case, the novelty of the new space created a sense of openness towards intercultural interactions. Thus, the classroom in this situation became an entry for potential intercultural academic exposure. However, over time, this space later became repetitive and confining for her:

I feel like I haven't really made the most of life here. Most of my time has been spent between the campus, the library, and my dorm: studying, eating, and cooking, so I haven't had much chance to explore the world outside.

This extract was about how Rui felt in her third semester when she was mainly working on her MA dissertation, which differed from her initial feelings about the classroom space. Specifically, classroom rhythms initially created opportunities for exposure to intercultural and academic exposure. However, the repeated movement across campus spaces gradually led to more limited interactions in both the spatial and social worlds. In other words, being on campus represented limited opportunities to access other intercultural spaces (e.g., the outside world). In this case, participation is institutionally compressed as spatial rhythms reduce students' exposure to intercultural interactions. Sometimes, spatial rhythms also interrupted the exposure to intercultural engagement. Xia recalled her first days after her arrival:

When I arrived, my luggage didn't land with me. I only had my small carry-on suitcase with my documents and maybe two or three changes of clothes. I was really upset, especially since I also had to do a 10-day self-isolation. At that moment, I really missed home and felt terrible.

At this time, it was still during the COVID-19 pandemic, and she had to self-isolate when she travelled from China to the UK. In this case, the dormitory was no longer an objective setting; instead, it created a sense of confinement and isolation. The dormitory also intensified her feelings of homesickness. As a result, her exposure to potential intercultural participation was interrupted.

These narratives indicate that spatial rhythms were not neutral backdrops for intercultural learning or interaction, but shaped students' sense of belonging, identity, and well-being. Furthermore, being abroad does not guarantee intercultural interaction, as access to spaces shapes students' exposure to opportunities for intercultural participation. In this sense, intercultural exposure emerges from how spatial rhythms structure and regulate students' movement, repetition, or withdrawal in different campus spaces. As the above narratives demonstrate, university spaces function as conditions of access and often constrain students' intercultural participation. Next, I illustrate students' spatial rhythms of the outside world.

4.5.2. The Outside World: Exploration, Commemoration, and Solitude

By contrast, the outside world created spatial rhythms of exploration and relaxation. Hu enjoyed wandering into second-hand shops and buying small objects that carried commemorative value:

Once I went into a vintage store and bought a few small items: a hand-painted picture from Italy and a little spoon, the kind of things you can't find on the market. I've had quite a few trips like this. Buying these small things gives them a special commemorative value as they add an invisible sense of depth and memory to my travels. Later on, whenever I look at them, I'll immediately remember where I bought them.

In this case, outside space created opportunities for memory-making as well as cultural curiosity for her. Thus, spatial rhythms enabled a slower and reflective sense of intercultural exposure, which was more about the meaning and significance of that moment rather than intercultural competence or performance. Thus, explorative spatial rhythms deepen intercultural meaning-making. Intercultural exposure is also not limited to cultural exposure. For Xia, she experienced excitement at seeing elements of British cities such as Gothic architecture and double-decker buses, and she described these aspects as "ideals shining into reality":

I've been really drawn to the old architecture here, which feels so different from what we have back in China and gives me a whole new experience. I'd always wanted to sit on the top deck of a double-decker bus and see the view, and I finally did that. I went to see some of the iconic things here, like the red phone booths and post boxes, and different historical buildings. I had seen Gothic-style architecture before in anime or movies, but now I've been able to experience it in person. I even went to a Sunday service at a church, just to see what it was like. That moment felt like a dream come true - like an ideal becoming reality.

As Xia explained, she imagined seeing the architecture in the UK, and being physically in these spaces fulfilled her cultural imagination. Spatial rhythms are experienced through visual cultural contact, and they signify her intercultural exposure. Thus, intercultural exposure is not only about interactions with people from different cultures, but also about interacting with cultural symbols, which have their own particular value (feeling like an ideal becoming reality for Xia). Nature offered another spatial rhythm: a sense of solitude and healing. Hu described her walking next to a river:

I walked along the river for more than three hours until I got back to campus. Walking by the river gave me a lot of feelings. Being alone like that, quietly, with my mind completely empty. I didn't have to think about anything else. Sometimes I would just stand there, listening to the sound of the water flowing and the birds singing. It felt so relaxing and healing. I really enjoyed that sense of solitude.

The spatial rhythms contrasted with the intensity of academic routines and campus life, as the river created a restorative rhythm in which Hu felt solitude and healing. This also illustrated that intercultural exposure to the spatial rhythms in nature provided recovery and an emotional reset for Hu. In this way, she experienced restorative exposure, which could make the intercultural engagement possible by creating better emotional conditions. Another type of spatial rhythm is related to value-directed exposure. For example, Hu shared how she actively participated in volunteering and teaching assistant roles to engage in purposeful spaces:

I have been working as a teaching assistant. This is also to find a job in the future because I will get a certificate from this internship. All these things I do are paving the way for my future. I am now applying for volunteer activities. Before, I went to a farm to hoe the ground; I went to the forest, cut down those trees, and made fences for animals. These volunteering activities have a sense of environmental protection.

Unlike previous narratives that highlighted a sense of relaxation, Hu's spatial rhythms at such spaces (i.e., forest, farms, volunteering locations) revealed a sense of responsibility, and they were meaningful for her own future plans. She encountered and participated in such spaces to create opportunities for her own development, i.e., she experienced intercultural exposure with ethical responsibilities and future-oriented self-development. While urban and natural spaces provided opportunities for renewal and development, some social environments introduced rhythms that clashed with students' personal dispositions. For example, Xia actively rejected the idea of going to the clubs: "I'm actually not that interested in going to clubs for parties. It's related to my personality. I don't really enjoy very lively or noisy environments. When it gets too loud, I feel restless and just want to get away." Xia chose to withdraw from the potential intercultural exposure at the club spaces. This indicates that not all social spaces promote intercultural exposure automatically, as students actively choose their own preferred spatial rhythms or avoid certain spaces.

However, spatial rhythms shaped students' sense of place in ways that were dynamic and affectively charged. University spaces such as classrooms and dormitories often became repetitive and restrictive, while the outside world (shops, cities, and nature) opened up rhythms of exploration, commemoration, relaxation, and development. Students' narratives also illustrate how spaces operated as realised imagination: iconic sites like Gothic buildings or double-decker buses materialised long-held

images and ideals, producing moments of wonder when imagination turned into lived reality. Students' choices of where to participate or withdraw reflected an affective choice, with rhythms organised around sensory and emotional comfort: whether the relaxing flow of a riverside walk or the discomfort of noisy clubs.

However, these accounts reveal that spatial rhythms were not passive backdrops but active sites of negotiation, where memory, imagination, and emotion intertwined to shape students' experiences. These spatial rhythms suggest that intercultural exposure rhythmically expands and constrains across campus, urban, and natural environments, and spatial rhythms shape when and whether intercultural exposure is possible, meaningful, or desirable. These findings demonstrate that spatial rhythms regulate and shape students' intercultural exposure or withdrawal. Under the compressed one-year programme and busy semester time, students' everyday space is limited to the repetitive rhythms of staying in the classroom, library, or their dormitories. Although such spatial rhythms provide the environment for students' learning and academic tasks, they also limit the opportunities for accessing the intercultural spaces or broader social spaces. Thus, intercultural participation is often regulated by the accessibility of spaces. In this way, spatial rhythms not only shape where students are, but they also filter which activities are likely to occur and which are to be delayed or excluded.

4.5.3. Emotional Rhythms and the Condition of Willingness and Readiness for Intercultural Participation

Students' emotional rhythms included anticipation, anxiety, solitude, and confidence, which were mentioned previously when presenting temporal and spatial rhythms. These emotional rhythms did not simply reflect students' experiences abroad (e.g., whether they are satisfied or happy). This section exemplifies how these emotional rhythms shape or regulate students' intercultural engagements across temporal and spatial structures, and how they promote or reduce students' willingness and readiness for intercultural participation. Specifically, students' narratives show that emotional rhythms are more than private psychological feelings; they are outcomes of intercultural communication and actively shape students' decisions to participate in intercultural interactions. Yi shared how her emotions towards the uncertainty of a future job shaped her intercultural engagement:

I have been looking for jobs for a long time. Since December, I have been sending job applications from time to time. Finding a job was not easy. I think there may be a tendency to belittle the returnees at public schools in China.

This extract shows that Yi spent time sending job applications while she was studying in the UK, driven by uncertainty about the future job market (i.e., whether her future employers in China would accept or reject her degree earned abroad). As a result, Yi's present engagement is shaped by her anticipatory rhythm of future life. Hu's experience portrays how emotional rhythms regulate her activities:

When I was writing my assignments, I slept very late: until 2 AM every day. There was a lot of pressure. Sometimes I cannot even write many words in a day. But I knew that I was in a stressful state, so I wouldn't even think about actually wasting a day or taking some time to relax. You will feel as if you have to do something once you are in front of this computer. There is a feeling of not wanting to go out. Then there was also anxiety.

As Hu mentioned, she had to do something once she was in front of her computer. The anxiety in this case regulated her daily schedule: she stayed up late to work on her assignments. She actively chose not to go out, and she even gave up on time for relaxation under the pressure of her academic deadlines. Thus, her story indicated a sense of unwillingness or unreadiness for intercultural participation. This illustrates how emotional rhythms regulate her daily schedule and legitimize the limitations on her participation in intercultural exposure or other cultural exploration activities. These emotional rhythms also interacted closely with temporal and spatial confinement, which reduced the possibility for engagement.

Emotional rhythms are not all about intense feelings. As Xia articulated how her emotions became stabilized:

Your expectations turned into reality. It is a process of getting to know something that I did not know and then gradually becoming familiar with it. You slowly accepted it and slowly adapted to life here. At the beginning, I thought about whether it would be a life of partying every day. But later I found out that it was not like this, because you need to read papers. You have assignments. I was quite tired, but I could also experience happiness that is different from that in China. For example, there are no restrictions on your travels. I think the ancient buildings in each place are quite attractive to me, because they are different from the styles in China. I will have different feelings.

As Xia pointed out, she slowly accepted and slowly adapted to life in the UK. This shows how students manage their emotions (not only intense feelings but also stabilised emotions), which further helps them to organise their time abroad, rather than merely reflecting their intercultural experiences. Thus, intercultural communication is more than interactional moments; instead, rhythmic conditions that make students' engagement and participation possible or desirable also constitute it.

Therefore, these emotional rhythms show that emotions are not merely outcomes of intercultural experiences; rather, they serve as conditions that mediate students' intercultural participation. Various emotions students experience (e.g., anticipation, anxiety, solitude, confidence) directly shape whether they will (at what time or in which ways) participate in intercultural activities. For example, anxiety or fatigue from academic tasks may reduce willingness or readiness to participate interculturally, while positive emotions may create conditions for greater exploration of opportunities. Thus, emotional rhythms actively regulate intercultural participation, specifically the readiness or willingness to participate.

5. Discussion

The above findings demonstrate students' experiences in a UK university through temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms, and all three dimensions intersect and are interconnected to shape students' intercultural participation. Specifically, temporal rhythms experienced in relation to their one-year MA programme in the UK, fast and busy semesters, and a future-oriented perspective provide insights into how students navigated institutional time. The findings suggest that the misalignment between institutional and personal time made intercultural participation less desirable or deferred, while a future-oriented perspective (realising how unique and valuable this one year was) legitimised the choice to participate interculturally. These findings indicate that students rhythmically negotiate the choice for intercultural participation in response to their compressed,

institutional, and future-oriented temporal structures. Spatial rhythms show that intercultural exposure rhythmically expanded and constrained across different campus (classroom, library, or dormitory, urban and natural spaces (cities, riverside, club, volunteering sites), which reveals how spatial rhythms regulate and shape students' intercultural participation and how different intercultural spaces possibly promote or reduce the potential for intercultural exposure. Emotional rhythms are present in both temporal and spatial patterns: their emotional rhythms of anxiety in accelerated academic life, to loneliness in dormitory confinement, and relaxation in natural places demonstrate how emotions are rhythmically created through the intersection of time, space, and embodiment. Students' various emotions (e.g., anticipation, anxiety, solitude, and renewal) regulated and organised students' willingness and readiness for participating in or withdrawing from intercultural engagement. These findings demonstrate that intercultural participation is rhythmically regulated by the interaction of temporal compression, spatial confinement, and emotional regulation, rather than being a matter of students' intercultural communicative competence.

Thus, these findings challenge dominant approaches in intercultural studies that focus on moments of intercultural interaction or the development of intercultural communication competence by showing that intercultural participation does not just take place during intercultural interactions, as it is often shaped by conditions (temporal, spatial, and emotional) prior to the occurrence of intercultural interactions. In particular, existing intercultural studies have largely focused on interaction through intercultural communication competence; this study finds that intercultural participation can also be explored through rhythmically negotiated meaning-making, shaped by temporal, spatial, and emotional conditions prior to interaction. Holliday (2025) criticises the exploration of intercultural difficulties that focuses solely on cultural differences or individual competence. This study expands on this critique by demonstrating that intercultural participation is often constrained by misaligned temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms rather than by communicative competence. This study also speaks to critical intercultural research approaches (e.g., Huang, 2022; Holliday, 2025) that disrupt essentialist descriptions of students' intercultural experiences (e.g., viewing country as culture). Specifically, Huang (2022) critiques the deficit model for researching students' experiences, viewing international students as lacking intercultural communication competence, and ignoring students' knowledge and agency. This article further illuminates that non-participation in intercultural engagement does not equate to a lack of communicative competence; instead, the temporal, spatial, and emotional conditions often regulate and limit students' availability, access, and willingness and readiness to participate, including when, what, and where to participate. In other words, intercultural participation is often constrained by misaligned temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms between institutional organizations and personal rhythms. By exploring students' temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms, this article shifts the attention from interactional outcomes to rhythmic conditions of participation and proposes that intercultural engagement is a rhythmically negotiated process. Rather than categorising students' experiences, the theoretical contribution of this multi-dimensional rhythm framework is in its potential for researchers to explore how engagement, participation, and exposure are rhythmically organised across institutional time, spaces, and emotional experiences, and how intercultural participation is often shaped by different conditions in advance of the actual intercultural interaction.

Methodologically, the multi-dimensional rhythm framework exemplifies an integrated analytical lens for rhythmanalysis to move from metaphor to systematic operationalisation. This study illustrates how rhythmanalysis can be practised as a methodological toolbox for understanding the lived complexity of temporality in education. By combining this with spatial and emotional dimensions, it demonstrates the potential of rhythmanalysis to capture how temporal, spatial, and emotional dimensions simultaneously operate to regulate, limit, and shape intercultural participation. This study contributes to the development of rhythmanalysis as a comprehensive methodology. This framework also provides an approach for researchers to evaluate why intercultural initiatives or activities promote or limit students' participation by exploring temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms. Lastly, intercultural communication should not be measured by how often or how successful the interaction is, but how it rhythmically aligns with students' sustained participation over time.

This study suggests that intercultural experience emerges through ongoing negotiation of temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms. Practically, based on this, universities should recognise the rhythms shaping students' lives by reducing misalignments between institutional time and students' lived capacities. In designing timetables for teaching and assessment, 1) universities need to take into consideration that accelerated and compressed deadlines lead to prioritisation of academic survival over intercultural engagement and 2) intercultural activities university can offer should consider students' temporal, spatial and emotional rhythms (e.g. whether they create the burden for their academic learning or emotional fatigue, allow the access and promote self-development). To further support alignment between institutional and student rhythms, universities could implement several concrete strategies. For the temporal dimension, universities might distribute assignment deadlines more evenly throughout the semester, introduce flexible assessment windows, and provide clear advance notice of important academic dates to give students more agency in planning their time. Regarding spatial rhythms, institutions could create or repurpose campus spaces specifically for intercultural engagement, such as dedicated common rooms, quiet zones, or outdoor areas where students can mingle and relax outside formal academic settings. Universities might also facilitate off-campus activities and offer transportation for students to explore local environments. Addressing emotional rhythms, universities could provide targeted well-being sessions during high-pressure periods, offer workshops on stress management, and create peer support or mentoring groups specifically designed for international students to share challenges in a supportive environment. These measures encourage a rhythm-sensitive approach that moves beyond treating intercultural participation as a generic goal, recognising and adapting to the lived realities of students' everyday experiences. By embedding such strategies into policy and practice, universities can foster an environment in which intercultural participation is feasible, inviting, and enriching for all students.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge potential risks, limitations, and challenges associated with implementing rhythm-sensitive changes in higher education settings. Firstly, institutional constraints such as limited resources, scheduling inflexibility, or established traditions may make it difficult to redesign timetables or reconfigure campus spaces as suggested. Additionally, creating meaningful alignment between institutional and individual rhythms is complex due to the diversity of students' cultural backgrounds, personal preferences, and academic needs. There is also a risk that well-intentioned efforts to accommodate diverse rhythms could inadvertently fragment support services or exclude some student groups if not carefully managed. Furthermore, attempts to synchronise university structures with student rhythms may not always be feasible or may have unintended consequences, such as increased administrative burden or the perception of unequal treatment. Therefore, any shift towards rhythm-sensitive support structures should be accompanied by ongoing evaluation, consultation with students,

and flexibility to adapt strategies in response to feedback and evolving student needs. By recognising these risks and proactively addressing them, universities can more effectively work towards fostering rhythm-sensitive environments that genuinely support intercultural participation.

6. Conclusions

This article has employed rhythmanalysis to develop a multidimensional framework for understanding the temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms of Chinese international students in UK higher education. This article shows that intercultural experience emerges through the negotiation of temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms, thereby shifting the focus from intercultural communication competence to the rhythmic conditions for intercultural participation. This study contributes to intercultural research by 1) theoretically advancing a condition-focused understanding of intercultural experience by showing how intercultural participation is potentially limited or deferred prior to the occurrence of interaction; 2) methodologically exemplifying a multi-dimensional rhythm framework that foregrounds time, space and emotion as interdependent dimension shaping intercultural participation, which offers an alternative to existing approaches that explore these aspects in isolation; 3) empirically providing practical insights into the lived experiences of Chinese MA students on one-year programmes and demonstrating how compressed academic time, access to space, and emotional rhythms simultaneously organise availability, access and willingness and readiness for intercultural participation.

A limitation of this study is that the context is restricted to Chinese MA students at a UK university. While the study provides an in-depth examination of temporal, spatial, and emotional rhythms, the findings are not intended to be generalized beyond similar institutional settings. While the framework is derived from the experiences of Chinese postgraduate students in the UK, it offers analytical tools that may be relevant for examining intercultural participation among other international student groups and across diverse higher education settings. However, generalizability is limited by the study's sample and institutional focus, so further research is needed to assess its applicability in broader contexts.

Future research could explore intercultural participation with other groups of sojourners in other types of sojourning, such as migration. In addition, there is an opportunity for further theoretical development through constructing cross-paradigm dialogues. For instance, the rhythm framework may be productively put into conversation with other critical or poststructural paradigms, such as assemblage theory, intersectionality, or decolonial approaches, to explore how different ontologies and epistemologies conceptualise the conditions of intercultural participation. Such an integrative discussion could enrich our understanding of the dynamic, relational nature of intercultural experiences and open new avenues for research collaboration and synthesis. I want to end this article with one call for intercultural scholars to look beyond the moment of intercultural interaction by exploring what happens in advance of the interaction to understand whether students can participate (or not) and a question derived from the core of this work: how can institution operate in a way that students can have time, access and emotional capacity to engage in intercultural learning?

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