

# A LEARNING-BELIEF EVOLUTION MODEL OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

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**Abstract:** This study explores how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve during their first academic year in Malaysia's culturally diverse classrooms. As part of a broader research project, it addresses the central question: How do learning beliefs develop over time in culturally diverse settings? Twelve first-year Chinese students, studying abroad for the first time, participated in semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. A two-stage thematic analysis revealed four key themes: (1) learning shock and expectation gaps, (2) experimentation with new learning ways, (3) integration of new learning ways, and (4) becoming intercultural learners. These themes form the basis of a learning-belief evolution model, grounded in an integrated framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Mezirow's transformative learning theory. The model illustrates how students integrate familiar and new learning ways through the dual processes of social interaction and critical reflection, shaped by cognitive reflection, emotional challenges, and cultural interaction. The findings offer practical, culturally grounded insights for educators and institutions seeking to better support international students' learning experiences.

**Keywords:** Chinese international students; Learning belief; Culturally diverse classrooms; Transformative learning; Sociocultural theory

## Introduction

The rise of international higher education has brought increasing cultural diversity to universities worldwide, reshaping teaching practices and student-teacher dynamics (Kayashima et al., 2024). Chinese international students represent a significant portion of this global population, bringing culturally rooted learning beliefs that influence how they navigate unfamiliar academic environments (Li, 2003). These beliefs, often described as 'cultures of learning', are socially and culturally transmitted frameworks that shape students' perceptions of education and approaches to learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011). Cultural frameworks can create differences in educational values and expectations across contexts: while Western education often emphasises creativity and independence, East-Asian traditions tend to prioritise perseverance, moral growth, and respect for authority (Li, 2013). Consequently, Chinese students studying abroad often encounter practices and expectations that challenge their traditional beliefs about learning and academic success. Early cultural models framed cultures as fixed, but newer perspectives, such as Holliday's (2013) concept of small cultures and sociocultural approaches (Kumpulainen & Renshaw, 2007; Wang, 2010), emphasise that culture is evolving and shaped through social interaction.

Malaysian classrooms reflect Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous influences (Tengku Nor Rizan Tengku Mohamad Maasum et al., 2015). Chinese students from Confucian backgrounds, where

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hierarchy and group harmony are valued (Li, 2003; Tan, 2018), may face new expectations around discussion and critical thinking. These differences can create dissonance, sometimes resulting in resistance or even shifts in beliefs (Mezirow, 1991). Despite this, research has rarely explored how such processes unfold in non-Western, culturally diverse contexts, meaning broader perspectives on Chinese students' learning beliefs can be overlooked. To address this gap, the present study investigates how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve during their first year in Malaysia, focusing on the role of diverse classroom experiences. The central research question is: How do Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve during their first academic year in a culturally diverse setting?

## Literature Review

### *Definitions, Theoretical Perspectives, and Evolution of Learning Beliefs*

Learning beliefs are shaped by experience and influence how individuals approach learning tasks (Wenden, 1999; Benson & Lor, 1999). Early research found beliefs as a key factor in explaining individual differences in learning that general learning theories often overlook (Lee & Webb, 2005). While beliefs were once viewed as relatively stable aspects of metacognition (Bromme et al., 2010), later studies have shown that they are dynamic and responsive to context, varying across cultures, learning environments, and stages of development (Kalaja & Ferreira Barcelos, 2019; Yang & Kim, 2011; Lou & Noels, 2019).

In the early 2000s, researchers began to emphasise the cultural and social shaping of learning beliefs, particularly in relation to Chinese students (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). These culturally grounded beliefs develop through interaction with teachers, peers, and classroom practices, and they influence how students prefer to learn (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Yang & Kim, 2011; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014). Understanding changes in learning preferences requires research into the ways students' beliefs about knowledge and learning develop and evolve over time. Such beliefs are shaped by prior educational experiences (Perry, 1968; Brownlee et al., 2002). Research shows that students' beliefs about learning influence how they regulate their learning and select strategies appropriate to different tasks (Hertel et al., 2024; Lawson et al., 2019). However, students do not consistently adopt deep approaches; instead, they adjust their strategies to task demands (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004).

While education can influence learning beliefs, they are usually stable and may shift only when challenged by new experiences (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). Research shows that studying abroad often triggers such changes, with students gradually adapting their beliefs when given time and freedom to try new methods in different cultural settings (Wu, 2015; Nilemar & Brown, 2017; Gutierrez & Park, 2015). Diverse environments help students rethink their beliefs, making them more open-minded, supporting the evolution of learning beliefs over time (Reybold, 2002; Perry, 1970; Wang, 2010). Depending on context and experience, beliefs may remain stable or continue to develop (Trevors, 2023; Yoon & Maeng, 2024).

Existing research mostly focuses on Chinese students learning English in Western contexts (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Yang & Kim, 2011), but more research is needed on how learning beliefs change over time in other contexts (Fazilatfar et al., 2015). Since definitions of beliefs shape how research is done (Kalaja et al., 2018) and current ones are inadequate, this study defines learning beliefs as students' culturally shaped views of learning, influenced by values, traditions, and expectations and not just thinking processes (Li, 2003).

### *Chinese International Students in Culturally Diverse Classrooms in Malaysia*

Nearer regional destinations like Malaysia and Singapore have recently gained growing attention among Mainland Chinese students (Zhao et al., 2023). The increasing recognition of Malaysia as an education hub in Asia (Singh & Jack, 2022) has resulted in Malaysia emerging as a leading destination

for Chinese international students, who now constitute the largest source country group by a significant margin. Education Malaysia Global Services data shows that Chinese students were the largest international student group by a significant margin, submitting 75,434 applications in 2025 (EMGS, 2026). As a multi-ethnic country with three dominant ethnic groups (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019), Malaysia features a harmonious society with diverse sociocultural backgrounds (Abdullah & Pedersen, 2003). Within this context, Xiao et al. (2024) note that Chinese international students in Malaysian universities face academic and cultural challenges as they adapt to new educational and sociocultural environments, highlighting the importance of institutional support in helping them adjust. Despite some cultural similarities, these students still experience culture shock (Dongqi et al., 2020), including difficulties with integrating with locals, language barriers, classroom participation, and limited English proficiency. Additional challenges involve speaking anxiety, vocabulary gaps, unfamiliar accents, and academic writing struggles (Zhai & Razali, 2022; Zhang & Hasim, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024), which can be attributed to unfamiliar learning styles and limited knowledge of the host culture (Xue & Singh, 2025).

According to Chiu and Hong (2007), culture shapes how students behave and learn. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) describe 'cultures of learning' as a set of beliefs and practices that define 'good learning,' which may clash with local expectations. Students from different background communities may have different preferences, expectations, interpretations, values and beliefs about how to learn, and these differences may affect the teaching and learning process within the classroom (Assis Hornay, 2020). In fact, studies suggest that Chinese students find it difficult to adjust to Malaysia's student-centred ways of learning, which focus on participation and critical thinking (Ma & Ismail, 2022; Zhang & Wahab, 2022). Such ways contrast with China's teacher-dominated classrooms and Confucian ideals of 'silence and respect for teachers' (Cao et al., 2018; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2022).

Indeed, a plethora of literature which addresses Chinese students' challenges in Malaysia exists, but they rarely investigate how their learning beliefs evolve in response to these challenges. There are also a few practical guidelines provided in literature for the development of the Chinese cultures of learning within Malaysian classrooms in Higher Education, highlighting a need for research on how Chinese students reshape their learning beliefs through interaction and reflection in culturally diverse classrooms.

## Theoretical Framework

### *An Integrated Lens: Sociocultural and Transformative Learning Theories*

Understanding how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve in Malaysia's multicultural classrooms requires a framework capable of explaining how beliefs are shaped through classroom interaction and how learners internally reconstruct those beliefs through critical reflection. No single theory fully captures this dual process. Therefore, this study integrates Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Mezirow's (1997, 2000) transformative learning theory as complementary lenses for analysing how culturally mediated classroom interaction creates conditions for reflective belief over time.

Sociocultural theory emphasises that learning is fundamentally shaped by participation in socially organised activities and culturally structured environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, while key concepts like the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding, and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978) explain how learners encounter new academic practices through interaction with lecturers and peers, they are less explicit in explaining how individuals internally reinterpret and reconstruct their existing beliefs about learning.

Conversely, transformative learning theory focuses on how individuals revise 'frames of reference' through critical reflection, particularly when confronted with 'disorienting dilemmas',

experiences that challenge prior or existing beliefs (Mezirow, 1991; Feng et al., 2025). This perspective explains how belief change happens at the cognitive level, but taken alone, it underplays the socially mediated classroom processes that generate such challenging experiences in the first place.

For this study, neither perspective alone suffices. Sociocultural theory explains how students are exposed to new academic norms and supported through interactions with lecturers and peers, while transformative learning theory explains how these socially mediated encounters can lead them to reflect on and reshape their beliefs about learning. Together, they offer a more complete explanation of how learning beliefs evolve.

Therefore, in this study, sociocultural and transformative perspectives are treated as analytically interconnected. Classroom interaction generates the structured encounters that expose students to unfamiliar expectations; transformative processes explain how these encounters trigger reflective reassessment and belief restructuring. Importantly, transformation here does not mean abandoning beliefs for new ones (Mezirow, 1991). Rather, students develop what Li (2018) terms a “third space”, a blended learning orientation drawing on both prior educational experiences and newly encountered practices. For example, a student who initially believed public questioning is disrespectful may, through scaffolded participation and critical reflection, come to see questioning as legitimate engagement while retaining Confucian-influenced values of diligence and respect. Belief evolution thus becomes expansion rather than replacement, a broadening of the learner’s interpretive toolkit in response to new cultural contexts.

This integrated framework is particularly appropriate to this study because it captures both sides of adaptation: participating in new classroom practices and rethinking prior beliefs. Rather than assuming students replace old ways with new ones, it helps show how they selectively blend both, forming flexible approaches that shift with context. While Berry’s (1997) acculturation model and Kim’s (2017) cross-cultural adaptation theory help explain cultural adjustment, they focus mainly on identity and communication rather than on learning *belief transformation*, the central concern of this study.

Using this integrated lens, the study examines how Chinese students’ learning beliefs evolved during their first year in Malaysia through classroom interaction, academic challenges, and reflection. It builds on previous work combining these lenses in international education contexts (Gamal El Din, 2021; Li, 2018) and extends it to a non-Western, culturally diverse setting, responding to calls for more contextualised understandings of international student adaptation beyond Western host countries (Kettle, 2017; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

## Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore how Chinese international students’ learning beliefs evolved during their first academic year in Malaysia’s culturally diverse classrooms. A case study approach is appropriate as it allows for in-depth, contextualised examination of a bounded phenomenon (Yin, 2018), in this instance, the learning-belief trajectories of a specific group of students within a particular institutional setting.

The research participants were twelve first-year Mainland Chinese undergraduates, recruited through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: first-year students, no prior overseas study experience, enrolment in culturally diverse programmes, and sufficient English proficiency to participate in interviews and focus groups. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached; new categories ceased to emerge by the 10th interview, with the final two confirming thematic saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms were used throughout.

Data were collected in two phases over one academic year (June 2022–June 2023) using three methods for triangulation: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. In Phase 1 (June 2022), semi-structured interviews with all 12 participants explored participants’ initial assumptions, beliefs and expectations of teaching and learning and their responses to

unfamiliar teaching practices in Malaysia. Example questions included, “*What is a good student to you?*” “*What were effective ways of learning for you in China?*” Interviews lasted 40–60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Focus groups (six participants per session) were built on interview findings, with questions including “*What is successful learning to all of you based on your experiences in China?*” Participant observations consisting of 11 sessions were conducted during lectures, study and tutorial sessions to better understand the learning culture and ways of mainland Chinese students. Observations included observing classroom behaviour and interactions, instances of confusion or disengagement. Field notes were recorded during observations and expanded immediately afterwards.

In Phase 2 (June 2023), all 12 participants were re-interviewed to capture current beliefs and retrospective accounts of change. Interview questions were designed to elicit reflective narratives of change, consistent with approaches commonly used in transformative learning research (Taylor, 2007). Questions include “*Has your idea of what it means to be a ‘good student’ changed? Describe experiences that make you say that.*” “*Looking back over the year, can you tell me about a time when you realised your old ways of learning were not working?*” Participants naturally used temporal language (“*at first,*” “*later I realised,*” “*now I understand*”), which was systematically noted during transcription and became central to the analysis of change over time. Follow-up focus groups explored how learning beliefs had developed, with adapted questions like “*How has your understanding of successful learning changed?*” and “*What learning ways do you now find most effective?*” A second round of 11 participant observations using the same protocol allowed comparison of behaviour and classroom dynamics across the year.

Data were analysed in two stages. First, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of all transcripts and field notes was conducted manually through iterative familiarisation, coding, and theme development, yielding four themes: (1) Learning shock and expectation gaps, (2) Experimentation with new learning ways, (3) Integration of new learning ways, and (4) Intercultural learning competence. Second, trajectory-based interpretation examined how beliefs evolved over time using retrospective accounts (Spencer et al., 2021; Thomson & Holland, 2003). Following Saldaña’s (2015) guidance on temporal coding, all instances of temporal markers (e.g., “*at first,*” “*later,*” “*now I realise*”) were identified in Phase 2 data. These markers distinguished between early (initial experiences, uncertainty), middle (reflecting on effectiveness, trying new ways), and later (transformed understanding, intercultural awareness) periods in participants’ narrated trajectories. This approach treats retrospective meaning-making as valid data about how change is experienced (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and is established in longitudinal qualitative research that reconstructs trajectories from retrospective accounts when real-time data collection is limited (Thomson & Holland, 2003; McKibben & Breheny, 2023).

The four themes were then re-examined through this temporal lens. A consistent pattern emerged: the language participants used signalled where they were in their learning journey. When participants used words like “*at first,*” they tended to describe confusion and unmet expectations (Theme 1). When they used words like “*later,*” they often talked about trying out new ways to study (Theme 2). Descriptions of developing regular habits and thinking critically about how they were learning corresponded to the third theme: Integration (Theme 3). Finally, phrases like “*now I realise*” pointed to a deeper understanding of what learning really is. (Theme 4).

This analysis did not assume linear progression. In fact, a few participants showed signs of multiple themes in a single interview, while others understood one aspect of a new culture but continued to struggle with another. Despite this variation, the same patterns appeared across many participants. This consistency confirmed that the four themes are distinct but connected parts of how learning beliefs develop over time. To improve trustworthiness, themes were cross-checked across interviews, focus groups, and observations. For example, early confusion reported in interviews matched observed withdrawal in Phase 1, while later confidence aligned with more active participation in Phase 2.

## Findings

The findings emerged from the two phases of data and showed how twelve Chinese participants' learning beliefs evolved over their first academic year in a multicultural context. The themes are (1) Learning shock and expectation gaps, (2) Experimentation with new learning ways, (3) Integration of new learning ways, and (4) Becoming intercultural learners.

### *Learning Shock and Expectation Gaps*

Most Phase 1 data showed growing discomfort in the early weeks after arrival. Participants' pre-conceived beliefs, shaped by China's teacher-centred, memorisation-based system, conflicted with the more interactive, student-centred approach in Malaysian classrooms.

Participants expected structured, exam-oriented learning where knowledge was transmitted straight from lecturer to student with little room for questioning. Participant 3 explained, '*For our gaokao, we only need our textbooks and teachers, they are enough.*' Participant 9 added, '*Chinese teacher explained everything in detail, we need remember only because there is correct answer for every question.*'

Staying quiet and not asking questions was seen as expected behaviour. Participant 11 said, '*...in China, we don't ask questions, especially publicly, as it is disrespectful to teacher, like you didn't study hard enough.*' During a focus group, Participant 9 shared, '*We Chinese students feel it's strange to interrupt teacher in class even when they ask us to speak.*' This was visible during an initial participant observation, where, despite the class lecturer repeatedly asking for input, most Chinese students kept their eyes down and avoided initiating questions.

In the early stages of arrival, unfamiliar teaching ways unsettled the participants. Group discussions, open-ended questions, and the idea that knowledge could be debated felt strange. Participant 9 expressed uncertainty regarding sharing opinions in class, '*In China, the teacher explains everything, we just follow. Here, the lecturer asks us to share our opinions, but I'm not sure what to say.*' Participant 10 added, '*Why do lecturers here always ask us questions? They should tell us the answers, not us, I think.*' Participant 12 asked, '*Does it mean the new theory is more accurate?*', a question that reflected the struggle to accept knowledge as something open to change rather than fixed. Similarly, Participant 8 also questioned the credibility of sources for the first time, noting, '*I think e-books, Google Scholar, and websites are ok, but lecturers always asked us to check their reliability, why?*'

Participant 9 shared a moment of disillusionment: '*Last week, I wrote a long essay, but got low marks. Lecturer said I didn't apply the content; I seriously don't understand this.*' Participant 11 was observed to have approached her lecturer and asked softly, '*I put all the points down, why my marks are so low?*' These early moments of confusion marked the beginning of a shift, as participants encountered expectations that challenged beliefs they had previously taken for granted.

### *Experimentation with New Learning Ways*

After the initial shock, Phase 2 data showed participants attempting to engage with more interactive, self-directed learning. Over time, they reflected on the limits of their previous ways, like reliance on memorisation, the belief that hard work almost always guarantees success, and reluctance to ask questions publicly.

Having come from educational backgrounds where success was closely tied to the ability to remember everything in textbooks, participants admitted that this approach quickly fell short in classrooms that valued group discussion and critical thinking. Participant 3 said, '*My first exam here, I forgot a lot of information, and couldn't logically figure the problem! In the next test, I didn't memorise so much anymore, but I don't know if it'll work.*' Participant 12 recounted, '*At first, I memorised everything but test questions that appeared, I couldn't even answer one of them! It's a bit useless to memorise, so now I'm trying to understand what lecturers teach rather than just remember.*' During

a focus group, one participant reflected, *'In beginning, we studied PowerPoint slides, but it seems they are not tested in exams here!'* Yet Participant 3 admitted they were still unsure how to rely less on memorisation. Participant 11 said, *'even when I tried to take notes to help me understand, I still go back to remember all lecture notes.'* Her comments indicate the tension between adopting new ways, such as taking notes, and defaulting to familiar habits like memorisation.

The belief that long hours and discipline guarantee achievement was also challenged. Participant 4 recalled, *'I usually studied until 2am, but I still didn't get good marks in my first test. Nowadays, I study only 2 hours but I really make sure it goes in my brain, not sure if it works!'* Participant 11 said, *'In China, if you work hard, you pass well. But here, even I worked hard, it may not be, so I'm learning to apply what I learn here, but it's difficult.'*

Asking questions in class had been discouraged in China, as Participant 5 explained, *'In my first weeks here, like in China, I didn't dare to ask questions in class, in case I say something wrong.'* But in the Malaysian classroom, however, participants encountered a different approach, one that encouraged participation. Participant 5 reflected, *'lecturers here keep asking us to ask questions saying it's important to do that, I try sometimes but it's a bit weird because I feel shy!'* Participant 4 echoed, *'Lecturers always encourage us ask questions, but even I think asking questions publicly here is fine, I still don't dare to do it often.'*

During an observation of participants, participant 11 kept glancing at the lecturer before giving hesitant, rehearsed responses. Participants 9 and 12 volunteered opinions but hesitantly, saying *'... but I'm not sure'*, *'...maybe you don't think so'*, then falling silent when asked further questions. In group activities, participants 10 and 12 took notes and answered when directly asked, but avoided initiating ideas. Participants' behaviours and reflections showed uncertainty or inconsistent use of more student-centred ways of learning because they sometimes reverted to familiar teacher-centred ways. Although they realised that old habits like memorising or staying silent were no longer enough, they were still unsure, trying new ways through trial and error. At this point, learning was more exploratory but still inconsistent.

### *Integration of New Learning Ways*

As participants grew more confident, they blended familiar ways of learning with new ones. Moving from Theme 2 to Theme 3, participants' responses shifted from *'At first, I tried...'* or *'But even when I tried...'* to *'Later I found what worked...'*, showing how they gradually adapted and made new learning ways their own.

The researcher used temporal markers as evidence of movement between themes, even though the movement is retrospectively described, not all were directly observed. In Stage 3, evidence showed participants applying new learning ways intentionally, whereas Stage 2 reflected sporadic or tentative attempts.

Participant 3 noted *'In China, I studied everything before exam'*, however, after several months in Malaysia, she realised that *'questions here require analyse, not just remember facts, so these days, I must understand concepts first'*. Participant 7 explained, *'I still memorise a lot, but not as much as I did when I first came here. Now, instead of just repeating ideas, I put them together like a picture, it works!'* These comments suggest participants did not abandon memorisation entirely; rather, they integrated it with conceptual understanding. Memorisation became a foundation for critical thinking rather than the only method of learning.

Participant observations reflected these changes. In Phase 1, most participants sat quietly and avoided eye contact. By Phase 2, many could raise thoughtful questions and debate ideas. As Participant 2 shared, *'At first, I spoke because lecturers asked us to, but now, I myself think it really helps me understand better'*. Participant 6 added, *'Mostly, during discussions, I felt I had no choice but by the second semester, I realise speaking aloud indeed made my head clearer'*. In one English literature class, Participant 5, who had usually stayed silent, confidently shared a story about her identity, sparking an open discussion. Participant 6 remarked, *'Somehow, I came to love arguing... lecturers' instructions made me start to know the meaning of thinking critically.'*

Participants also moved from studying alone to learning with peers. Participant 11 shared, *'I always studied alone, even many months after coming here, but nowadays, I want to study with friends because I can understand more.'* Participant 6 added, *'I felt forced to join group discussions at first, but now I actually prefer this way because classmates see things differently.'* Participant 9 said, *'When we discuss things together, I often realise what I missed before.'* Group study was no longer just a useful experiment, but a regular, cognitively enriching learning way. Participant 7 explained, *'I still study myself but I realised when I study with others, even I make mistakes, my classmates can point out to me. I'm more confident, it's good.'* The phrase 'study with others' reflects a change from prior, more individualistic study habits, where the participant had begun experimenting with learning with peers, corresponding with Stage 2. Meanwhile, the outcome, 'more confident', indicates that this approach has had a positive and internalised effect on her self-perception as a learner. This sense of confidence suggests that group study is no longer just a trial strategy, but has been accepted and integrated into the participant's belief system as a meaningful and effective learning way, which is a clear indicator of Stage 3.

By Stage 3, most students had developed a hybrid learning way, blending solitary practices with more interactive, group-based methods and had begun to internalise these approaches.

### *Becoming Intercultural Learners*

At this stage, participants showed conscious awareness of cultural differences in learning and began to value them. Participant 6 shared, *'I used to be angry when people didn't understand me, but now I'm politer, I try to understand others first.'* Participant 4 confided, *'I used to speak too directly and made people angry without knowing. Nowadays, I adjust my tone.'* Along similar lines, participant 2 recalled, *'Many times, I got angry in group projects, these days, I'm more patient. A year ago, no way!'*

Some changes went even deeper, touching on values and beliefs. Participant 5 reflected, *'Even being here for many months, I still believed there was only one right way to do thing, however, something happened two months ago, making me realise things are not always black or white.'* This shift in moral reasoning was echoed by participant 10, who said, *'Studying international case studies lately make me know ethics is not the same everywhere. It depends on culture.'* In the same vein, participant 12 added, *'I used to think Chinese ways are always correct, but then, I think now, other countries have their own logic too, it's not wrong, just different.'*

Even as they became more culturally aware, they faced challenges that tested their resilience and confidence. Participant 4 said, *'Sometimes, we find classmates didn't want to work with us, thinking our English is bad, but nowadays, I don't care much, I just do my best.'* She also said, *'I was very impatient with classmates who were often slow in their work...but nowadays, I have become a better listener.'*

Supportive classrooms helped them build confidence, as participant 2 said, *'I learned here making mistakes are ok, nowadays, I'm dare to speak up more.'* Participant 7 added, *'Lecturers here are kind so I slowly become braver to speak.'* Inclusive approaches by lecturers made participants feel comfortable enough to speak up and participate. Being around culturally diverse classmates was helpful in making participants feel more comfortable in groups. Participant 9 noted, *'I felt strange in first few months, but now I feel fine!'* Malaysia's multicultural setting also made a difference. As Participant 12 claimed, *'It's easier here, because its mixed, not just one culture!'*

Group work remained challenging but slowly improved. Participant 3 said, *'Malaysian classmates always submitted things last minute. I used to get angry. But nowadays, I just adjust myself and remind them earlier.'* Participant 5 described, *'In China, teachers don't criticise students in front of everyone. Here, they do. At first, I felt ashamed. But now I feel it's normal, it's not bad meaning.'* Likewise, participant 10 admitted, *'In the first semester, I was confused with most lecturers' accents! Now, I can even use Malaysian accent! It doesn't bother me anymore.'* For these participants, progress did not come overnight, as it took time, repeated exposure, and a lot of awareness and patience.

Participant 2 summed up with, *'Before coming here, I never talked to foreigners. It's my first time to a classroom with so many different cultures, I was so nervous! Now, I can talk to anybody'*. For the research participants, it was their first time in a diverse learning environment. Being surrounded by such diversity led to new ways of thinking, not just about how to study, but about how to relate to others and find their place in a shared space.

## Discussion

### *An Emergent Framework: A Learning Belief Evolution Model*

This study explored how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolved during their first year in Malaysia's classrooms. Analysis of interviews, focus groups, and observations revealed four interconnected themes: (1) Learning shock and expectation gaps, (2) Experimentation with new learning ways, (3) Integration of new learning ways, and (4) Intercultural learning competence. These themes are presented sequentially for clarity, although participants described them as overlapping and recursive, and not in a straight line. The process is better understood as a spiral, where participants may revisit earlier challenges, but with growing insight each time.

#### *Theme 1: Learning Shock and Expectation Gaps*

The foundation of this theme came from data collected at the beginning of the year, which showed participants' initial reactions when their expectations (Lam, 2024; Lin, 2022) were confronted with unfamiliar pedagogical practices. They were confused, anxious, and struggled with open discussions and critical thinking in Malaysia's more participatory classrooms (Dongqi et al., 2020; Ma & Ismail, 2022). As one participant remarked, *"I felt lost when lecturer asked us to debate; I didn't know how to argue without disrespecting others. I should learn such skills before coming here!"*

Similar adjustment issues have been reported among Chinese students in other Western contexts (Holliman et al., 2023), aligning with Li's (2003) assertion that culturally shaped learning beliefs influence how students perceive effective learning. While Zhou et al. (2008) describe this phenomenon as cultural learning shock, the present study frames it not just as stress but as a catalyst for change. From a Mezirowian perspective, these moments represent the "disorienting dilemmas" that can trigger transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990). Research shows that students' learning beliefs are closely linked to how they experience and respond to educational environments, with dissonance often serving as a catalyst for reflection and change (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Lee & Branch, 2022; Stolk, 2024). However, the data suggest this process does not happen in isolation. Participants who moved through their initial shock often described peers or lecturers who normalised their confusion or offered guidance, pointing to what Vygotsky (1978) calls "mediated assistance." This suggests that disorienting dilemmas alone may not be enough for transformation; they require social support. Wu (2015) similarly found that culture shock paired with reflective support can catalyse growth, reinforcing the interdependence of social interaction and internal reflection. These findings extend Prawat's (1992) observation that dissatisfaction with current beliefs is the first step toward transformation, by showing that students need socially supported dissonance, not just dissatisfaction.

#### *Theme 2: Experimentation with New Learning Ways*

When classroom practices challenged their existing approaches, participants felt pushed to begin experimenting with unfamiliar ways of learning, such as mind-mapping, group discussion, and self-monitoring. One participant captured the tentative nature of this theme: *"I started making mind maps when I saw copying every word didn't help me understand, but I don't know if it'll succeed."* This supports the view that beliefs are dynamic and responsive to new environments (Yang & Kim, 2011). As Reybold (2002) suggests, discomfort can create openings for growth. In

line with Prawat's (1992) argument, belief change occurred when learners became dissatisfied with previous methods, saw alternatives, and gradually integrated new ideas with what they already knew. This theme highlights the interplay between Vygotskian scaffolding and Mezirowian reflection in ways neither theory alone fully explains. Experimentation occurred within the Zone of Proximal Development as participants tried new ways of learning. They were supported by peers and lecturers who showed alternative approaches (Vygotsky, 1978), enabling them to experiment with more confidence. However, Vygotsky's framework explains what students do, but not why they persist when outcomes are uncertain. Mezirow's (2000) concept of critical reflection fills this gap and explains that participants are not merely copying behaviours but evaluating whether new strategies resolved the dilemmas of Theme 1. The participant's uncertainty (*"I don't know if it'll succeed"*) was not hesitation but more thinking in action and assessing whether new approaches are worth integrating. This finding complicates Prawat's (1992) three conditions for belief change (dissatisfaction, alternatives, continuity) by showing that dissatisfaction alone does not automatically lead to experimentation. Students needed encouragement from lecturers and peers to try what felt unfamiliar, implying that belief change is not just cognitive; it depends on social conditions that make experimentation feel safe. The process of reflection and gradual adjustment observed here aligns with broader research on Chinese learners' adaptability in new educational contexts (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2021; Kember, 2016).

### Theme 3: Integration of New Learning Ways

As noted in the methodological preface, Themes 2–4 were distinguished through temporal coding. Theme 3 captures how participants moved beyond trial to deliberate integration, blending memorisation with conceptual discussion, balancing individual study with collaborative learning, and reflecting on what worked. One participant still memorised information but now talked it through with peers to deepen understanding. Such integration reflects Prawat's (1992) third condition for belief change: continuity, where new beliefs are integrated alongside existing ones rather than replacing them. Instead of abandoning Confucian values, students developed a hybrid orientation, retaining diligence and respect for teachers while embracing autonomy and critical thinking, consistent with research on Chinese learner adaptation (Li, 2013; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

This theme offers the clearest evidence of how Vygotskian and Mezirowian processes converge. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of internalisation, social experiences becoming part of individual thinking, was visible as participants appropriated classroom practices into personal study routines. Over time, these social experiences shaped their internal thinking. However, internalisation alone does not explain why students retained some practices and discarded others. Mezirow's theory fills the missing gap by showing that learners drive their own change when they stop, reflect on their results, and assess whether blended approaches resolved the dilemmas of Theme 1 better than old or new approaches alone.

Such a reflective act shows that learning involves adapting existing practices, not replacing them, a view consistent with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). The data also challenge Vygotsky's assumption of straightforward internalisation and Mezirow's assumption of frame replacement. Neither fully accounts for the "hybrid adaptation" (Tran, 2011) found in this study. Participants maintained dual orientations, like memorising in some contexts and discussions in others. They were not "between" cultures, but had developed an understanding of when each approach was appropriate. These findings challenge deficit narratives about Chinese learners (Lyu et al., 2021; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013). The issue is not whether students can adapt to Western-style classrooms, but whether adaptation is framed as replacement (losing one culture to gain another) or expansion (adding tools while retaining existing ones). The data support expansion, adding tools while retaining existing ones, suggesting that transformative learning theory may need to accommodate multiple frames of reference, not just transformation (Holdo, 2023; Mezirow, 2000).

#### Theme 4: Intercultural Learning Competence

Theme 4 captures the most complex orientation observed in participants' later reflections: a reframed understanding of learning itself as culturally situated. As one participant explained, *"It's not just about learning for marks but also, when I work with others, I see learning differently."* Participants' reflections revealed a shift toward deeper intercultural understanding, not just trying new methods, but rethinking their whole approach to learning (Markey et al., 2023). This suggests Chinese students have a capacity for intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), aligning with Deardorff's (2006) conception of navigating difference through openness and empathy.

Participants began to act differently, too, corresponding with Mezirow's (2000) "action phase," where new perspectives are put into practice. Unlike past research suggesting Chinese students struggle in student-centred classrooms (Lyu et al., 2021; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013), participants in this study made conscious choices about when to adapt and when to retain aspects of their own learning culture.

Theme 4 reflects what Mezirow (1991) terms "transformation of frames of reference", a shift in how participants understood learning itself. Over one year, encounters with differences made them more reflective and culturally aware, gradually reshaping old beliefs to fit new academic contexts (Wu & Cosnefroy, 2025; De Leersnyder, 2017). Similar findings by O'Dea, Wang, and O'Dea (2023) show that exposure to diverse environments leads students to question habitual practices and develop more flexible approaches.

However, the data revealed something Mezirow's theory underplays, that this transformed frame is inherently intercultural. Participants developed an awareness that their familiar approaches suited certain contexts, while Malaysian approaches were right for others. This goes beyond Perry's (1970) "commitment within relativism." Participants did not simply commit to one perspective among many. Instead, they held multiple perspectives simultaneously and chose among them based on context. This finding extends existing intercultural competence models (Deardorff, 2006; Bennett, 1993) by suggesting an additional dimension: epistemological intercultural competence, the recognition that ways of learning are culturally shaped, and that competent learners move between them intentionally, rather than simply adapting to the host culture.

Importantly, the four themes are not discrete stages. Participants followed different paths; some experimented while still disoriented, others integrated strategies before fully reflecting, and some reached intercultural awareness in certain areas while remaining in earlier orientations in others. The themes are therefore overlapping dimensions, not sequential steps. While presented in order for clarity, the process itself is non-linear: sometimes new experiences shift beliefs first; other times, trying new approaches leads to deeper reflection. This iterative, bidirectional relationship (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Hong, 2006) means that as students apply expanded beliefs, they gradually shape future learning ways. These findings align with research showing that learning is influenced by cognitive, emotional, and cultural factors (Reybold, 2002; Prawat, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978; Tang, 2022; Chen & Chen, 2021; Kember, 2016), reflecting the non-linear nature of belief evolution in cross-cultural contexts.

#### **Study's Contributions, Limitations, and Future Work**

This study offers three main theoretical contributions. First, it shows that learning beliefs evolve through the interplay of social interaction and critical reflection, meaning Vygotsky and Mezirow are complementary rather than competing frameworks. Second, it reconceptualises adaptation as expansion rather than replacement. Participants did not abandon existing beliefs but developed what Li (2018) terms a "third space", a place where different ways of learning coexist and can be used flexibly depending on context. Third, it reveals the non-linear, recursive nature of belief evolution, where beliefs and learning ways shape each other over time, suggesting that interventions must address both at the same time.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for scaffolded support, peer interaction, and reflective activities. Early orientation workshops can help set realistic expectations. During the experimentation phase, low-risk group tasks where there are minimal consequences if mistakes occur allow students to try new approaches safely. As students' progress, assignments that combine memorisation with critical thinking can support integration.

For policy, Malaysian higher education should recognise learning adaptation as dynamic and culturally mediated, using culturally sensitive methods and creating opportunities for reflection and peer interaction to support international students' academic and intercultural development. Together, the study's contributions provide a research-based explanation of how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve in diverse classrooms, highlighting this as growth rather than a weakness.

Despite these contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the model relies on participants' retrospective accounts collected at only two time points. While this captured significant shifts in learning beliefs, it may not fully catch the subtle, continuous changes between these points. Second, as with all self-reported data, participants' accounts may involve some bias, as past experiences can be selectively remembered or reconstructed. Nevertheless, the depth and richness of their reflections still provide strong insight into how beliefs developed over the year. Third, peer review was conducted on only 10% of the coded data. While this helped check coding consistency, a higher percentage would have further strengthened dependability. Future research could address these limitations by employing more frequent longitudinal data collection (e.g., mid-year points) and more extensive peer review throughout.

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