# Research Project: The Personal and Professional Life Trajectories of University of Manchester Chinese Alumni

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

## THE PROMISE AND REALITY OF A UOM DEGREE: UNPACKING STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT UOM

### 1. MOTIVATIONS FOR STUDYING AT UOM: PRESTIGE, PASSION, AND PRACTICALITY

The interviews explored participants' motivations for pursuing a degree at UoM. Most cited career advancement as their main reason, believing that a degree from a top international university would give them a competitive edge in the Chinese job market. Other practical reasons for studying in the UK included lower tuition fees compared to the US, English language skills, and a strong affinity for British history and heritage — influenced by pop culture references like Sherlock Holmes, Harry Potter, and football clubs. Within the UK, Manchester stood out due to its high QS rankings and its leading research reputation.

> *"Firstly, I really love the United Kingdom. I've read Sherlock Holmes from when I was eight years old. So, I really love the culture. And the second reason is very simple - I just wanted to hold a Master's degree from a top-tier university so that I can earn a lot of money."*

**Participant 8 (MSc 2014-15 | Female | AI Researcher, NTT DOCOMO Beijing Labs)**

*"Despite being a small country, the density of talent is incredible. Walking around, history feels very present. At the University of Manchester, there's Alan Turing. The Turing Award, the highest in computing, is named after him. In fluid mechanics, there's Reynolds, a great scientist. You feel history around you."*

**Participant 3 (PhD 2017-20 | Male | Associate Professor, Central South University)**

### 2. CULTURAL DIVERSITY, SELF-SEGREGATION AND UNMET EXPECTATIONS

While studying at Manchester, participants' initial expectations were put to the test. Although all acknowledged the value of their UoM degree and the knowledge gained, they also pointed out the high concentration of Chinese students within their cohorts, which reduced opportunities for interaction with local and other international peers. As a result, many felt drawn toward socialising within Chinese student circles, leading to self-segregation.

*"I wanted to experience different cultures. I wanted to see the world. But it turned out to be me staying with Chinese people; hanging out with Chinese groups. So that is a little bit of a*

*pity for me. I felt very disappointed at the very beginning, but then I thought, actually, British people are all around you. You can find them; you can talk to them. But actually, I didn't have a lot of opportunities at that time, and I was very busy with my studies.”*

**Participant 5 (MA 2022-23 | Female | IELTS English Teacher, Xi'an)**

## 3. TEACHING, CURRICULUM, AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Overall, participants were pleased with the standard of teaching and the resources provided by the University, finding their course content well-designed and intellectually stimulating. Nevertheless, they highlighted several challenges, such as language barriers and curriculum differences. Despite these obstacles, they appreciated the teaching staff for being 'friendly', 'approachable', and 'helpful', offering encouragement and support throughout their studies.

*"[A lecturer] told us […] "Once you're sitting in here, it's because I think that you have full abilities [...] to learn these lessons, to have this Master's degree. And all you have to know is that you have 潜能 [tr: potential] to finish this." And after that, I have had more confidence.”*

**Participant 10 (MA 2022-23 | Female | Government Sales Institution, Beijing)**

## SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, CULTURE SHOCKS, AND THE EVOLUTION OF HABITS, VALUES, AND BELIEFS

### 1. BUILDING INDEPENDENCE ABROAD: DAILY LIFE AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

For most participants, studying at UoM marked their first experience living abroad, away from family, and learning to become independent. This involved picking up basic life skills — from cooking meals to fixing a broken bike tyre — and engaging in new social activities, such as visiting pubs and clubs. While most interactions took place on campus with classmates and teaching staff, some participants also travelled across the UK, took up new sports, and enjoyed an active social life in Manchester. All emphasised the importance of building a strong support network, particularly when adjusting to a new environment felt overwhelming.

*"I still remember the first day when I arrived at Manchester. My supervisor went to the airport and picked me up because it was the first time I went abroad. He's a Chinese person. […] I appreciated his help. […] My colleagues also introduced [themselves] and they also helped me to find a place to live. I found a house to rent. They […] helped me to get used to the new environment quickly.”*

**Participant 4 (PhD 2017-20 | Male | Associate Professor, Central South University)**

## 2. REDEFINING IDENTITY, SELF-EXPRESSION AND BEAUTY STANDARDS

During their time at UoM, several participants experienced an unprecedented sense of freedom in self-expression, particularly outside the gendered and racialised traditional expectations of Chinese society. Many described experimenting with fashion for the first time, including thrift shopping and wearing vintage clothing and felt empowered to explore new personal styles, reflecting extensively on shifting beauty standards.

*"Before I got to the UK, I didn't realize I'm beautiful. Because, you know, in China, a man's dream is about a bright girl, like the skin needs to be white and thin. For a girl like me, I like [the] outdoors so much, so my skin is chocolate colour, kind of. So, it's not so popular with men's dreams in China. […] But when I went to the UK, […] the international standard is like tanned skin is more popular. This gave me more confidence, definitely."*

**Participant 2 (MSc 2016-17 | Female | Founder & CEO, Domestic Shanghai Corp.)**

## 3. NAVIGATING SAFETY, SERVICES, AND SENSITIVE CONVERSATIONS

Although participants did not report experiencing direct incidents of racism, many remained cautious and alert. Safety concerns — including thefts and other criminal incidents — were frequently mentioned. Participants also expressed frustrations with aspects of public services, such as long waiting times for NHS appointments, outdated shopping malls, and early closing times for stores. There was also hesitation around engaging in political discussions, as many felt it could be risky or uncomfortable.

*"When I'm trying to find somebody to talk with, I think they have some political agenda. […] I don't know whether I should keep talking with them, or I should stay in my own comfort zone, because sometimes I think it's a little bit dangerous to, you know, to get involved in those political conversations. And of course, China is a very different country. We have a different political system, so I don't really want to have this kind of conversation to confuse myself."*

**Participant 5 (MA 2022-23 | Female | IELTS English Teacher, Xi'an)**

## 4. SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES: NEW WORLDVIEWS AND GLOBAL AWARENESS

Participants widely agreed that their worldviews and personal values evolved profoundly during their time at UoM. Many described it as the first time they were exposed to a broad range of ideas, social groups, and alternative lifestyles. They spoke about joining religious organisations, volunteering at refugee NGOs, participating in LGBTQ+ Pride, and witnessing protests concerning Iran, Ukraine, and Gaza. Academic course content also challenged their pre-existing beliefs and encouraged more critical reflection on their role in global society.

*"My mind has changed when I had the first course. […] My supervisor told me that happiness is not related to your income, and he said that you have to know why you're working. You have to know the significance of what you have learned, and you have to apply what you have learned in university to real-life issues, to help those people in need. […] I hope to be socially responsible; that's my goal in life now."*

**Participant 9 (MSc 2016-17 | Female | RF Verification Engineer, Eriksson Beijing)**

## 5. TOLERANCE, AUTHORITY AND WORK CULTURE

Many participants also reflected on the differences in knowledge production between China and the West and how their engagement with Western philosophical thought reshaped their identities and working habits. They described becoming more "tolerant" and "accepting," gaining a heightened awareness of social inequalities, and recognising their own privileged status. Several are actively trying to incorporate these changes within their workplaces, for example, by resisting overtime work and fostering more collaborative environments.

*"After returning to China, I encourage my students to express their ideas, no matter how immature they might seem. I can't be sure if their seemingly childish ideas won't lead to something great. Encouraging thought and discussion is essential. My teaching style now is more inclusive, slightly different from locally trained PhDs, with tolerance for new ideas."*

**Participant 3 (PhD 2017-20 | Male | Associate Professor, Central South University)**

## RETURNING HOME, PURSUING A CAREER IN CHINA AND FACING REVERSE CULTURAL SHOCKS

### 1. RETURNING HOME: CAREER PLANS AND IMMIGRATION BARRIERS

The majority of participants returned to China immediately after graduation, with limited work experience in the UK. Their decision to leave was largely influenced by the UK's restrictive immigration policies and concerns about visa and employment requirements for international graduates. Nonetheless, many were confident about securing good jobs back home, some having already established professional connections in China.

*"I chose to go back to China because there are more opportunities for me on the Chinese market because I have connections here, and more Chinese companies that I can join. And one of the most important things at that time, I think it was Theresa May, the prime minister, saying we can't get a visa after we graduate. […] I think it's really hard for Chinese people to find a job in Britain. So, I went back to China."*

## 2. FEELING UNPREPARED: LIMITED EXPOSURE TO THE UK JOB MARKET

Participants also expressed feelings of uncertainty when it came to navigating the UK job market, noting that China, with its greater sense of security and familiarity, felt like a more viable option. This uncertainty often stemmed from the limited time they had spent in the UK and their relatively narrow exposure to British society and professional environments.

*"My impression of the UK society and the business [sector], of jobs and career opportunities was very limited. […] I think, if I stayed longer, I'd try to interact with the society more, maybe I'd have a full picture, a larger picture of the UK society, of business. […] But at that moment, I was so young, not as mature and smart as now, and I understood the society [in a] very limited [way]. So, it was best to come back."*

**Participant 2 (MSc 2016-17 | Female | Founder & CEO, Domestic Shanghai Corp.)**

## 3. TRADITION AND FAMILY: THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATIONS

Beyond professional motivations, family expectations also strongly influenced their decision to return. Many participants wished to spend more time with their aging parents or start a family of their own — decisions heavily shaped by traditional gender expectations and social norms in China. In particular, female participants felt these pressures acutely, even when their personal aspirations differed.

*"My parents… they have a lot of 期望 [tr: expectations] from me. […] It's complicated. […] 它在不是意义上是有点好的工作. People always say that a stable job is good, and girls have to be stable because you have to look after your family, your child or something, but I don't think that. […] I'm young, and I want to have more experiences."*

**Participant 10 (MA 2022-23 | Female | Government Sales Institution, Beijing)**

*"I am the only child in my family [...] and, as you know, Chinese people are really, really traditional [...] especially if the only child is a daughter. […] They think that maybe it's risky for their daughter to go abroad […] They are also afraid of their daughter to have a foreign marriage. […] When I was younger than now [...] I liked to have more challenges for myself, but for now, parents are really important […] and with their age growing older and older, maybe we also need to spend more time with them."*

**Participant 1 (MSc 2020-21 | Female | PhD Student, Ningbo University)**

## 4. RE-ENTRY TENSIONS: BALANCING SELFHOOD AND SOCIAL ROLES

While some alumni adjusted quickly back into Chinese society, others faced significant challenges. Exposure to different worldviews and alternative lifestyles during their time abroad made it harder for them to reconcile traditional expectations with their evolving sense of self and aspirations, as they are trying to negotiate their conflicting identities.

*"This is a really chaotic time because I'm the age of 26, so this is the perfect or the golden age for a woman to get married in China. [...] Sometimes I think that as a human being, I do have some responsibilities, as a daughter, as a person in Chinese society, living here. So, I'm trying to find my social identity and my self-identity, how to balance these two. […] I'm trying to find out whether I should go abroad again or I should stay here."*

**Participant 5 (MA 2022-23 | Female | IELTS English Teacher, Xi'an)**

## IMPROVEMENT SUGGESTIONS FOR THE UNIVERSITY

### 1. ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: EXTRACURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES

Most participants expressed regret about not engaging more with local and international students, often due to prioritising their academic work. They felt that the University could do more to actively promote its extracurricular activities and explain how students can get involved. This issue was particularly relevant for PhD students, who often work independently for extended periods, leading to isolation and potential mental health issues.

*"Many PhD students may not be aware of these opportunities because their academic pressures are quite heavy. Subjectively, they may not be willing to step out and interact with others, easily getting immersed in their own status quo. Without a large classroom environment, it's difficult for them to meet others beyond their small research group, sitting in an office with those few people. Perhaps organizing weekend trips could help with that."*

**Participant 3 (PhD 2017-20 | Male | Associate Professor, Central South University)**

### 2. STRENGTHENING CAREER SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Participants suggested that the University should offer more frequent and higher-quality career workshops and professional networking events specifically tailored for international students. They emphasised the need for better support in understanding the UK job market, including available opportunities, employer expectations, and the skills required to succeed.

*"Maybe they can give more information in advance, rather than when students want to find a job, then they come to them. Maybe when they [i.e.: students] first come to this University, and they take a Major of Design, then, maybe in the first semester the career support people*

*can say, "in the UK, we have these big branders, we have that design house. If you stay in the UK, you may get this kind of opportunities like that. That can be, I think, rather helpful for the students' career development."*

**Participant 2 (MSc 2016-17 | Female | Founder & CEO, Domestic Shanghai Corp.)**

## 3. IMPROVING THESIS SUPERVISION AND INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICES

In terms of teaching and academic support, most participants felt that more structured guidance was needed for their dissertations. A common concern was the limited number of meetings with supervisors, which left some students feeling under-supported during the most crucial stage of their degree. In classroom settings, participants also recommended rethinking the structure of tutorial discussions and group projects to encourage greater interaction between Chinese and non-Chinese students, thereby reducing tendencies toward self-segregation and fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

*"When we organized the groups, we found each other by our mind, but I think we can do this from the level of university or from the lecturers. […] I think that maybe they could help us to organize the group, […] invite some foreign students and Chinese students or other backgrounds' students together […] to make the group discussion more balanced."*

**Participant 1 (MSc 2020-21 | Female | PhD Student, Ningbo University)**

## 4. ADDRESSING FUNDING GAPS FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

One participant expressed criticism regarding the funding and resources available at the University, especially in light of the high tuition fees paid by international students. In his case, a lack of sufficient funding threatened to delay his PhD experiments, prompting him to personally fund the shipment of necessary materials from China to Manchester. He noted that this was not an isolated experience, as other students had encountered similar challenges related to limited research support.

*"I was ready to do some experiments, like manufacturing of some samples, but my supervisor told me he doesn't have money. He didn't have funding, so I paid money by myself. […] Another friend of mine [UoM PhD student], he also paid all the tester manufacturing, all the fees by himself, even buying some equipment."*

**Participant 4 (PhD 2017-20 | Male | Associate Professor, Central South University)**

## 5. RETHINKING THE ONE-YEAR MASTER'S STRUCTURE: BALANCING DEPTH, INTEGRATION, AND ENGAGEMENT

Several participants raised concerns about the structure of the one-year taught Master's programmes at UoM, particularly in terms of academic depth and the limited time for adjustment. They felt that the intensity of the programme left little room to explore their research interests beyond a surface level and made it difficult to build meaningful relationships with peers or engage in academic life outside the classroom. For many Chinese students, the short timeframe also restricted opportunities to adapt culturally, socially, and academically — which they saw as a missed opportunity for deeper integration.

*"The one-year taught master's programs in the UK do seem to lack a lot of academic depth. I don't know if you've felt this, but whether it's in lab sessions or in interactions with professors, there's a sense of superficiality. What I'm suggesting is to increase academic communications and provide students with more opportunities to participate in the college's work, such as helping professors organise materials and increasing face-to-face interactions with them*."

**Participant 9 (MSc 2016-17 | Female | RF Verification Engineer, Eriksson Beijing)**

## 6. ENHANCING INTEGRATION THROUGH INTERCULTURAL PROGRAMMES AND TARGETED COMMUNICATION

Regarding the University's efforts to support the integration of Chinese students, participants expressed a strong desire for more intercultural initiatives, such as the Manchester Confucius Friendship Programme (MCFP) and language-buddy schemes. These programmes were seen as valuable opportunities for newly arrived Chinese students to form meaningful connections with non-Chinese peers and build a more inclusive university experience. Additionally, participants recommended that the University expand its presence on Chinese social media platforms — particularly WeChat and XiaoHongShu — to more effectively engage with the Chinese student community, especially freshers who may not yet be accustomed to Western digital platforms.

*"I think that maybe for the cohorts that have more Chinese students, the University might have some policy or could do something to give these students a bit more chance to deeply interact with international or local students."*

**Participant 2 (MSc 2016-17 | Female | Founder & CEO, Domestic Shanghai Corp.)**