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Cover letter

Social formation for interaction in international mobility programmes: A case of Danish students in China

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Abstract

From a social cultural learning perspective, the study explored the social formations for interactions of Danish students during a short-term international mobility study programme in China, using multiple qualitative data sources. Although a variety of patterns of strategies, practices and discourses were identified, the findings suggest that the students socialised most with co-nationals and little with local Chinese. Although their internal socialisations created some opportunities to learn from each other and learn about Chinese culture, they were mainly found to be constraints to learning due to limited interaction with locals and stereotyping the local 'others', risking misunderstandings. The outcomes of the study identify a gap between the ideal of the mobility study programme's formal objectives and the practice of its implementation, which challenges prevailing political initiatives to increase internationalisation through student mobility. Also questioned is the effectiveness of sociocultural learning design in the short-term mobility context.

Keywords: international mobility, study abroad, social interaction, Denmark, China

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, cross-border mobility among students for the purposes of study is seen as one of the indicators of internationalisation strategies and campus diversity in higher education (Bista, Sharma, & Gaulee, 2018). Over recent decades a number of studies have stressed the micro-level individual experiences of studying abroad, focusing on foreign language learning, cultural confrontation and challenges, identity and personal transformation, and interaction between travellers and locals (Byram & Dervin, 2008; Bista & Gaulee, 2017; Coleman, 2013; Deardorff & Van Gaalen, 2012; Dervin, 2011; Jackson, 2016; Teichler, 2015). A number of studies have reported statistical analysis of factors leading to the decision to study abroad (Bista et al., 2018) and policy analysis of internationalisation (Author, 2017; Waters, 2018). Recently popular topics have also emphasised the value of learning opportunities for locals and hosting institutions (Authors, 2016).

Indeed, trends for studying abroad are changing continuously. For example, while most studies have described the flow of students from East to West, with English-speaking countries the most attractive destinations, or the flow within Europe (Jackson, 2016; Teichler, 2015; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015), a new flow from West to East has been observed in recent years (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Dervin, Härkönnen, & Du, forthcoming; Jackson, 2016). As one of the main receivers of international students in recent years, China has hosted both long- and short-term study abroad students in rising numbers. According to the Ministry of Education in China (2016), the number of international students in China has risen from around 100,000 in 2004 to 442,773 in 2016. This trend will probably continue in years to come, as the economic and political role of China is increasing and political initiatives related to internationalisation compel educational institutions to send more students abroad. Although the number of international students in China is catching up with the number of Chinese students abroad (ICEF Monitor, 2016), the research ratio is heavily weighted towards Chinese students abroad (Dervin et al., forthcoming).

International student mobility is also changing from individuals studying abroad to institutionalised mobility programmes. In terms of timeline, the study period is changing from long-term (from three to six months or longer) to short-term (from two to eight weeks) (NAFSA, 2006). Currently there is growth in short-term mobility programmes with participants travelling, living and studying together in non-Western countries (Danish Government, 2013; European Higher Education Area, 2009; NAFSA, 2006; Teichler, 2015), which is regarded as a cost-effective mode for educational institutions to meet the aims and requirements of internationalisation (Engle & Engle, 2003). In addition, the new drive for internationalisation and an increasing awareness of the importance of interdisciplinary skills in a globalised age means that students from diverse disciplines now also join short-term study programmes abroad, instead of only students majoring in Chinese languages and sinology. Ideally the increasing popularity of short-term mobility programmes will offer students enhanced language proficiency and intercultural competences, which will lead to higher global employability. They are often lauded as a way to prepare and engage students for a globalised world (Wendy, 2019). Therefore research attention is called for, with a need for more studies on short-term mobility (Grey, Cox, Serafini, & Sanz, 2015; Holmes, Bavieri, Ganassin, & Murphy, 2016; Walters, Charles, & Bingham, 2016).

This study aims to identify challenges and address issues in short-term international student mobility programmes with students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, particularly in the context of travel from West to East, i.e. from Europe to China. From a social cultural learning perspective, the study explores how social formations were established for learner interaction at a meso level in the limited time of a short-term study abroad programme, and whether these social formations became a source of or constraint on the development of intercultural competences.

2. Social formation and interaction in studying abroad

Social formation

Studying in international mobility programmes is largely based on experiential and sociocultural understandings of learning, on the premise that learning through sociocultural learning activities is done best by sharing and developing knowledge through contextual and meaningful interaction (Coleman, 2013, 2015; Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Thus, intensive, frequent and meaningful interactions are a crucial component of learning during mobility study (Coleman, 2013). Previous studies have emphasised the importance of interaction between international students and local people in the target language and culture for learning. However, recent studies have recognised that mobility programme students tend to interact first with co-nationals, second with other outsiders, and only third with locals (Brown, 2009; Coleman, 2013; Meier & Daniels, 2013). Identified reasons included anxiety and the need for a sense of security (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014), a preference for interacting with people similar to oneself (de la Rua, 2003), shared language (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015), institutional and spatial constraints in the host universities (Dervin, 2009a, 2009b; Kenney, 2011), and encountered cultural differences (Gram, Jæger, Liu, Qing, & Wu, 2013).

The majority of the existing literature on social formations and networks in the context of international student mobility has focused first and foremost on the development of foreign language proficiency in a 'Western' context as an outcome of social interaction (Kinginger, 2013; Meier & Daniels, 2013; Mitchell, Tracy-Venture, & McManus, 2015; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015), with the development of (inter)cultural competence often regarded as an added benefit or by-product. Nevertheless, little is known about how social formation processes among mobility students influence their social interactions with locals in the hosting context, or about their possible influences on cultural learning processes, particularly in the scope of short-term mobility programmes which are increasing in popularity. Therefore, it is worthy of research attention to explore not only with whom, but also *how* international mobility students interact among themselves, how their practices might affect interactions with and perceptions of local people and the target 'culture', and whether these social formations become sources of or constraints on learning processes in relation to intercultural competences.

CoP and discourse as tools to study social interaction

Social interaction, although widely recognised as an important activity in researching certain objectives, is rarely a learning objective for study in mobility programmes. Conceptualising short-term international mobility study from the perspective of sociocultural theory, learning activities are situated in a context of social interaction, meaning that knowledge is historically and socially defined, and knowing thus becomes an act of participating in different social systems (Wenger, 2000). In theorising learning activity as a socially mediated process, the

concept of Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) can be used. A CoP is centred on the *joint enterprise* that defines a community, which binds members together through a shared understanding, enabling them to contribute and hold each other accountable. Through interaction, establishing norms and relationships of mutuality, members *mutually engage* themselves in the CoP. This engagement leads to the production of a *shared repertoire* of resources belonging to the CoP, which can be described as knowledge.

The use of CoPs to study learning processes during study abroad is not new. However, previous studies have mainly examined the *immersion* perspective of the CoP concept in the context of mobility studies (Jackson, 2016), focusing on how newcomers gain access to and immerse themselves in local CoPs during mobility study, in order to obtain the knowledge or repertoires operating within these learning systems. However, examination of the relationships between CoPs and social interaction within groups has been uncommon during mobility studies. The concept of a CoP can also be useful to examine boundary encounters of CoPs (*delegations*). Boundary encounters between CoPs may be described as events rich in potential learning and negotiation of meaning within CoPs and across boundaries (Wenger, 1998). A CoP can open and connect to other CoPs and the rest of the world by allowing others to observe and experience practices without subjecting them to the demands of full membership. Operating at the *peripheries* of CoPs is a source of dynamism, and presents opportunities for learning both for outsiders and for communities (Wenger, 1998).

In reality, however, challenges of accessibility may curtail participation in CoPs. Coleman's concentric circles model (2013) illustrates students' social interaction in three spheres: co-nationals, other others, and locals. Within and across these spheres students engage in different social activities and communities, but Coleman finds that interaction across the spheres is significantly limited. Dervin (2009a) analysed how differentialist discourses impede interaction with locals and the integration of exchange students in Finland, and discussed how certain discourses create perceived boundaries between the self and 'others'. Discourses can be seen as systems of options that help language users to construct their perceptions of phenomena and (re-)position themselves (Dervin, 2011). Understood as "a subject's representation or perspective that s/he (co-)constructs, negotiates, contests … while interacting" (Dervin, 2009a, p. 20), discourses help speakers to co-construct 'reality' and their perception of phenomena, including abstract concepts such as 'culture', or 'the Chinese', which consequently are understood as fluid and dynamic concepts that are constantly negotiated. Interlocutors' understanding of these concepts is thus reflected in the discourses that they take part in. Therefore, connecting CoPs and discourse may offer a tool to understand learners' social formations and interactions during student mobility experiences.

3. The present study

Many students specialising in Chinese language and sinology studies from Danish universities have studied in China over the past decades, mainly in the form of individual visits for a period of six months to two years. Their studies in China, following the curriculum provided by the host universities, were mainly focused on learning Chinese language, culture and social studies, with encouragement to immerse themselves in intercultural interaction and language learning (Brødsgaard & Kirkebæk, 2001). Currently, part of the internationalisation strategy for higher education in Denmark is to encourage more students from diverse educational disciplines to participate in short-term cross-border mobility programmes, specifically to China and other BRIC countries. The goals are to increase the development of language proficiency and international skills in students and to strengthen business networks through an increase in short-

term mobility programmes, to a level where 50% of all graduates in 2020 have experienced a stay abroad of at least two weeks as part of their education (Danish Government, 2013). Thus, for Denmark short-term mobility stays in China provide a welcome opportunity for higher education institutions to meet several internationalisation goals at once.

Many students going to China today have different prerequisites for the trip in terms of motivation, knowledge and language qualifications than were necessary in the past. Furthermore, their stays are organised in bigger groups and on a shorter term (often for only two weeks). As the composition of participants and contexts change, research attention is needed to investigate the new conditions for social interaction and learning experiences.

In particular, in recent years mobility programme curricula have started to expect students to explore and learn about everyday modern culture during their free time through social interaction and observation (Authors, 2018). This is based on an unfounded assumption that students will learn about culture and develop intercultural competences spontaneously by staying in a foreign context (Deardorff, 2009; Dervin, 2009b), which mirrors understandings implied in policy papers on internationalisation strategies (Lyngdorf, 2017). However, recent literature has reported that Danish students established stereotyped understandings of "the Chinese" and "Chinese culture" in a static and homogeneous way during their mobility study in China (Authors, 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to further reconnoitre their daily interaction experiences in order to better understand how they construct their learning in such a context.

This study, from a sociocultural learning perspective, intends to explore conditions and constraints for learning in a short-term international student mobility programme context, specifically students from Denmark studying in China. In particular, it aims to explore how guest students in such programmes learn (or do not learn) on their own through the way they form social groups, and investigates with whom students interact, and what their focuses of interaction are. The following research questions were formulated:

1) How do students from Denmark form groups for social interaction in an international mobility programme in China?
2) What are the constraints on and conditions for learning in the process of social formation and interaction?

4. Methodology

The research context of this study was a mobility programme co-organised by a Danish university (through a Confucius Institute programme) and a university in Beijing, as it neatly reflects efforts to advance internationalisation strategies through mobility activities and recent policy directions in Denmark. This two-week programme takes place in July each year, usually with 20 to 25 participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Students are expected to have taken a minimum of 40 hours of Chinese language and culture classes. The official aims of the programme are to develop language proficiency and learn about (Chinese) culture. During the programme the students attend morning language classes daily, while cultural activities take place in the afternoons, in the evenings, and on weekends. Additionally, students are encouraged to explore in their free time to learn more about the culture on their own.

Seventeen students from one Danish university who took part in this collaboratively organised Denmark-China mobility programme in 2015 participated in the current study. They had mixed ages (ranging from 21 to 30 years), diverse disciplinary backgrounds (engineering,

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international affairs, media, business and economic studies), and ethnic backgrounds (12 Danish and five from other European countries). A qualitative approach to data generation was employed, including multiple sources of data from participant observation (Spradley, 1980; Wadel, 1991) and group interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Table 1 presents details of the participants.

Table 1. Participant information

No./Name	Nationality	Background	Age	Focus group no.
1 Jakup	Dutch	Structural and civil engineering	22	1 (Non-Danes)
2 Patryk	Polish/Danish	M.Sc. Organisation and strategy	30	1 (Non-Danes)
3 Peter	Bulgarian	Culture, communication, and globalisation	25	1 (Non-Danes)
4 Adam	Hungarian	Development and international relations	24	1 (Non-Danes)
5 Sena	Turkish	International business and economics	27	1 (Non-Danes)
6 Sofie	Danish	International business communication	22	2 (Young Female Danes)
7 Ada	Danish	Communication and interactive media	22	2 (Young Female Danes)
8 Stine	Danish	International business communication	24	2 (Young Female Danes)
9 Line	Danish/German	International business communication	22	2 (Young Female Danes)
10 Søren	Danish	HA Business economics	22	3 (Young Male Danes)
11 Hoang	Danish	Electronic engineering and IT	22	3 (Young Male Danes)
12 Anni	Danish	Humanities informatics	22	3 (Young Male Danes)
13 Anh	Danish	Humanities informatics	21	3 (Young Male Danes)
14 Thøger	Danish	International business communication	24	3 (Young Male Danes)
15 Nathali	Danish	B.Sc. Economics administration	23	N/A (Young Female Danes)
16 Nikolaj	Danish	Economics and business administration	24	N/A (Young Male Danes)
17 Benjamin	Danish	Civil engineering – urban design	25	N/A (Young Male Danes)

Note：Pseudonyms are used for the participants.

Prior to departure we were in continuous communication with the students by email, and we held informal talks and hosted a preparation workshop, which allowed us to get to know them and learn about their motivation for joining the programme. One of the authors joined the trip to Beijing as the programme co-ordinator from the Danish side, participated in all the activities in the programme, and also joined in many activities organised by the students during their spare time. Thus, a large amount of time was spent with the students during their stay abroad, and the author was regarded by the students as a natural and accepted part of the group. The accompanying author took field notes during the trip about social formations, practices, discourses and interactions by observing and conversing with the students (Spradley, 1980; Wadel, 1991). This intense and time-consuming approach helped the authors to better understand the students' experiences, which were used for data triangulation and to build an interview guide for the post-programme group interviews.

Group interviews were conducted after the participants had returned to their home university. The interviews were aimed at triangulating data and understanding student experiences in terms of the formation of groups in relation to the conditions for learning. Twelve out of a total of seventeen students participated. The last five students accepted the invitation but were ultimately unable to attend. Prior to the interviews, the participants were asked to name the five people they had spent the most time with during their stay abroad. Based on this and the authors' observations of social formations during the programme, they were divided into three groups (coded FOC1–3) of three (FOC1), five (FOC2), and four (FOC3) students. The choice of group interviews was intended to reflect and capture the smaller communities that arose within the delegation group during the programme. Students were invited to discuss questions concerning social formations, interaction and practices as they were experienced. The semi-structured interview guide is provided in Appendix 1.

Each focus group interview lasted around an hour. The interview with group 1 (FOC1) was conducted in English as the group consisted of non-Danes of different nationalities, while interviews with group 2 (FOC2) and 3 (FOC3) only had Danish participants and thus were conducted in Danish. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the recordings were transcribed and analysed thematically by meaning condensation analysis. This entails an abridgement of the meanings expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), triangulated with observational data and extant literature. This process clarified main themes and helped to create categories related to the social experience of the study abroad, attitudes and motivations, and interactions, practices, and discourses relevant to the research questions of the current study. A content analysis technique was conducted to reveal the focus of individual and group responses by describing patterns of communication and interpreting meanings via linguistic features in context (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Table 2 illustrates an example of the coding scheme.

Table 2 An example of the coding scheme

Natural unit	Condensed	Theme	Focus group and student no.
Yes, it seemed cool. It seemed like a good opportunity to get down there and see a lot of things on the cheap and get to know some people.	Joined the programme mainly for tourism purposes and to expand (Danish) network	Aims, attitudes and motivations	3 / 10

Further analysis was guided by the themes and categories produced based on the understanding that interviews and observations need interpretation to achieve a 'thick description' of events (Geertz, 1973). This includes not only describing events in context, but more importantly interpreting participants' social discourse, including intentions, strategies and agency (Cohen et al., 2011). This approach is also an attempt to look past the immediate responses of the informants, which should not always be taken as fact, and to identify the discourses that lie behind them (Dervin, 2011; Holiday, 2013).

One of the authors worked as the programme coordinator and participated in the whole programme with these groups, including academic activities, social events and life settings (using the same canteen and staying in the same accommodation). As we adopted a socio-cultural lens to investigate social formations for interactions, we believe that the dual role of a STSA researcher and a programme facilitator may provide a situated understanding of the social interactions that stemmed from social formations.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 Emerging group formations for social interaction

Coleman (2013) suggests that students abroad are not isolated entities, but instead intertwine with each other cognitively, affectively, intellectually, sensually, physically and socially. Thus, almost all the students' experiences happened in a social group context, whether they were in formal or informal learning environments. The short-term mobility programme in this study provided an environment with intense social experiences. With the well-structured and planned teaching and cultural activities, social formations developed quickly. Interviewees remarked on this social grouping experience:

- (FOC1): '95% of the time we were in groups. [others agreed]'
- (FOC2) 'You have to be together with the others until the end of the programme.'
- (FOC3) 'We were always in a group; I was never alone. (Not even in the shower!)'

The following is a synthesised description of the groups, with key words describing the characteristics of the group, attitudes, and values italicised. The CoPs identified in this study were not conceptualised beforehand based on nationality or 'cultural belonging', but instead are based on the social formations that arose and were observed in the process and confirmed later on by the students.

Group 1

The students in this group were *slightly older than the rest*, and consisted of a *mix of nationalities (no Danes)*. Compared to the other groups, this group expressed a *stronger motivation for learning about China* and was quite clear about learning expectations. They *actively sought opportunities for interaction with the locals,* to a degree that they sometimes felt they forced interaction, even though they found it hard with their limited language skills. They *invited locals to join in their own activities* (e.g. sports and beer tasting), just as they themselves tried to *do as the locals do* by using public transportation instead of taxis and eating in the university canteen instead of the nearby McDonald's. They also went *sightseeing* like the other groups, but described it as an opportunity for *meeting Chinese people* at the same time. Finally, they regarded themselves *lucky and humble to get the scholarship* and the chance to travel to China. Therefore, they had a *planned and structured approach* to the trip in order to make the most of their limited time in the country. One student summed it up as follows

(FOC1): "We always evaluated the days ahead and usually what we were gonna do and like to do. Then just plan trips after the classes at the meal or whatever, just to get as much with the time we had, but others chose to go to the gym (laughing with the others) [referring to the Danes]."

Group 2
This group of female Danish students also considered the short-term programme a *good offer in terms of price and travel value* first and foremost. It offered a good opportunity for *combining studying and having fun*. At the same time, several of them emphasised *more pragmatic values* not directly related to the learning aims of the programme of *expanding networks with people of a similar profile* and *improving personal CVs*. One student said (FOC2): "One of my purposes was to pass the exam. I really, really wanted that, because of future plans, CV and so on. That is really important to me." All the students in this group expressed a need for being together *in groups for safety and socialisation reasons*. Thus, they would most often be *flexible* and join others when going *sightseeing, shopping* etc. based on their interests. Like Group 3, *having a good time* and *visiting famous places* were important to the group. However, they also *took studying seriously* by attending class, doing homework and practicing speaking Chinese.

Group 3
The students in this group described the mobility study as primarily a cheap opportunity for *travelling* and seeing famous places in a *fun* and *relaxing* way. They described themselves as having a *casual* and *flexible* approach to exploring China, where *getting to know new people* and *socialising with each other* were important. Asked directly if they meant getting to know Chinese people, one student answered (FOC3): "Ehh, Danish people. I really didn't get to know any Chinese." This orientation of *inward socialisation* was recognised by the other group members as well. Going out *sightseeing, shopping eating,* and *experiencing nightlife together* were the main activities during their free time. One student summarised it in the following way (FOC3): "For me the most important was to see the 'big things'." Another student replied: "Yeah, and the markets where we spent a lot of time."

The groups were not static – everyone participated in formal learning activities such as language teaching and cultural excursions, a few students circulated across group boundaries, and some were part of different groups at the same time. Nevertheless, except for contact with local Chinese teachers and students through formal activities within the programme, none of the groups reported further social interaction with Chinese locals. This may be due to the busy schedule of the programme structure. Although the students were free to do as they wished in their free time, the planned activities took up a good deal of time and were organised exclusively for them. In addition, group 1 did not feel as integrated into the delegation as a whole as the rest, and neither were they regarded as such.

At first glance this finding of social formation roughly reproduces Coleman's (2013) concentric circles model for social networks – the students tended to socialise first with co-nationals, second with other outsiders, and third with locals. The observed pattern was confirmed by all students; as one student put it (FOC3): "I felt there was some grouping between us Danish-speaking and the ones who did not speak Danish." Another student (FOC2) expressed: "But it was still mostly divided between Danes and international students. They kept a lot to themselves, which I also understand." For both the Danish and the non-Danish students, interaction with each other in most cases came second, while interaction with Chinese came third.

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Despite this resemblance, the identified patterns in this study also challenged the social networks model of Coleman (2013) by raising questions concerning explanations and the complexity behind these formations – for example, factors of nationality and age. The complexity of group formation may be related to individual identities as suggested by Gomes et al. (2014), which are related to multiple factors including course of study, location, environment, and individual prior experiences, interests and religion.

In previous mobility studies students have often been observed to have a strong wish to aim to achieve contact, friendship and social engagement with locals in the destination country (Yang, 2016). Findings in the current study differ in this respect. Only group 1 expressed a specific wish to socialise and interact with the locals, while the other students hoped to socialise and expand networks with co-nationals with a similar profile – a feature, or possible benefit, of study abroad that is under-researched. The students' mutual engagement in this joint enterprise showed in their willingness to spend time on planning activities together, sharing knowledge, developing language and practices, and showing flexibility in sacrificing individual priorities.

5.2 Practices and discourses leading to constraints of learning

The rapid establishment of group identity, practices and discourses also brought about a number of observed patterns for learning opportunities and conditions, which can be related to the three dimensions that define and unite the community, as specified by the concept of CoP (Wenger, 1998): what the community is about (*joint enterprise*), how it functions (*mutual engagement*), and what capability it produces (*shared repertoire*). The concepts of accessibility and objectification are found to be central when discussing culture learning through the examination of the groups' *shared aims, motivations,* and their developed *strategies*, *practices* and *discourses*.

A variety of practices and discourses were identified throughout the study. Some were general patterns that manifested in all the groups, while others pertained to specific groups or were more pronounced when students were massed in one big group. The shared aim of socialising with each other led to a practice of exploring China together in big groups. Many of the students commented that the sheer size of their group often became a hindrance and inhibited interaction. As one student noted, it may have been intimidating for the locals (FOC3): "You do not just go and talk to 12 people." Furthermore, moving around in groups meant that individuals were not in control of their own time or free to make spontaneous decisions to act upon their curiosity (FOC2):

> "There was not room to experience the local life because of the tight schedule and because you also wanted to follow the group … it was at the expense of one's own wishes … you sacrificed yourself."

Also, the chance to interact with locals using Chinese language was hindered at times by others, as expressed in the following (FOC1):

> "…we tried, at least in our group, to have some encounters with the locals and what I heard the others had tried mostly in English, if they tried at all. We at some points had those phrases that we had studied, and it was like "Now! Say it now!" to come in contact using the local language."

Another student described how the groups could be limiting in a different way, related to decision-making (FOC3):

> "The one who was loudest and knew how to get others on your side decided, and then persuading skills of course also. It is easy to get others' support if you know what to say.'

Another student replied:

> "Yes, I think, sometimes two or three people who wanted to go someplace else, but then because they were so few, they would go with the majority instead, and that was a bit of a pity."

Thus, many students acknowledged that there was a cost to being affiliated with a group, in terms of both opportunities for interaction with locals and following one's own interests. As such, the opportunities for interaction and boundary meetings between local and student CoPs were curtailed, and social dynamics within CoPs shaped the practices of individuals.

These limitations meant that the students' impressions of Chinese people and culture derived mainly from observing them from a distance and commenting to each other on their observations, which led to speculation about the relationship between Chinese people's actions and Chinese culture. For example, students remarked:

- "The Chinese just crash [sleep] in the classrooms."
- "Chinese children just do not wear diapers, that is what they do."
- "Chinese taxis sometimes just do not pick you up."
- "Chinese people like to take pictures of you."

Asked if they had found explanations for such behaviour, students replied (FOC3): "No, that is just how it was", and "That is just how they roll".

From these examples it can be seen that the students resorted to what Holliday (2013) has termed 'easy answers'. Easy answers are superficial responses to differences, often using stereotypes or simplistic understanding to explain behaviour. The term implies criticism of participants' unwillingness to invest the required effort to understand complex matters such as differences. Had there been the opportunity, and genuine curiosity and interest in engaging with the 'other', the students might have found several explanations for the observed behaviours that were not necessarily linked to culture. For example, Chinese students might choose to take a nap in a classroom because their dormitory does not have air conditioning or because it is too far away to go back to during a short break. Had they enquired about the reasons behind some of the practices they assumed to be cultural, the international students might have realised that they would have done the same if they were in the Chinese students' place. This failure to engage risks falling back on easy answers and results in objectifying, or 'solidifying', the 'cultural other' (Dervin, 2011). That is to say, assuming 'strange' behaviours to be universally Chinese and attributing them to 'culture' reduces people to cultural robots. Many of the students admitted that they did not have a genuine interest in interacting with locals, or found it tiresome to do so. One student said (FOC3): "I would never be able to communicate with a Chinese. Even if I spoke the language fluently…" Furthermore, some students expressed a kind of interest in keeping the Chinese 'strange', which will be analysed below.

Following their diverse aims, the students developed strategies to reach their goals for the stay. Accordingly, the Chinese and Chinese culture took on different meanings and roles for the students. At times the Chinese were the main object of interest, while at other times they were objects of derision, and at still other times they were potential friends and peers. The role of the Chinese for the different groups is mirrored in their different practices and discourses at different times.

Groups 2 and 3 shared the aim of socialising and expanding networks within the group itself while relaxing and enjoying themselves. They achieved these goals mainly by organising group activities and experiencing China together. However, 'China' in this context was limited mainly to scenic tourist spots and marketplaces. Furthermore, these tourist attractions, and interaction with the people there, were rarely the focus of attention, but rather were seen as settings for the students to socialise. Thus, observations of Chinese people and 'Chinese culture' were often used as jokes within the group. For this purpose, *peculiarities* and *differences* were especially interesting and were pointed out as elements of 'Chinese culture'. For example, badly pronounced English, excessive applauding, unusual food, and unusual 'Chinese' behaviours and sounds were focused on and made fun of in a sarcastic manner. This created an excessive focus on differences instead of similarities. Thus, for these two groups Chinese people and culture were mainly described and perceived as *peculiar*, *different*, *difficult to approach*, *funny* (unintentionally), and *mysterious*.

According to all the students, joking in the group most often targeted the Chinese without involving them. Like the easy answers, this contributed to the objectification of the Chinese in the discourse. Group 3, who were the main perpetrators of this kind of joking, acknowledged that at times it got out of hand and probably did not bring them closer to the locals, but at the same time they maintained that it contributed to the high spirits in the group. They commented (FOC3):

> "We laughed a lot at them… We, as a foreign group, were strengthened when we had fun, but damn, I do not know about the Chinese, they did not become part of our group."

Other students admitted to finding things funny at times, but they (especially group 1) also considered this kind of behaviour rude and even abusive of the Chinese – for example when someone openly copied bad English or a certain behaviour in front of the Chinese. This is illustrated in the following discussion from FOC1:

> "It was too much, I think. They [the Chinese]should get… I felt offended, you know. Even I felt embarrassed of some jokes sometimes… it was even insulting."

Another student replied:

> "They were subjected, it was not even joking anymore. It was virtually like being impolite in a very strong manner."

Group 1 tended to include the locals in conversation or shared activities. This reflects the competing and conflicting discourses about the Chinese between the groups.

In this way, China and Chinese people respectively became a setting and a prop or accessory used by the students for reaching their own goals of socialising within their group. This is not to say that all students had purely stereotyped understandings of Chinese people. Alternative discourses were identified, but the discourses of 'otherness' often became hegemonic in the delegation group. Students often *chose* solidifying discourses for the purpose of entertainment and internal socialising, with the consequence that the inner social dynamics of the group resulted in practices that were excluding and 'otherising'. According to Dervin (2011), interlocutors co-construct discourses and influence each other in terms of content and subject matter in an unplanned fashion. As such, it can be said that the development of a language of othering, and mutual engagement in identifying and focusing on differences and peculiarities, became part of a shared repertoire in the joint enterprise of socialising within the group.

6. Discussion and future perspectives

Stemming from social cultural perspectives on social interactions as a prerequisite for learning and the development of intercultural competence, this study investigated how students from Denmark formed groups and socially interacted in a mobility programme while studying in China, and how these formations become both a source of and a constraint on learning about Chinese culture and developing intercultural competences. A variety of patterns of grouping for interaction among Danish students were identified, which helped capture distinctive practice and discourse features and revealed students' attitudes, strategies and priorities. The findings of the study reproduced Coleman's (2013) concentric circles model for social networks, showing that students tend to socialise first with co-nationals, second with other outsiders and third with locals.

In addition, the study added to the existing literature by analysing the complexity of the patterns. One of the major reasons for this complexity was that the students joined the mobility programme with diverse aims and motivations, which had consequences for their choice of social formation and interaction. Their establishment of communities of practice created certain opportunities to learn from each other and learn about Chinese culture, but these practices and discourses were also observed to be an obstacle constraining their opportunities for learning via close interaction with the locals. While students expressed some interest in learning the Chinese language and visiting historic and scenic spots; in most cases these experiences led to solidifying understandings of Chinese people and culture. Student grouping practices were found to 'other' locals and focus on internal socialisation. The observed patterns of socialisation problematised their learning due to their stereotyped discourses, and 'othered' the local people and culture (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016; Dervin, 2011; Yang, 2016). Thus, a gap was identified between the ideal of the formal objectives of the programme and the practice of its implementation. In this light, short-term international mobility programmes, or at least the practice of them, and their assumed role in relation to internationalisation and preparing students to become global-ready citizens, needs be reconsidered.

The study generated new knowledge about issues of short-term international student mobility programmes with students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, particularly in the context of travel from Europe to China. The outcomes of this study offer insights into the development and use of stereotyped understandings and discourses of othering in social formation for learner interactions. It also challenges the prevailing political initiatives to increase internationalisation

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through student mobility, namely that students spontaneously develop intercultural competences by studying abroad. Furthermore, it questions whether the often-used unfocused sociocultural learning design, which expects learners to explore ideal learning through their own observations and interactions without providing explicit guidance and scaffolding, is effective for the recent trend towards short-term mobility. In addition there were also contextual factors related to the local host institution – such as whether the guest students' accommodation should be integrated with the local students, and the local organisers' language proficiency (pointed out by the interviewed students) and intercultural communication competencies – may influence the social formation and interaction of the guest students. Problems with these factors may become barriers for the visitors to learn, and their improvement may generate learning opportunities for the travellers.

The current study is limited due to the small participant sample size. A larger sample size could reveal whether patterns identified in this study, such as the types of groups, would be reproduced in similar contexts. Future studies may also consider using different tools to document social interaction, e.g. digital communication platforms and video. A perspective from the 'others', and their experiences of the visiting students, would also be helpful in describing co-constructional processes. Action research with alternative designs for short-term international mobility programmes, or programmes with more support for students to develop critical views of cultural conceptualisations (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016) and awareness of learning agency (Meier & Daniels, 2013), may provide new angles in the field.

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Appendix 1 Interview Guide

Researcher questions	Interviewer questions
Warm up questions: Aims	Could you briefly describe why you chose to go on the summer school?
Formation of groups	During the stay, did you spend most of your time together with others in a group, or on your own? On purpose? What brought you together?
Discuss: Strategies for learning in free time	How did you spend your free time in China? • Did you have any specific plan or way to explore China and meet Chinese people? • How did you do it?
Reflecting through the group	Did you use each other to discuss different experiences during the trip? How? Do you remember a time? • Did you talk about the Chinese in the groups? • Would this lead to discussions or debates? E.g. if you disagreed on something, found something particularly interesting, or did not understand something you had experienced.
Discuss: Learning about China in groups Individual subject to group wishes?	• Do you feel you spent a lot of time with and got to know local people? Explain how you did or did not. (Language not an excuse; plenty spoke English.) • Did you feel it was more important to be with the group than to do what you wanted yourself? • Can you describe your interactions with local people? • Did you learn something new about China and Chinese people through your interaction?
Groups: Perceptions and interaction	There were times when you were in smaller groups and when you were all together in one big group. • Was it easy to meet Chinese people when you were together in the big group? How about in smaller groups? • Was there any conflict in having fun with the group vs. exploring and learning about China? Or could these easily be combined? • Do you feel there was a difference in the relationship to local people when you were all together in one big group vs. when you were on your own? What about in the smaller groups?

Humour: Was there a certain way of talking about the Chinese in the group?	How would you describe the overall atmosphere of the big group? (Often there was a very lively and joking atmosphere in the big group, both in the classroom and on excursions.) • What role do you think humour played for the group? How about in relation to the group and the Chinese? Examples? • Do you feel the Chinese people were included in the humour or were they the subject of the humour? (If the subject, did that create distance? Did it affect your experience of Chinese people?)
Discuss: Organised meetings on common interests **Discuss: Learning**	We also had some more organised activities with some local people, like the meeting with BNU teachers, football games, and more. • What was your experience of the organised meeting with BNU students/teachers? • Do you feel you learned something new about China at these meetings? • Was it easy to get close with the Chinese during these activities? When do you feel you learned more about China and Chinese people, during organised events or in your own free time?
Excursions Another city	We went on several cultural excursions, for example to the Great Wall, Beijing Opera, acrobatics, the Forbidden City etc. Could you discuss what you learned about China through these experiences? We also went to another province of China, where we visited Xian. Did this experience give you new perspectives on China?