

**Learning to be civically engaged? Experiences of Chinese international students in
Canadian universities**

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Abstract

Over one million international students chose to pursue their education in Canada in 2023, making Canada one of the top destinations for overseas post-secondary education. Chinese students are the second-largest international student group in Canada, making up 10% of the total international student population. Once in Canada, many Chinese international students choose to experience civic engagement, both formally through the courses they study as well as outside the classroom and campus. Previous studies have shown that civic engagement and related experiences in post-secondary education are crucial to students' civic identity formation, benefiting their community/society's development. Yet, the neoliberal approach in Canadian higher education emphasizes Chinese students' economic and soft power contributions rather than recognizing their ability in civic areas. Active civic engagement as part of their Canadian university experiences would encourage them to continue pursuing positive social change locally and globally.

To better understand the potential benefits of civic engagement education for Chinese international students and Canadian universities, this study explores their civic engagement and identity development while pursuing their undergraduate degrees at Canadian universities. The research studies the factors impacting Chinese students' civic development in Canadian universities and their implications, including learning experiences in students' degree programs and on/off-campus engagement experiences. Drawing on the Civic-Minded Graduate model and social identity theory, this research employed a qualitative research methodology, working with seven Chinese international students from two English-speaking universities in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The research data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by using reflective thematic analysis.

This research reveals that studying abroad gives Chinese international students more opportunities to join on/off campus community and political participation for their civic engagement and identity development. This study also found that Chinese students' national identity and immigrant status in Canada significantly impact their civic development. Although they study abroad, their nationality can still strongly influence their civic engagement, focusing on the Chinese community, politics and policy.

Despite the scope for Canadian universities to support students' civic development, this study demonstrates that course experiences for civic engagement/identity development are still insufficient. This also influences the broader international student population beyond Chinese students. However, Chinese students' professional identity develops from their field of study, impacting their civic life in Canada. In light of these findings, the study offers recommendations for Canadian universities to design interdisciplinary community-based learning programs as a new strategy for civic engagement education.

Résumé

Plus d'un million d'étudiants internationaux ont choisi de poursuivre leurs études au Canada en 2023, faisant du Canada l'une des principales destinations pour l'enseignement postsecondaire à l'étranger. Les étudiants chinois constituent le deuxième plus grand groupe d'étudiants internationaux au Canada, représentant 10 % de la population totale d'étudiants internationaux. Une fois au Canada, de nombreux étudiants internationaux chinois choisissent de s'engager dans la vie civique, tant de manière formelle à travers les cours qu'ils suivent qu'en dehors de la salle de classe et du campus. Des études précédentes ont montré que l'engagement civique et les expériences connexes dans l'enseignement postsecondaire sont cruciaux pour la formation de l'identité civique des étudiants, contribuant au développement de leur communauté et de leur société. Cependant, l'approche néolibérale de l'enseignement supérieur au Canada met davantage l'accent sur les contributions économiques et de pouvoir doux des étudiants chinois, plutôt que sur leur capacité dans le domaine civique. Un engagement civique actif dans le cadre de leurs expériences universitaires canadiennes les encouragerait à poursuivre des changements sociaux positifs au niveau local et mondial.

Afin de mieux comprendre les avantages potentiels de l'éducation à l'engagement civique pour les étudiants internationaux chinois et les universités canadiennes, cette étude explore leur engagement civique et le développement de leur identité durant leurs études de premier cycle dans des universités canadiennes. Le projet de recherche étudie les facteurs qui influencent le développement civique des étudiants chinois dans les universités canadiennes et leurs implications, y compris les expériences d'apprentissage dans les programmes d'études des étudiants et les expériences d'engagement sur et hors campus. En s'appuyant sur le modèle de diplômé orienté vers le civisme et sur la théorie de l'identité sociale, cette recherche a employé une méthodologie de recherche qualitative, travaillant avec sept étudiants internationaux chinois de deux universités anglophones à Montréal, Québec, Canada. Les données de recherche ont été recueillies à travers des entretiens semi-structurés et analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique réflexive.

Cette analyse révèle que les études à l'étranger offrent aux étudiants internationaux chinois d'avantage d'opportunités de participer à des activités communautaires et politiques sur et hors campus, contribuant à leur engagement civique et au développement de leur identité. L'étude a également révélé que l'identité nationale et le statut d'immigrant des étudiants chinois au Canada ont un impact significatif sur leur développement civique. Bien que les étudiants chinois étudient dans des universités canadiennes, leur identité nationale continue de fortement influencer leur engagement civique, en mettant l'accent sur la communauté, la politique et les politiques chinoises.

Bien que les universités canadiennes aient la possibilité de soutenir le développement civique des étudiants, cette étude démontre que les expériences offertes dans les cours pour encourager l'engagement civique et le développement de l'identité sont encore insuffisantes. Cette situation a également des répercussions sur la population étudiante internationale plus large, au-delà des étudiants chinois. Cependant, l'identité professionnelle des étudiants chinois se développe à partir de leur domaine d'études, ce qui a un impact sur leur vie civique au Canada. À la lumière de ces résultats, l'étude propose des recommandations aux universités canadiennes pour qu'elles

conçoivent des programmes d'apprentissage interdisciplinaires basés sur la communauté en tant que nouvelle stratégie d'éducation à l'engagement civique.

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Author Contribution

This thesis follows McGill University's guidelines for a standard (traditional) thesis. I conducted this research project by myself, including research design, data collection, and analysis, and I am the sole author of this thesis. My faculty supervisor, Dr. Emma Harden-Wolfson, provided guidance and feedback throughout this research project and every chapter of this thesis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2018, I worked at an elementary school after I completed my college program in Ontario. One day, I walked into school and saw the gym set up for an event. I asked my co-workers about the occasion. They told me that the school was the voting station for the municipal election and asked me if I would vote after the shift. I replied that I could not vote in the election because of my immigration status. That afternoon, I witnessed parents come to vote and talk with each other about the candidates.

Although I know that voting is the right of every Canadian citizen, these conversations and observations of the election were new to me. In my previous education experiences in China, teachers always told us that we should not discuss political affairs, especially in school. Then, the thought of “Who am I?” appeared in my mind. In my college program in Canada, I learned a lot about community building in educational settings and participated in volunteer activities with schools and local organizations. I saw myself as a member of the community through different activities, regardless of my immigration status in Canada. However, that day, I felt distanced from the community I had lived in for many years.

My experiences as an international student and immigrant in Canada led me to reflect on Chinese international students’ civic experiences beyond what they learn in the classroom as well as the connections between individuals’ identity development and their overseas post-secondary education experiences. After I was admitted to the master’s program at McGill, I decided to use this thesis project as an opportunity to conduct research on Chinese international students’ civic engagement and identity development in Canada to examine Canadian higher education institutions’ (HEIs) roles in these processes.

1.1 Research context and background

Recruiting international students has been a crucial task for Canadian international education since the 2000s, and the strategies are still evolving based on government and institutional needs since the 1970s (McCartney, 2021; Sabzalieva et al., 2022). In 2023, over 1 million international students were pursuing their education degrees in Canada—a valuable community to Canadian higher education and society (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024a, 2024b). The federal government recognizes international students' importance in Canada's economic, social and cultural life in their official documents from the past two decades (Global Affairs Canada [GAC], 2014, 2019; IRCC, 2024a). Yet, the reality for this large student group is different. The connections between international students and economic growth have appeared in Canadian public policy since the mid of the 1990s (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Moving to the 2010s, two International Education Strategy plans from the federal government still emphasize international students' economic and soft power benefits as a rationale to promote international education in Canada (GAC, 2014, 2019). By focusing on international students' economic and soft power benefits to Canada at the policy level, their ability to participate in social, cultural and political changes in Canadian society is overlooked (Hutcheson, 2024a; Li, 2016; Montsion & Caneo, 2024).

The international student community in Canada is formed by people from all over the world (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2023; IRCC, 2024b). Since 2018, Chinese students have been the second-largest international student group in Canada (IRCC, 2024b). Although the pandemic and geopolitical frictions between Canada and China in higher education (e.g. research collaboration bans, visa refusal for national security reasons) have led to fluctuations in the student population, around 100,000 Chinese students come to study in Canada each year from 2020 to 2023 (Greenfield, 2024; IRCC, 2024b; Ling & Zimonjic, 2024; Tunney,

2024). Prior to the introduction of a cap on international student enrollment and new limitations on post-study immigration, many Chinese students had chosen to permanently settle in Canada as their post-graduation plan (CBIE, 2016; Kwak et al., 2024; E. Yu, 2020; S. Zhao & Ebanda de B'beri, 2022). In 2023, around 45% of Chinese students planned to apply for permanent residency in Canada after completing their post-secondary education, and only 13% of Chinese students decided to return home directly after completing their post-secondary studies (CBIE, 2024).

Nevertheless, due to inequalities embed international education policies and initiatives, Chinese students face unequal treatment from the local communities both on/off campuses, negatively impacting their academic learning and social interactions with local communities (Ge, 2021; Ge et al., 2019; Hutcheson, 2024a; E. Yu, 2020). Cultivating international students' interests and behaviour in civic engagement and navigating their civic identity is a method to resist these stereotypes, showing their ability to contribute to Canadian society's development in social, cultural and political areas. Civic engagement provides an environment for newcomers to support the local community and feel belonging in the host country regardless of their legal status (Dixon et al., 2018). This could be particularly helpful for Chinese students, who may need to take extra steps to understand and compare the meaning of civic life in Canada and China because of the different social contexts. For example, Canada and China's sociocultural and political environments significantly differ, influencing the education system's operations (Hayhoe, 1992; Tao, 2019). In China, the embedded socialist and authoritarian ideologies impact individuals' understanding of civic life by restricting education practitioners' and students' academic autonomy and curriculum (Hayhoe, 1992; Liang & Han, 2013; Tao, 2019).

1.2 Problem statement

Universities can provide opportunities for on-campus civic learning through community-based learning, engagement projects and using curricula to cultivate civically engaged students (Kreber, 2016; Munck, 2010). Although Canadian universities have learning programs to support students' civic development, they lack international perspectives in designing and implementing these programs (Taylor et al., 2015). Current research related to education for students' civic development is focused on administrator and faculty perspectives (e.g. Aujla & Hamm, 2018; Kricsfalussy et al., 2016). International students' education experiences for civic engagement development still need to be further explored.

As one of the largest student groups, both studying and applying for post-study permanent residency in Canada (CBIE, 2016; E. Yu, 2020), it is instructive to focus on the extent to which Chinese international students are learning to become civically engaged while studying in Canada. Despite being treated as 'cash cows' and facing learning/social barriers in Canadian universities (Y. Guo & Guo, 2017; Montsion & Caneo, 2024; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016), Chinese students still show motivations and interests to contribute to the local community and broader Canadian society through civic engagement, such as volunteering and voting after they granted Canadian citizenship (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Li, 2016, 2020). Higher education can be the starting point for them to build and transition to an active civic life in Canada. However, very few studies address the implications of post-secondary education experiences in Chinese international students' civic development. This research fills this gap by focusing on Chinese international students' civic engagement and identity development in Canada.

1.3 Purpose of the study and research questions

This study has two purposes, which together aim to generate new knowledge about Chinese international students in Canadian universities and advance the field of civic

engagement learning in higher education. First, this study aims to understand the concepts of civic engagement/identity from Chinese international students' experiences and perspectives. From students' first-hand experiences, this research can determine the factors that support or hinder their civic development. The second purpose of this study is to explore the connections between Chinese international students' university lives and their civic engagement/identity development. Therefore, this research can identify the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian universities' approaches to support (international) students' civic development. Based on these objectives, I proposed three research questions to guide the research design:

Research Question 1: What are Chinese international undergraduate students' perceptions and attitudes toward civic engagement?

Research Question 2: How does studying in Canadian universities impact civic engagement and civic identity development among Chinese international undergraduate students?

Research Question 3: What factors outside university experiences impact Chinese international undergraduate students' civic engagement experiences and civic identity development?

1.4 Thesis structure

In the **first chapter**, I provide the background and rationale of this research project. **Chapter 2** explains the theoretical framework I used for this study, which combines **the Civic-Minded Graduate (CMG) model** (Steinberg et al., 2011) and **social identity theory** (Hogg, 2016; Hogg et al., 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This chapter also explains how to apply these frameworks in my research. **Chapter 3** is a literature review of previous studies in the history of international student mobility in Canadian higher education, (Chinese) international students'

overall experiences in Canadian universities, education for civic engagement/identity formation in Canadian universities, and different student groups' civic development experiences in Canada.

Chapter 4 outlines the research design process and procedures. This research used a qualitative methodology to collect data through semi-structured interviews. I discuss selecting research sites, sampling strategies, recruitment criteria and interview protocol. I employed reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to complete the iterative coding and theme-generating process. Additionally, I describe my positionality, ethical considerations and reflections on research recruitment and data collection.

Chapter 5 presents the research findings relating to Chinese students' civic development experiences in Canada and the factors that influence their development. Four key themes have been identified in the dataset, including 1.) At the intersection of individual, community and politics: How students understand civic engagement and identity, 2.) Becoming a civically engaged student in Canada: Motivations and barriers, 3.) Civic development emerging from universities, and 4.) Challenges and benefits of being civically engaged students. This chapter also highlights the subthemes that collapsed under each key theme to outline the details of Chinese civic development experiences in Canada.

Chapter 6 serves as a discussion in this thesis. This chapter focuses on discussing the following four areas: 1.) Limitations of using the CMG model in international students' experiences, 2.) The roles of Chinese international students' national identity, immigration status and their intersections in guiding students' civic development, 3.) Limitations of universities' current strategies and practices, and 4.) The roles of international mobility and online engagement in Chinese students' civic development. Discussing the research findings in these

four areas illustrates the nuances and needs of (Chinese) international students' civic development, providing a better understanding of Canadian international education.

In **Chapter 7**, I conclude this thesis with a summary of key findings to answer my research questions and highlight the significance of this study in the universities' civic engagement learning and international education. Then, I highlight this research's implications for Canadian (international) education and provide some recommendations for Canadian higher education practitioners. Lastly, I revisit the limitations of this study and make further recommendations for future research directions and higher education practices, such as how to develop civic engagement learning in the international education landscape.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical frameworks that were used to investigate Chinese international students' civic engagement and identity formation during their undergraduate studies in Canadian universities. This research is guided by **the Civic-Minded Graduate (CMG) model** (Bringle & Wall, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011) and **social identity theory** (Hogg, 2016; Hogg et al., 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Sections 2.2 and 2.3 provide an overview of both the CMG model and social identity theory, including the definitions and the connections between my research and the framework. Section 2.4 outlines the connections between the CMG model and social identity theory to demonstrate the suitability of adopting both frameworks to operationalize my project.

2.2 The Civic-Minded Graduate (CMG) model

The CMG model demonstrates how the interconnections of identity, educational experiences, and civic experiences shape individuals' civic identity and engagement behaviours. (Bringle & Wall, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011). **Civic identity** in the CMG model indicates an individual (university student) who understands their responsibilities for their communities and society, achieving this by actively participating in civic activities (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Hatcher, 2011). Steinberg et al. (2011) also suggest that students' civic identity is influenced by the specific social contexts and environment in which they live and study.

Identity in the CMG model “represents the person's self-understanding, self-awareness, and self-concept” (Steinberg et al., 2011, p. 20). This definition in the CMG model is broad enough to discuss an individual's identity in their civic lives. The authors describe ‘**student identity**’ in detail, representing intersections between identity-educational experiences (Bringle & Wall, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011). Student identity means students connect themselves with

the academic field they are currently learning in the university (Steinberg et al., 2011), such as describing themselves as ‘a student from faculty of education’. Additionally, the CMG model was developed to investigate the connections between university experiences and students’ civic development outcomes, emphasizing the role of ‘student identity’ over other personal identities in individuals’ civic identity and engagement development (Bringle & Wall, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011).

Educational experiences in the CMG model suggest students should develop a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions through their learning, such as knowledge of current social issues and their professions, self-efficacy and motivations for future civic engagement through their studies in HEIs (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Steinberg et al., 2011). As the CMG model was designed to support universities’ civic education pedagogy, it focuses on understanding the implications of individuals’ higher education experiences on their civic identity and engagement development rather than other levels of education (i.e. K-12 education) (Steinberg et al., 2011). Moreover, the model emphasizes community-based learning implications on students’ civic development, indicating it is more effective than traditional classroom learning (Bringle & Wall, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011).

The dimension of **civic experiences** mentions that individuals support their communities’ development by constantly interacting and building connections with the communities through various civic activities, such as helping community organizations and election-related activities (Steinberg et al., 2011). Although the CMG model does not explicitly explain ‘community’ in students’ civic and educational experiences, the definition of civic experiences implies that ‘community’ is related to local groups that students interact with in their lived social

environment, such as student and staff groups inside the university (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Steinberg et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the knowledge, skills and dispositions developed from individuals' education experiences connect with their identity and civic experiences, and the intersections influence their future civic life (Steinberg et al., 2011). To support students' future civic engagement and identity formation, HEIs should create learning environments for the students to apply the knowledge/skills from the classroom to real-life practices, such as community-based learning (Steinberg et al., 2011). Steinberg et al. (2011) state that civic identity is situated at "... the intersection of identity and civic experiences" (p. 21). Through higher education experiences, students can build their unique civic identity, which is that of a civic-minded individual (Steinberg et al., 2011).

Based on this model, HEIs can be an environment for students to experience the intersections of identity, educational experiences, and civic experiences by developing civic engagement opportunities for their students beyond traditional learning components (Steinberg et al., 2011). The CMG model emphasizes the important roles of higher education in cultivating students' civic development, acting as a platform for students to participate in civic engagement before completing their education journey (Steinberg et al., 2011).

Previous studies have not applied the CMG model specifically in investigating international students' civic experience. However, I found it is a relevant framework for this research to examine Chinese international students' experiences because it emphasizes the roles of higher education (institutions) in the students' civic engagement and identity development. For example, Wiemer (2022) applied the CMG model to conduct a phenomenological study, showing that learning and civic experiences inside U.S. university campuses positively influence students'

civic identity formation and future civic engagement. Following the CMG model's guidelines, I can investigate the implications of Chinese students' studying experiences in Canada on their civic development beyond classroom learning experiences.

2.3 Social identity theory

Social identity theory was developed by Tajfel & Turner in the 1970s to explain the social groups' influence on individuals' understanding of themselves and their behaviours in interacting with others inside and outside of their social groups (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). **Social identity** means "a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, [and it] provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 259). Individuals construct their social identity through interactions with different social groups, acknowledging their similarities/differences with others (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, Lalonde et al. (2016) and Giguère et al. (2010) state that newcomers and later-generation immigrants in Canada claim their 'immigrant' identity by comparing and understanding the cultural differences and how local Canadian communities view and treat them.

Each **social group** forms unique behaviours, values and beliefs for the members based on internal relations in their communities and their relations with other social groups and society (Hogg, 2016). In other words, social identity influences individuals' perceptions of themselves and their behaviours when interacting with other outside communities and society. The concepts of 'social group membership,' 'belonging' and 'group behaviours' in social identity theory connect with the meaning of civic engagement, which is "reflecting people's psychological and associational attachment to their communities" (Henderson et al., 2012, p. 94).

Originally, Tajfel and Turner developed social identity theory to investigate how **internal and external factors** influence social group behaviours and internal interactions (Hogg, 2016;

Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, moving into the 1990s, social identity theory expanded by exploring individuals' impacts on group social identity and collective behaviours (Hogg, 2016). The research direction specifically shifted to investigate the relationships between social identity, collective engagements, and social change initiatives (e.g., collective protests against social injustice) (Hogg, 2016). Thus, individuals and their communities bring mutual influences, and individuals' civic life is also influenced by their social identity.

Social context is the foundation for establishing and identifying 'social groups' (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social groups' customs and behaviours are developed based on specific social environments, but social context also makes individuals' social identities fluid and convertible (Hogg et al., 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Noticeably, Canada is a significant country in discussing social identity due to its societal multiculturalism (Lalonde et al., 2016). For example, social identity theory has been used in the Canadian context to illustrate immigrants/newcomers' identity formations, transition and integration, or Francophone communities' social behaviours and interactions (Lalonde et al., 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In higher education, F. Yu (2018) examined Chinese student identity formation experiences in Canadian universities through the lens of social identity theory. They found that Chinese international students' identity is multifaceted, consciously reinforcing specific intergroup behaviours while interacting with different communities (F. Yu, 2018). For example, as Canadian universities have relatively more open and diverse social environments, Chinese students prefer to emphasize their Chinese heritage (identity) in university communities rather than social groups they encounter in off-campus settings. Building on F. Yu (2018) and other studies from other social spheres, social identity theory supports this study's exploration of the social relations in Chinese international students' civic engagement experiences in Canada. It

provides this research with a second lens to explore how Chinese international students' social identity interacts with education for civic development in Canadian universities, such as their responses/reactions to current civic learning components. Moreover, this framework can help me to unpack how Chinese international students' social identity connects with their on/off-campus civic engagement, influencing their understanding of their civic identity.

2.4 Applying the theories in this study

Applying the Civic-Minded Graduate (CMG) model (Steinberg et al., 2011) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) would support this research to gain in-depth insights into how Chinese international students' civic development experiences connect with their studying experiences in Canadian universities.

Identity is the essential element tying the CMG model and social identity theory. The CMG model is built for the university and emphasizes the importance of higher education experiences in students' civic engagement and identity formation process (Bringle & Wall, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011). As a result, this model pays more attention to influences on 'student identity' than other personal identities (Bringle & Wall, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011). However, this emphasis does not address the nuances in student identity for the research population in this study. The research population in this project is international students from mainland China, for whom student identity may include multiple social identities in their university learning experiences, as F. Yu (2018) suggested.

On the other hand, social identity theory focuses on how individuals understand themselves in different social environments and groups (Hogg, 2016), which can help strengthen and expand the identity component in the CMG Model (Steinberg et al., 2011). F. Yu (2018) states that Chinese international students' social identity can be divided into different formats, including 'university student,' 'international student,' and 'Chinese student.' All the identity

branches under Chinese international students can represent different social groups. Using both social identity theory and the CMG model as this research's framework, I would be able to view participants' student identity as multifaceted to discover how this influences their positions and connections with Canadian universities and society, informing their civic experiences.

The CMG model and social identity theory both suggest that socio-cultural factors influence individuals' actions and interactions with others. The CMG model briefly discusses the factors in macro socio-cultural contexts and students' interactions with their surroundings related to individual civic identity, whereas social identity theory focuses on micro-contexts, referring to social groups and their relations (Hogg, 2016; Hogg et al., 1995; Steinberg et al., 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These considerations also support the conceptualization and operationalization of **'community'** in interview question design and data analysis. Drawing on both theories, I define 'community' as a group formed by individuals who share similar social identities, including shared traditions, values and behaviours. In addition, individuals' sense of belonging to the group connects with community formation and development.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Drawing on the study's theoretical framework, this chapter starts by exploring dimensions of civic engagement from different disciplinary perspectives and developing a guideline for this study. Understanding the dimensions of civic engagement and related activities from previous literature guides this study in investigating civic learning and practice opportunities in Canadian universities and providing specific details to supplement the area of 'civic experiences' in the CMG model (Steinberg et al., 2011). As this study focuses on Chinese international students in Canada, it is necessary to investigate the internationalization of Canadian higher education and international students' experiences because it contextualizes international students' living and studying situations in Canada from policy to real-life practices. Section 3.3 provides a general background of the social contexts for Chinese international students to develop their civic identity and engagement. Section 3.4 maps out the educational experiences for students' civic development in Canadian universities, including community-based learning and classroom learning experiences. Then, the last two sections in this chapter review the studies on students' perceptions and experiences of their civic engagement and identity formation while they study in Canadian universities, including local and (Chinese) international student groups.

This literature review has two limitations. First, during the literature selection process, I noticed that not much literature has been published from 2020 to 2024 regarding university students' civic engagement in Canada or civic education in Canadian higher education. One potential reason may be the implications of the pandemic. Many learning programs for civic engagement in Canadian universities require students to attend community-based learning in in-person settings (e.g. Guo-Brennan et al., 2020). Therefore, the literature review might not

provide the most up-to-date information on Canadian universities' current educational programs. Second, very few studies have addressed Chinese international students' civic engagement/identity formation experiences in Canada despite the significant number of them in Canadian higher education. These limitations provide further impetus for studies like mine, which seek to bridge these gaps.

3.2 Dimensions of civic engagement

Generally, civic engagement reflects individual participation in activities relating to social and political issues, starting from personal interests or motivations (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Different socio-cultural environments influence the meaning and formats of civic engagement (Ramasubramanian & Albrecht, 2018). Civic engagement does not have a universal definition in academic and real-life practices because the meaning usually shifts based on academic fields and research focuses (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Ramasubramanian & Albrecht, 2018). In social work research, civic engagement is presented as collective activities to promote social changes for public issues (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013). Education research emphasizes community services/activities in students' civic engagement development based on pedagogical frameworks and curriculum designs (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). Political science scholars focus on investigating the significance of political activities in civic engagement and the connections between civic engagement and democratic society (Diller, 2001; Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

Berger (2009) suggests that the concepts of engagement need to be refined and discussed separately (e.g., political and social engagement) rather than categorize them all as civic engagement. However, some scholars argue that only focusing on political activities as civic engagement has a limited scope in viewing people's civic life because community activities also have implicit political elements (Ramasubramanian & Albrecht, 2018). Adler and Goggin (2005) claim that the main feature of civic engagement is individuals actively interacting and engaging

with the community to support community and social development. Based on this characteristic, civic engagement can be divided into vertical and horizontal dimensions (Adler & Goggin, 2005). The vertical dimension represents individual and collective participation in civic life, and the horizontal dimension indicates civic engagement includes both community and political activities (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

Developing individuals' civic engagement skills and behaviours targets to create positive social change through individual and/or collective actions (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Many individual actions intersect between community and political areas, which could be transformed into collective movements. In the political aspect of civic engagement, individuals attend events or activities organized by public institutions, such as voting in elections and public meetings, to address their concerns about social/political issues (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Keeter et al., 2002). Besides that, individuals can also engage in civic activities to react to public/social affairs from a political aspect, including protesting, boycotting, or making petitions (Keeter et al., 2002). In the community aspect, volunteering is an important and popular form of civic engagement and other community service activities (Diller, 2001; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Keeter et al., 2002).

Cultivating an individual's civic engagement abilities and intentions in both community and political dimensions allows individuals to use multiple pathways to achieve their goals in pursuing public goods (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Henderson et al. (2012) suggest that people's volunteering participation at younger ages positively impacted their political participation and civic engagement in their university studies. Thus, community and political participation in civic engagement are often interconnected (Stewart & McDermott, 2009).

This research project focuses on Chinese international students' civic engagement/identity development while they pursue their degrees in Canada. In Canadian higher education, students have opportunities to access both community activities (e.g. volunteering) and political activities (e.g. student protests) (e.g. Dobson et al., 2021; Morris, 2019). Based on this, I integrate educational and political science approaches to civic engagement to determine specific types of civic activities, which land in the parameters and definition from Alder & Goggin (2005) and Ekman & Amnå (2012). In this study, civic engagement experiences include volunteering within community organizations/school associations, being a member of students' associations/community organizations, participating in events with these organizations (e.g. voting for students' organizations), participating in activities for responding to social/political affairs (e.g. signing for petitions), and personal advocacy for social/political issues (e.g. posting on blogs/social media, writing articles, boycotting). I specifically include some civic activities within the university environment (e.g., activities in student organizations), which can help me explore how current Canadian universities provide practical opportunities for Chinese international students on campus. Figure 1 presents the actions and activities of civic engagement that I adapted from previous literature for this research project and which I apply in this study to explain the different dimensions of civic engagement.

Figure 1

Dimensions of civic engagement



Source from: Adler & Goggin, 2005; Broom, 2016; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Diller, 2001; Keeter et al., 2002; Steinberg et al., 2011

Source: Author

3.3 Internationalization and (Chinese) international students' experiences in Canadian higher education

The internationalization of Canadian higher education is an ongoing process, and this tendency is reflected in the policy initiatives and changes in immigration and international education since the post-World War II period (McCartney, 2021; Sabzalieva et al., 2022).

Internationalization of higher education demonstrates “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions (primarily teaching/learning, research, service) or delivery of higher education” (Knight, 2014, p. 77). In Canada, the federal and provincial governments play a significant role in promoting the internationalization of higher education, and international student recruitment has become a key indicator in policy documents to measure the progression of internationalization (GAC, 2014, 2019; Trilokekar et al., 2020). From the 2000s to the 2010s, the federal government established and updated the International

Student Program and International Education Strategy plans¹ to recruit more international students to Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2011; GAC, 2014, 2019). As a result, the international student population has had a substantial increase in the past two decades in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Yet, since the end of 2023, the federal government has started limiting international student recruitment (IRCC, 2023, 2024a). Despite multiple policy changes from 2023 to 2024, the Canadian government still claims that international students are an important community in Canadian society (Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025; IRCC, 2024a). Canada had over 400,000 post-secondary international students in 2022, and nearly 85% of them chose HEIs located in Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2023). In 2024, over one million international students chose to study at all levels of education in Canada (IRCC, 2024a).

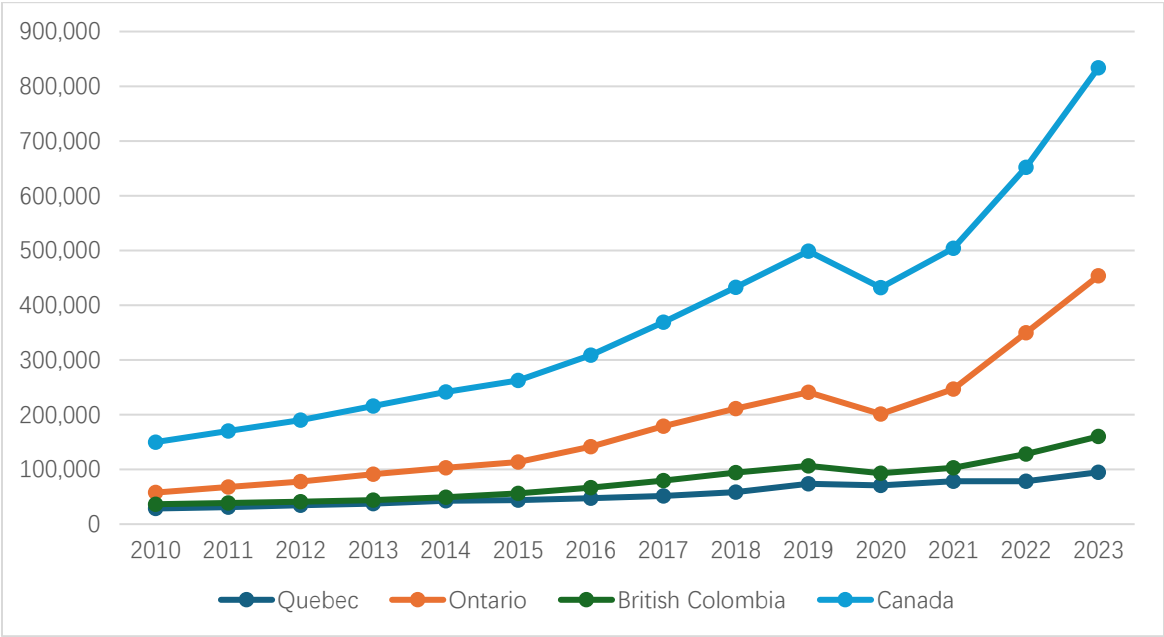
Canada is one of the most popular destinations for Chinese students to choose from when pursuing their post-secondary education (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Chinese students were the largest international student group in Canada between 2010 and 2017 (IRCC, 2024b). Since the pandemic, fewer Chinese students have chosen Canada to pursue their international education, but they were still the second-largest international student group in 2023 (IRCC, 2024b). The following charts show the numbers of international students in Canada and the three leading provinces² by year (Figure 2) and the number of Chinese international students in Canadian higher education by year (Figure 3).

Figure 2

¹ The federal government published two international education strategy plans: the first plan for 2014-2019 and the second plan for 2019-2024. As of January 2025, the third strategy plan has not been officially published.

² The data is retrieved from Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC, 2024b, 2024c), indicating the population numbers are the international students who obtained legal temporary resident status (i.e. study permit) from the government.

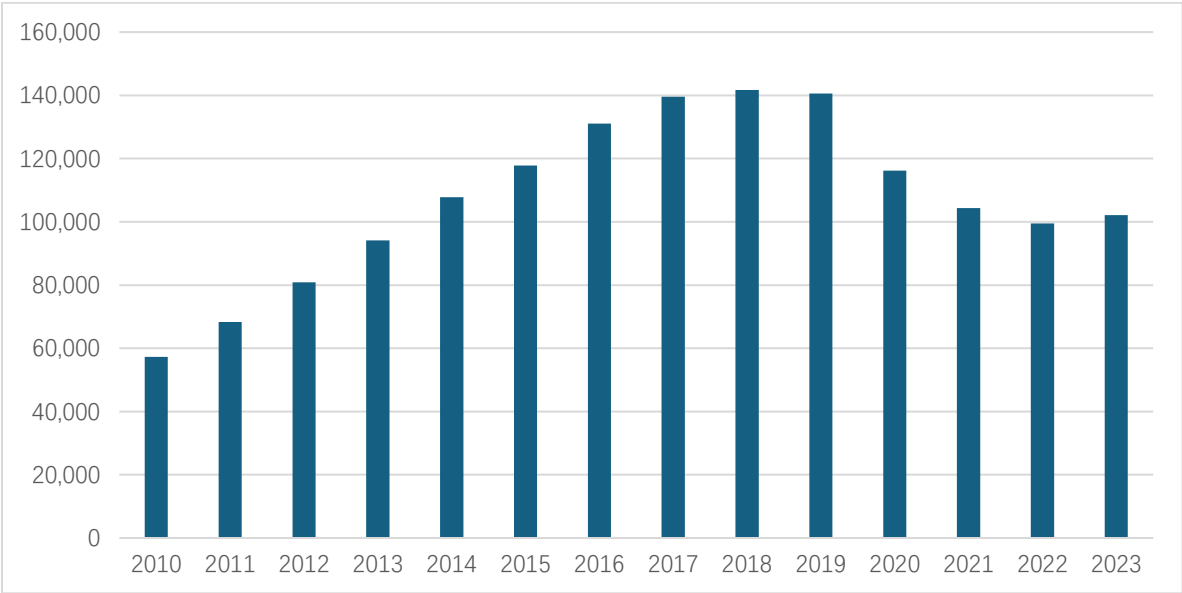
Number of international students in higher education in Canada, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec, 2010-2023



Source: (Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada, 2024b)

Figure 3

Number of Chinese international students in Canada, 2010-2023



Source: (Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada, 2024c)

Although the population of international students in Canada has dramatically increased over the past two decades, critical internationalization studies suggest that Canadian international education policy embeds with inequalities, constructing international students' images based on policymakers' demands and needs (Y. Guo & Guo, 2017; Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025; Hutcheson, 2024a, 2024b; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). International education policy narratives and implementations lead international students to encounter barriers and unfair treatment while attending post-secondary education programs in Canada (Y. Guo & Guo, 2017; Hutcheson, 2024b). The mismatch between policy and lived experiences has two dimensions.

First, international students' economic and soft power benefits are salient rationales embedded in government and HEIs' international education policies (Buckner et al., 2020; Sabzalieva et al., 2022). At the policy level, international students are constantly labelled as capital and assets in Canadian higher education and society (Hutcheson, 2024a; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Reflecting this policy narrative to real-life situations, international students, especially students from Asian countries, are usually described as a 'wealthy community' and 'cash cows' (Beck, 2024; Hutcheson, 2024a; McCartney, 2021; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). These stereotypes dehumanize the international student community and may negatively influence local communities' perceptions of international students inside and outside university campuses (Beck, 2024; Hutcheson, 2024a; McCartney, 2021).

Secondly, international students' learning experiences in Canadian universities do not align with internationalization development, including course content designs, curriculum implementations and classroom interactions (S. Guo & Guo, 2022; Y. Guo & Guo, 2017; E. Yu, 2024). Many Canadian colleges and universities list curriculum reformation and improvement as a task in their internationalization strategy (Buckner et al., 2020). However, this commitment has

not been prioritized as student recruitment, which would bring more revenue (Buckner et al., 2020). Currently, many subjects' curricula and pedagogy (e.g. education, film studies and engineering) across Canadian universities are still largely shaped by Eurocentric and Westernized views and have limited content drawing from international perspectives (S. Guo & Guo, 2022; Y. Guo & Guo, 2017; E. Yu, 2024).

For Asian/Chinese international students, lacking international perspectives appears in various areas of their campus life, not only in curriculum designs and implementation. Overall, Chinese international students are less satisfied with their academic learning experiences in Canadian universities than international students from other countries (Kim et al., 2024). Besides academic experiences, over 50% of Chinese students do not have positive experiences engaging and integrating into university campuses, such as daily interactions with different university communities (e.g. academic staff and other students) (Kim et al., 2024). Chinese international students experience racism and marginalization through being excluded from interactions with instructors and peers in their campus experiences (Ge et al., 2019; E. Yu, 2024). Therefore, although Chinese students typically describe Canadian HEIs as a safe environment, but it is not an inclusive environment for them (Kim et al., 2024).

Besides academic learning, extra-curricular activities and interactions are also a part of (Chinese) international students' post-secondary studying experiences in Canada (Kim et al., 2024; E. Yu, 2024). International students from Asian countries prefer to join cultural/ethnicity-based student organizations rather than local student groups, supporting them in their lives in Canada and maintaining their cultural identity (Malette & Ismailzai, 2020). However, domestic White students suggest these associations lack inclusivity in encouraging local students' participation, and they have negative perceptions of Asian international students' language ability

and interactions with university communities (Malette & Ismailzai, 2020). These sentiments of Asian international students from the domestic community also mirror the barriers (Chinese) international students face in international education policy and practices (Ge et al., 2019; Hutcheson, 2024b; Malette & Ismailzai, 2020). These international students' experiences show that Canadian universities do not provide an inclusive academic/social environment to effectively cultivate mutual understanding and respect among all student communities (Ge et al., 2019; Malette & Ismailzai, 2020; E. Yu, 2024).

Chinese students also experience marginalization, developing difficulties in learning and integrating into Canadian society outside university campuses (Ge, 2021; Kim et al., 2024). For example, anti-Asian racism towards Asian students in Canada evolved during the pandemic, especially among Chinese international students (Ge, 2021; Kwak et al., 2024). 40% of Chinese international students experienced incidents of racism during the pandemic while they studied in Halifax (Kwak et al., 2024). Meanwhile, around 50 % of international students reported they have experienced or witnessed racism against Asian or Chinese students (Kwak et al., 2024).

These studies have illustrated the limitations and disconnections between international education policies and international students' experiences in Canadian HEIs. Chinese international students face different barriers and inequalities inside/outside the university campuses, suggesting that current Canadian university environments still have limitations in including Chinese international students as community members. Yet, civic engagement requires individuals to understand the community, position themselves as a member and feel responsible for developing positive changes for the community (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Steinberg et al., 2011). The limitations and inequalities in Canadian higher education guide the following sections

to review education pedagogy/curriculum for civic engagement in Canadian universities and Chinese international students on/off-campus civic engagement experiences.

3.4 Education for civic engagement in Canadian universities

Community-based learning and undergraduate courses in social science fields are the two educational opportunities related to students' civic development in Canadian universities (e.g. Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b; Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2015). These educational programs guide students to understand the concept of civic engagement and gain relevant practical experiences from their higher education experiences (e.g. Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b; Martin et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2015).

3.4.1 Community-based learning

In Canadian higher education, community-based learning³ started evolving in the early 2000s, and it is the most relevant educational method for students' civic engagement/identity development (Taylor et al., 2015). However, community-based learning is still a niche learning area in current Canadian universities. By 2015, 30 Canadian universities established official community-based learning programs⁴ (Taylor et al., 2015).

Community-based learning allows students to interact and work with the communities to address their needs and concerns, which benefits their civic development (Aujla & Hamm, 2018; Taylor et al., 2015). Community-based learning programs can be delivered in various formats, including placement/internship, project-based courses, and research projects (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Kahlke & Taylor, 2018). Most community-based learning programs are established at college and undergraduate levels, and graduate students have relatively less access to related

³ Community service-learning and community-based learning are synonyms that represent similar learning functions in Canadian universities. The following review uses community-based learning as the terminology.

⁴ However, according to Taylor et al. (2015), this result does not thoroughly represent the landscape of community-based learning in Canadian higher education.

programming (Taylor et al., 2015). Community-based learning encourages students to apply knowledge from their field of study and skills to the community (Taylor et al., 2015). During learning, students understand their civic/social responsibility and increase their motivation for long-term civic engagement (Taylor et al., 2015). Many faculties and academic departments in Canadian universities offer community-based learning programs, such as health science, education, engineering, psychology and so on (Kahlke & Taylor, 2018; Taylor et al., 2015). Many HEIs implement these programs with local organizations or groups within the city or province of the universities for the students (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Kahlke & Taylor, 2018; Kricsfalusy et al., 2016). Additionally, community-based learning can create interdisciplinary collaborations and hands-on practices (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2015).

Community-based learning programs are one of the common ways for HEIs to incorporate civic engagement in students' academic learning (Taylor et al., 2015). Each university has different strategies to design and implement community-based learning (Kahlke & Taylor, 2018). Universities' locations, funding/finance, and local/regional community needs are the main factors influencing community-based learning (Kahlke & Taylor, 2018; Kricsfalusy et al., 2016). The local/regional community needs and concerns are the core elements influencing engagement formats and learning objectives in these programs (Kricsfalusy et al., 2016). Community needs inform universities' design of different learning activities and programs for students and empower them to initiate social changes within the community (Kricsfalusy et al., 2016).

Beyond local community engagement, Canadian universities also seek to develop community-based learning in global/international contexts. For example, previous studies highlight the cases in the University of British Columbia, the University of Ottawa and St.

Francis Xavier University for providing various international programs for students to experience civic engagement in global contexts, such as experiencing field placements abroad (Kahlke & Taylor, 2018; Kricsfalusy et al., 2016). In the literature, the meaning of ‘international’ in these programs always refers to learning locations rather than international student groups in Canada. Further, these learning programs in Canadian universities always emphasize their local/regional issues or needs, which suggests the concept of community is primarily linked to local social groups in Canada in the literature on Canadian universities’ community-based learning (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Kahlke & Taylor, 2018; Kricsfalusy et al., 2016).

As mentioned, community-based learning connects students’ academic learning with their civic development, supporting students in building an in-depth understanding of social/community issues (Hébert & Hauf, 2015; Taylor et al., 2015). Students who have had community-based learning experiences are usually more motivated for future civic engagement than their peers who do not have similar learning experiences (Hébert & Hauf, 2015). Despite that, Canadian universities’ current community-based learning curriculum might still have limitations to support all students in achieving learning objectives in civic engagement development (McLean & Truong-White, 2016; Taylor et al., 2015). For example, the pre-service teachers in civic education are required to have community-based learning to create civic education and civic engagement modules for students studying in the K-12 system (McLean & Truong-White, 2016). However, only a few teacher candidates connect their civic engagement development to their learning reflection (McLean & Truong-White, 2016).

Community-based learning is not widely promoted in Canadian universities for students’ civic development (Calvert & Montemayor, 2018). For example, the University of Alberta is one of the Canadian universities with a well-developed community-based learning center (Calvert &

Montemayor, 2018). Although the university has a sophisticated community-based learning structure, only around 1,500 students enrolled in community-based learning projects among all student populations in the 2022-2023 academic year, and the learning program only has 9% international students among the enrolled student population (Kincaid, n.d; University of Alberta, n.d). The University of Alberta's case implies that students, especially international students, still have difficulties using community-based learning to support their civic development. Other than the low participation rate, higher education in Canada does not emphasize and distinguish international students' community-based learning experiences and outcomes. Previous literature shows that universities do not include domestic and international students as a parameter in designing and implementing these learning programs (Kahlke & Taylor, 2018; Kricsfalusy et al., 2016). However, many international students encounter challenges in community-based learning, including language proficiency, integrating community learning with their regular course schedules and limited accessibility due to immigration policy restrictions (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020).

3.4.2 Education for civic development in classroom settings

Other than interacting with local groups/society through community-based learning, courses in classroom settings can also benefit students' civic engagement/identity development. Previous studies show that undergraduate courses in social science subjects can support students' civic development through course contents, in-class participation (teaching/learning strategies), and assessments (Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b; Martin et al., 2023). First, the introductory courses in political science offered by many Canadian universities allow students to learn political knowledge for their civic engagement (Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b). Students' civic engagement development is a learning objective that is embedded in these courses (Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b). However, this learning objective is usually not explicitly listed in the

course syllabus (Bell & Lewis, 2015b). In these classes, students can understand the concepts of civic engagement, political activities, and citizenship by learning Canadian politics and government structures (Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b). The learning materials and assessments both influence students' civic engagement development, including writing reports/essays, in-class presentations, and in-class presentations (Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b). Ultimately, these courses aim to foster students' behaviours in civic engagement, such as voting and participating in community services (Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b). However, these introductory courses are typically offered in the political science department, which raises concerns about their accessibility to all university students.

Other than introduction courses in political science, public policy courses in social work are examples of classroom learning that also support students' civic engagement in a Canadian university (Martin et al., 2023). In this policy course, students can learn about Canadian politics, policies, and social welfare through lecture debate sessions, an active learning pedagogy for university learning (Martin et al., 2023). This pedagogical choice allows students to apply political/civic knowledge in practice (Martin et al., 2023). The active learning environment helps students connect academic materials with real-life issues in communities (Martin et al., 2023). Even though students' civic engagement development is not the primary learning objective in the curriculum, students build interests and skills for future civic engagement after attending this course (Martin et al., 2023). Since the course is open to all undergraduate students as an elective option, it provides more opportunities for students to experience civic engagement in formal classes.

However, course-based learning still has some limitations in helping students to apply the knowledge related to civic engagement to their real-life practices. In Bell and Lewis's studies

(2015a, 2015b), the regular class discussions and exams in current introductory courses do not significantly impact students' civic development from instructors' perspectives. However, 'political simulation' is an effective way to foster students' interests and behaviours in involving civic activities, but it is limited to implementation in these introductory courses (Bell & Lewis, 2015a). Both studies suggest that developing civic engagement-related activities for courses allows students to practice their engagement skills in the classroom setting, which might effectively cultivate students' interests and motivations in civic engagement (Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b; Martin et al., 2023). Therefore, students' civic development is not only related to learning civic knowledge from courses but also requires the pedagogies to connect the knowledge with practices.

3.5 Students' perceptions and experiences of civic engagement in Canadian universities

Students' perceptions and experiences of civic engagement influence their civic identity as a 'civically engaged individual,' including their interests and frequency of on/off campus civic engagement (Steinberg et al., 2011). Previous studies show that students' perceptions and civic experiences may be affected by the civic environment created in their university but also extend beyond universities' environments, including provincial public policies related to higher education (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014; Chicoine & Ancelovici, 2021; Drago, 2021; Haque et al., 2021).

3.5.1 Forms of civic engagement

University students in Canada commonly participate in voting and volunteering as their major civic activities (Broom, 2016; Broom et al., 2017). Besides these two conventional activities, students consider donating, boycotting/protesting, following recent political news, and engaging in political activities/discussions on social media as civic engagement (Broom, 2016; Broom et al., 2017). Only around 15% of students decided to become members of civic

organizations and political parties to expand their civic experiences (Broom et al., 2017). Students' attitudes and participation in voting and volunteer activities are influenced by their previous educational experiences in citizenship and civic education (Broom, 2016; Broom et al., 2017). Additionally, students' knowledge of Canadian politics and democracy strongly connects to their attitudes toward voting (Broom, 2016; Broom et al., 2017). Other than that, students' study length in the university might relate to their motivation and engagement since fourth-year students usually have the highest weekly community engagement rate compared to other levels of students (Haque et al., 2021). Also, many third- and fourth-year students have greater recognition of the value of community participation to themselves than first- and second-year students (Haque et al., 2021).

University campus is one of the common settings where undergraduate students can initiate and participate in community activities for their engagement. (Haque et al., 2021). Further, Canadian universities have the environment and resources to develop civic activities for students beyond their learning experiences in their degree programs, such as volunteering, student governance, co-curricular community-based learning programs, and student clubs/associations (Haque et al., 2021; Li, 2016; Kahlke & Taylor, 2018). Students can experience both the political and community aspects of civic activities. In the political domain, students can participate in the decision-making process in the governance of departments (Li, 2016). On-campus volunteering and students' clubs/associations can provide civic engagement opportunities in the community domain. Moreover, community activities can also support students in forming new social groups in universities (Dobson et al., 2021). For example, one of the intentions for the students to volunteer at language learning centers is to support other ESL students in the university and develop the teaching/learning community for this student group

(Dobson et al., 2021). On top of that, Broom (2016) and Broom et al. (2017) explain students' use of social media for multiple civic activities, such as following political news and online political discussion. However, many political science instructors' perspectives do not recognize this, as they claim traditional political activities (e.g. voting for elections, becoming a member of a political party) are closer and better represented to the concept of civic engagement than online activities, such as sharing political perspectives on social media (Bell & Lewis, 2015b). Nevertheless, online civic engagement is trending among post-secondary students (Visser & Stolle, 2014). Many university students in Canada use digital platforms to participate in political activities, including election-related activities, supporting student strikes and online political discussions (Dumitrica, 2016; Harell et al., 2020; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2020; Raynauld et al., 2016). University students in Canada believe social media can empower them to share their political views with broader communities and expand engagement (Dumitrica, 2016; Harell et al., 2020). Individual students and student organizations can also use online engagement to influence in-person engagement (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2020; Raynauld et al., 2016). For example, in Quebec, many students advocate online for individuals' participation in the 2012 student strike (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2020; Raynauld et al., 2016).

3.5.2 Provincial differences in students' civic engagement

Reflecting on their civic engagement experiences, most university students want to make more efforts in the future by participating in more civic activities than their current participation rate (Broom, 2016; Broom et al., 2017; Haque et al., 2021). Over 65% of university students from British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec evaluated themselves as partially active in civic engagement (Broom et al., 2017), and over 60% of students from Alberta have monthly participation in community activities as their civic engagement (Haque et al., 2021). Differences in students' civic engagement may be caused by provinces' socio-political environment and

higher education policies (Broom et al., 2017; Chicoine & Ancelovici, 2021; Drago, 2021; Evans et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant for Quebec.

For example, in Broom et al.'s study (2017), more than 60% of students share their understanding of government policy changes in tuition, healthcare and environment, and social issues in Canada, such as discriminatory actions towards minority groups. Specifically, Quebec students mention their concerns about Quebec nationalism, the government's corruption, and policymakers' dismissive attitudes towards youth's political opinions (Broom et al., 2017). These comments of the provincial government do not appear in students' responses from Ontario and British Colombia (Broom et al., 2017).

Quebec has a unique socio-cultural environment that differs from other provinces and territories in Canada for university students, as Francization is a vital topic in current Quebec society and unique provincial policy regarding student organizations/movements (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014; Gagnon & Larios, 2021). These factors result in universities in Quebec having a different institutional environment than universities in Canadian provinces and territories, which also impacts university students' civic experiences. Students in Quebec have longstanding traditions of initiating student movements to address social affairs, such as advocating for provincial elections (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014). From the 2010s to the present, Quebec university students have organized many student strikes from campus-wide to off-campus, including the largest student strike in Canada in 2012 (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014; Liddle, 2024; Morris, 2019). These student actions are influenced by the provincial government policies and regulations, allowing Quebec student unions more autonomy than other provincial students' unions in forming these engagement activities (Chicoine & Ancelovici, 2021; Drago, 2021).

For students in Quebec English-speaking universities, the provincial framework of *Francization* also influences their studying and civic experiences, especially non-Quebec resident students (Gagnon & Larios, 2021; Liddle, 2024; Usher, 2023). In recent years, the Quebec government has instituted multiple policies and laws regarding French requirements that influence HEIs, including Bill 96 and the tuition hike in English-speaking universities in 2024 (Jolin-Barrette, 2021; Liddle, 2024). Many student groups from English-speaking universities organized protests to respond to the provincial government's tuition policy based on language law (Liddle, 2024). With Quebec student unions' autonomy inside/outside HEIs and Quebec's socio-political environment (e.g. policy and law), students can organize various student movements and activism to pursue their interests and rights as students from HEIs (Chicoine & Ancelovici, 2021; Drago, 2021). For students in Quebec, this can be valuable in creating the conditions to gain political participation experiences for their civic engagement and identity development.

3.6 Chinese international students' civic engagement and identity formation in Canada

Most studies view university students as a homogenous group, as is the case with most literature featured in the previous section, and do not bring students' other background information as factors into the discussions. Since this study focuses on Chinese international students as the research population, it is necessary to review Chinese students' experiences in more detail. There is quite a lot of literature regarding Chinese international students' overall experiences in Canadian higher education. Most studies (e.g. Ge et al., 2019; Zhang & Beck, 2014; Zhou et al., 2017) investigate their academic experiences and social integration in academic environments. However, I was only able to identify four studies that investigate how international students' experiences related to their civic engagement/identity development in Canada, including Chinese students (Broom, 2016; Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Lew, 2006; Li,

2016). These studies either had Chinese students as the sole research population or as a major group among the research population and are therefore used as the basis for this section. In addition, Broom's research (2016) had Chinese students as one of the main research groups but did not confirm the Chinese students' immigration status. Taken together, these four studies help illustrate Chinese international students' civic engagement patterns and identity representations.

Although Chinese students and other international student groups have not actively appeared in the research, they are motivated to support the local communities (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Lew, 2006; Li, 2016). Tracing back students' experiences, many international students, including those from China, learn and experience civic engagement through community-based learning and civic activities with student/community organizations (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Lew, 2006). International students can build relationships with local communities and support them in solving their issues through these experiences (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Lew, 2006). Specifically, community-based learning experiences allow international students to increase their awareness of social issues in both Canadian and international contexts to build their identity as global citizens, supporting them to be civically engaged in home and host countries' societies (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020). After attending community-based learning projects at their university, most international students build an in-depth understanding and increase their interest in civic engagement in Canada, especially in addressing social justice and equity issues (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020).

Besides attending educational programs, volunteering is a popular civic engagement for both Canadian and international students (Broom, 2016; Lew, 2006). Compared with White/Canadian students, most Chinese students prefer to join in volunteer activities and have more participation than Canadian students (Broom, 2016). Further, international students from

Asian countries, including Chinese students, choose to join and support ethnicity-based student organizations as a crucial part of their civic engagement in Canada (Lew, 2006).

Other than participating in community civic activities, many Chinese students have more passive attitudes and lower participation rates in voting than students from other cultural backgrounds (Broom, 2016). Since this study did not collect students' immigration status, the author assumes that Chinese students' legal status impacts their intentions and attitudes toward voting (Broom, 2016). From Chinese students' perspectives, some of them indicate that they are unfamiliar with democracy and democratic practices, which influenced them to have less interest in voting and other civic activities (Broom, 2016). This aligns with Li's (2016) research, highlighting that neoliberal approaches in international higher education and the transitions from authoritarian to liberal democratic society influence Chinese students' intentions and interests in political participation (Li, 2016). Neoliberal approaches shape Chinese international students' characteristics as politically insensitive individuals in Canadian higher education, weakening their ability to engage in political participation (Li, 2016).

Despite that, studying and living experiences in Canada still support Chinese international students to experience political participation in Canada, regardless of their immigration status (Li, 2016). First, Chinese students who study social science fields can explore democracy and related engagement by studying government protocol in urban planning, equality in society, public policy and social movements (Li, 2016). During post-secondary learning experiences, Chinese international students compare socio-political environments in China and Canada with their professional knowledge and develop a deeper understanding of democracy and how the engagements support individual and collective interests and rights (Li, 2016). These

learning experiences (Li, 2016) connect with the civic engagement and identity definitions mentioned in Sections 2.2 and 3.2 (e.g. Adler & Goggin, 2005; Steinberg et al., 2011).

Second, student politics in student organizations also influences international students' civic engagement experiences (Lew, 2006), which also aligns with Chinese students' experiences (Li, 2016). Many Chinese students participated in the student governance process in their academic departments (Li, 2016). Outside the campus environment, Chinese international students can observe the electoral process and campaign (Li, 2016), which also informs that their immigration status influences their civic development. From these experiences, Chinese students believe that political participation should not only be limited to voting for the public, but the local community should create more deliberation opportunities to include all individuals regardless of their immigration status in Canada (Li, 2016).

Nevertheless, in these development experiences, some international students feel obliged to accept and act in the same manner and traditions as the local community to prevent further challenges in their learning and development (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020). These feelings underline Chinese students' barriers to civic development, including language and cultural barriers in interacting with local communities in Canada (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Lew, 2006). These barriers might also cause Chinese students to hesitate to engage in civic activities with the local community (Lew, 2006). Additionally, academic achievement and financial pressure might be the other factors that impede Chinese students from participating in civic activities in Canada (Lew, 2006).

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This research aims to understand Chinese international students' civic development in Canada and the implications of studying experiences in Canadian universities. I proposed three research questions to help my inquiry: **Research Question 1:** What are Chinese international undergraduate students' perceptions and attitudes toward civic engagement? **Research Question 2:** How does studying in Canadian universities impact civic engagement and civic identity development among Chinese international undergraduate students? **Research Question 3:** What factors outside university experiences impact Chinese international undergraduate students' civic engagement experiences and civic identity development?

This chapter outlines the methodological approaches and techniques used in solving these research questions and the reasons behind these methodological choices. This chapter starts by introducing the methodology and method for this research project and how I made these choices. Section 4.3 illustrates my position as the lead researcher of this project, which addressed my insider/outsider position and power dynamics in this research between my participants and me. The processes of reflexivity are also addressed in my positionality statement. Section 4.4 provides detailed information on the two research sites, sampling strategies and the recruitment protocol. I outline the processes of data collection and the ethical considerations that I addressed during each research stage in Section 4.5. Section 4.6 describes my data analysis process by following Bruan and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis.

4.2 Methodology and research method

4.2.1 *Qualitative methodology*

This study adopted the qualitative research methodology to guide research design, data collection and analysis. According to Marshall et al. (2021), "qualitative research is pragmatic,

interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (p. 2). Based on the nature of qualitative research, the inquiries always relate to real-world situations in order to learn about society (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Marshall et al., 2021; Yin, 2016). Researchers can use various methods to interact with participants and learn their perspectives/experiences about social issues/phenomena in qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As this study aims to explore the connections between individuals’ civic engagement, identity development, and overseas higher education experiences, qualitative research methods are suitable for guiding me in interacting directly with participants. Participants can share the details of their learning and civic engagement experiences in qualitative research, contrasting with quantitative research, which seeks generalized answers to research questions.

Moreover, the knowledge produced by qualitative studies is not a fixed and single answer to the research questions (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Although this research aims to examine the connections between higher education and Chinese students’ civic engagement and identity development, it does not plan to seek generalized answers or patterns that represent all Chinese international students in Canada. This research seeks an in-depth understanding of a small number of Chinese international students’ perceptions of civic engagement/identity development in their post-secondary education experiences in Canada. The importance of context in qualitative research also influences me to adopt this methodology (Yin, 2016). Since researchers usually use qualitative methods to investigate society and social phenomena, ‘context’ becomes the fundamental element that needs to be addressed by researchers, such as the physical and socio-cultural environment of the research settings (Yin, 2016). The feature of contextualization in qualitative studies can guide this research in examining the connections between participants, the institutional environment (universities), and Canada’s/Quebec’s socio-cultural environment.

Many previous studies have adopted qualitative research to investigate students' civic engagement experiences or international student learning experiences in higher education (e.g. (Hutcheson, 2024b; Lew, 2006; Sieriakova & Kokoza, 2019). Using the qualitative research method, the students can share their participation in different activities during their post-secondary education experiences. For example, Lew (2006) conducted a qualitative research study to examine six international graduate students' civic engagement experiences in Quebec, Canada. Sieriakova and Kokoza (2019) also applied qualitative methodology to investigate students' civic experiences at a Ukrainian university. Additionally, Hutcheson (2024b) uses qualitative methodology to explore international students' experiences and examine the inequality and unfairness in Canadian international higher education. Based on methodological choices in previous studies, qualitative research is the appropriate methodology and inquiry approach for me to answer the research questions.

4.2.2 Research method: Semi-structured interview

This study used semi-structured interviews as the sole data collection method. The semi-structured interview is a common and effective data collection method in qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Researchers always design an interview protocol based on existing knowledge and research topics to gather in-depth information from the interviewees (Kallio et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). However, unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide flexibility to interviewers and interviewees during the interviews (Kallio et al., 2016). For example, interviewers do not have to strictly follow the pre-designed interview protocols (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). When the participants mention any new concepts or ideas, interviewers can ask off-script questions to explore the topic further (Kallio et al., 2016).

By employing this data collection method, I designed an interview protocol with key and follow-up questions. Since this research population is Chinese international students and I am a

native Chinese (Mandarin) speaker, the interview questions were available in English and Chinese versions (see Appendix B for the English version). The questions are categorized under two topics: 1.) civic engagement/identity development in university learning and 2.) civic engagement/identity development beyond the university environment. The design of the questions followed Patton's (2015) qualitative interview guidelines. The guidelines suggest six categories of interview questions for researchers to determine the purpose of each question, which can help researchers effectively use interviews to address the research questions (Patton, 2015). The guidelines also explain how and why follow-up questions should be developed as needed to gather detailed information for the key questions (Patton, 2015). Interview questions in qualitative studies can be sorted into six categories: experience, opinion/values, emotions, sensory, knowledge, and personal background (Patton, 2015). Most interview questions in this protocol landed on experience, value, emotions and knowledge categories. The content of interview questions related to formal post-secondary education was referred to from the findings in previous literature, such as community-based learning and political/civic knowledge for civic engagement (e.g. Bell & Lewis, 2015a, 2015b; Kahlke & Taylor, 2018; Martin et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2015).

Questions 1, 2, and 3 started with learning participants' perspectives of civic engagement as international students and their previous engagement experiences inside/outside universities. These questions helped to draw a picture of Chinese international students' attitudes toward civic engagement. Participants' previous civic engagement experiences could also reflect how their social identity influences their choices. Questions 4 and 5 focused on the educational opportunities in Canadian universities that relate to students' civic engagement and identity development, which were identified from previous studies (e.g. Steinberg et al., 2011; Taylor et

al., 2015). These questions also helped me discover the relationship between university learning and students' engagement experiences. After question 5, the interview would move to topic 2, seeking more information about students' development experiences outside the university to answer *Research Question 3*. Questions 6 and 7 aimed to provide more spaces for participants to share their civic engagement experiences while they studied in Canada, extending Questions 2 and 3. Question 8 offered a discussion opportunity for Chinese international students' perceptions of civic engagement learning in a Western context and how it influences their civic engagement and identity formation. Questions 9 and 10 were designed to understand the connections between participants' learning and development experiences in Canada and their future lives.

4.3 My positionality

Addressing personal positionality in the research allows researchers to reflect on their relationships with participants, possible bias, power dynamics and privileges in different research stages. Reflexivity is necessary for qualitative research in each stage because it supports the credibility and validity of the qualitative research (Agee, 2009). Meanwhile, reflective thematic analysis considers the researchers as the main instrument in approaching and interpreting the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Both features of qualitative studies and reflective thematic analysis require researchers to acknowledge their positionality, including their bias, values and assumptions.

Researchers often hold insider and outsider positions in their research projects, indicating the physical and psychological distances between researchers and their participants (Holmes, 2020). In this research, I describe my insider position based on my identity and educational experiences and my outsider position as a student researcher who is interested in higher education research. As a former Chinese international student in Canada, I share similar living

and studying experiences with my participants in both social contexts. We also have two shared languages (Mandarin and English), which helped me understand participants' perspectives and choices during their civic engagement experiences and identity development.

Moreover, my insider position provides me with the scope to identify potential concerns from participants, which has helped me as a researcher to tackle these situations. For example, participants could have been uncomfortable discussing political topics in the interview session based on their identity. Therefore, I worked on these concerns throughout the research process, such as protecting participants' confidentiality and highlighting the relevant information in the recruitment process. Besides participants' confidentiality, my insider position allows me to understand the socio-cultural environment in China. This understanding guided me to carefully choose the language I used in interview questions, such as avoiding the use of terms directly related to any political affairs/parties in China and Canada. During the interview and analysis processes, I realized that my participants mentioned specific knowledge and events related to the Chinese/Canadian context without explaining detailed background information because, as a Chinese student, I already shared the understanding with them.

Researchers must acknowledge the researcher-participants' power dynamic from navigating their insider/outsider position, especially in social science/culture studies (Merriam et al., 2001). My insider position could construct my assumptions based on my previous knowledge and personal opinions about Chinese international students and their political stances in civic engagement, which might lead me to misunderstand and misinterpret participants' opinions. Also, when I approach participants as a researcher, they might feel obliged to provide the answers that fit my values or assumptions. This factor influences my outsider position as a student researcher, potentially increasing the imbalanced power dynamic between me and my

participants. I recognized that the intersections between my insider/outsider positions might negatively influence research participants' power dynamics. Therefore, I used the following strategies to address these potential negative influences. In the research design process, I tried to develop the interview questions to be as open-ended as possible and avoid any leading questions. Before the official interviews, I completed a pilot interview to test out the interview questions' wording choices and the interview session's flow. Then, at the beginning of each interview session, I reminded the participants that they do not have to answer any questions they feel uncomfortable answering. Also, I provided space for participants to take as much time as needed to respond to questions. Then, I positioned myself as an active 'facilitator' and 'listener' to ask the questions and provide explanations as needed rather than an 'active discussion participant' to interrupt their thinking process. Finally, I sent interview transcripts in Chinese and English versions to participants to ask for their help in checking my understanding and interpretation of transcribing and translation.

4.4 Research design

This research was granted ethical approval from the Research Ethics Boards at McGill University and at Concordia University in March 2024. The following section explains the procedures and protocols of participant recruitment, data collection/management, and data analysis.

4.4.1 Research sites

I selected McGill University and Concordia University as my two research sites for participant recruitment. McGill University and Concordia University are English-speaking, research-oriented universities in Quebec, Canada. Both universities have a large population of international students on campuses. At McGill University, Chinese international students are the largest student population among all international students (McGill University, 2024).

Chinese international students are the fourth largest international student group at Concordia University (Concordia University, 2024). The large population of Chinese students in these two universities allow me to include more Chinese international students' voices to share their university and engagement experiences, which could support me in building a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese students' civic behaviours and views in Canada. Besides the large Chinese international student population in these two universities, Quebec's socio-cultural environment and rich history of student activism and engagement, as discussed in section 3.5.2, also make these two universities valuable research sites for examining the implications of university experiences and provincial framework on Chinese international students' civic development.

4.4.2 Participant selection criteria

This study employed two sampling strategies for recruiting participants: **purposive** and **snowball sampling** strategies (Etikan et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling helps researchers identify and select the participant population that fits the research objectives and questions well (Patton, 2015; P. Zhao et al., 2022). Therefore, the studies can gather detailed and appropriate data to understand specific phenomena (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling allows current participants in the research studies to refer the studies' information to potential individuals who are suitable and interested in participating in the research (Etikan et al., 2016).

I designed five selection criteria to recruit participants who could support me in exploring the research questions (summarized in Table 1). I drew from previous literature to build the inclusion criteria, especially for Criteria 2: Level of study and Criteria 5: Experience of civic engagement.

Criteria 1 describes **participants' country of origin and legal status in Canada**, indicating that participants are from mainland China and self-identified as international students

in Canada. Criteria 2 focuses on **undergraduate students as the research population**. Previous studies related to (Chinese) international students' civic development mainly focused on investigating students at the graduate level rather than undergraduate students (e.g. Lew, 2006; Li, 2016). However, undergraduate students are also the main targeted populations for Canadian universities to develop educational programs in civic engagement learning for students' development (Kahlke & Taylor, 2018; Taylor et al., 2015). As a result, learning about undergraduate students' developmental experiences helps this research expand the knowledge in civic engagement learning at different levels of university studies.

Criteria 3 identified the **participants' study field** as a recruitment requirement. According to Taylor et al. (2015), many career/professional-oriented fields include community-based programs as a learning component, such as healthcare, education and engineering. Moreover, Bell & Lewis (2015a, 2015b), Li (2016), and Martin et al. (2023) show that a major with rich civic literacy and social science knowledge influences students in cultivating their interests in civic engagement and their civic identity development. Based on the literature review, the recruitment priority is participants from majors with community-based learning and/or civic knowledge, including East Asian studies, education, engineering, business, political science, and sociology. However, I also recruited participants from other majors if they considered it relevant to this research topic. Setting primary and secondary recruitment parameters allows this research to explore civic engagement learning beyond the previous research lens.

Criteria 4 describes **the length of time participants have studied in Canada**, which indicates the participants need at least one year of learning/living experiences. One year of learning and living experiences helps participants better understand their universities and

sociocultural environments in Quebec and Canada than newly admitted/enrolled students. The prerequisites of criteria 3 and 4 supported this research in finding participants who can provide more insightful perspectives about current civic engagement education in Canadian universities, their civic engagement/identity development experiences, and the connections between higher education and personal experiences.

Criteria 5 indicates participants' **previous civic engagement initiatives** in Canada. The list of civic activities was developed from the dimensions of civic engagement I identified in Section 3.2 and students' common civic experiences in Canada from Sections 3.5 and 3.6 (e.g., Adler & Goggin, 2005; Broom, 2016; Keeter et al., 2002). The experiences are sorted into five categories: volunteering, membership in student/community associations, attending civic activities for social/political affairs, and personal advocacy. The participant only needed to have one related experience to match the fifth criterion. Setting previous civic engagements as the inclusion criteria can support this research in providing a comprehensive inquiry for RQ2. When the participants have actual experiences in Canada, it helps them to link the learning and practices together. Participants' previous civic engagement experiences can also reflect their civic identity formation process in Canada.

Table 1

Inclusion Criteria

Criteria	Detailed Description
1. Country of Origin/Legal Status	- Participants were born in Mainland China - Self-identifies as an international student in Canada
2. Level of Study	- Enrolled in an undergraduate program at one of the two research sites
3. Major	- Business, East Asian studies, Education, Engineering, Political science, Sociology - Other major relevant to the research as identified by participants

4. Year of Study	- At the time of interview, had completed at least one year of their program
5. Experience of Civic Engagement	Participants have had at least one of the following experiences during their study in Canada: - Volunteering within community organizations/school associations - Being a member of students' associations/community organizations - Participating in events with community/school organizations - Participating in activities for responding to social/political affairs (e.g. signing for petitions) - Personal advocacy for social/political issues (e.g. posting on blogs/social media, writing articles, boycotting)

4.4.3 Participant recruitment

Recruitment ran from April 2024 to October 2024. I used multiple methods for initial recruitment. I designed a recruitment poster (Mandarin and English versions) to advertise this research, which included the purpose of the study, the pre-screening survey, and the research procedures. I used a Microsoft 365 Form to create a pre-screening survey with questions that checked whether participants met the inclusion criteria.

The recruitment poster was shared on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, WeChat⁵ and Red) and the university bulletin boards at both research sites. I reached out to potential participants who matched the recruitment criteria from my professional network via email. I also contacted the Chinese students' associations at the two research sites and Chinese community associations to disseminate the recruitment information. My supervisor shared the recruitment poster on their LinkedIn and via email with their contacts at two research sites.

⁵ Due to the provincial and university policy, I only used WeChat for recruitment purposes on my personal device, not a McGill device.

After receiving and verifying each pre-screening survey from potential participants, I emailed an invitation letter and consent form (see Appendix A) to obtain official agreement and consent. I provided the same recruitment poster for the identified participants to share with other potential participants they knew. Participation in the interview was voluntary, and participants could withdraw their consent up until the completion of transcript reviewing sessions. After the participants reviewed their initial interview transcript, I generated a new anonymized code for the research data. Therefore, the data would be not able to be identifiable and removed from data collection. All results from the screening survey were destroyed after the recruitment process was completed. After participants gave official agreement and consent, the information from screening survey data was used to provide an overview of the participants' population (see Table 2).

After an extensive recruitment process, I recruited five participants from McGill University and two participants from Concordia University.⁶ In order to protect participants' confidentiality, Table 2 provides a general overview of participants, and in the following report, I refer to participants by code names, such as Participant 1. Several participants had more than one major and/or a minor, so the total number of studies listed in these categories exceeds seven.

Table 2

Participants Overview

Enrolled University	McGill University (5) Concordia University (2)
Major Studies	Biology (1) East Asian studies (1) Political science (1) Philosophy (1) Psychology (1) Sustainability studies (1)

⁶ Since most recruitment and data collection occurred during the spring/summer semesters, two participants had completed their undergraduate studies by the time of interviews in the summer.

	Sexuality studies (1)
Minor Studies	Business (1) East Asian Studies (1)
Year of Study	Completed Year 1 (0) Year 2 (0) Year 3 (3) Year 4 (4)
Previous Civic Engagement Experiences in Canada	Volunteering (4) Being a member of students' associations/community organizations (4) Participating in events with community/school organizations (5) Participating in activities for responding social/political affairs (5) Personal advocacy for social/political issues (4)
Participants' Pronouns (self-declared)	He/Him (0) She/Her (5) She/They (1) They/Them (1)

4.5 Data collection and management

4.5.1 Data collection

I conducted seven individual semi-structured interviews between June and October 2024. Due to the project timeline, the interview sessions were parallel with the recruitment process. The summer vacation caused some gaps in recruiting and interviewing participants. The first five interviews were completed from June to July, and the last two were completed at the end of August and the beginning of October.

Consent to participate in the research was collected before the interview session by 1) giving written consent before the in-person interview session or sending a written consent form via email before virtual interviews and 2) giving verbal consent that was audio-recorded at the start of the interview. I'm a native speaker of Mandarin and fluent in English. Therefore, participants could choose to do the interviews in the language that makes them comfortable. All participants chose to use Mandarin for the interview session. Five interviews were conducted in

person, and two interviews were conducted virtually through Microsoft Teams. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes.

All interviews were audio-recorded for transcribing and analysis purposes. All audio recordings and initial and confirmed transcripts were securely stored in password-secured files at my McGill OneDrive. For the in-person interviews, I recorded them on my personal recording device and uploaded them to my McGill OneDrive. Once the uploading had been completed, I immediately deleted the recordings from my personal device. I used Microsoft Word to transcribe the in-person interview recordings, and Microsoft Teams was used to record and transcribe virtual interviews. The transcribing process on software only provided initial transcribing results. To ensure accuracy, I manually checked the transcripts with audio recordings and corrected the mistakes.

After transcribing the audio recordings, I manually translated all the Chinese transcriptions into English for analysis and report generation because the final thesis was presented in English. Although I am a native Chinese speaker and fluent in English, the translation process still has a chance of causing some misinterpretations. Therefore, I sent both transcripts (Chinese/English) to each participant for the interviewee transcript review process (Hagens et al., 2009). Besides that, the initial plan was to send the interview transcripts to all participants regardless of the language they used in the interviews. However, all participants chose to use Mandarin for their interviews. In the transcript reviewing process, participants could revise and confirm the content of their interviews or provide additional information as needed in this process. Sending the initial original and translated transcriptions to interviewees helped me to prevent or fix the mistakes and interpretations from translations. The review process provided an opportunity for participants to be more actively engaged in the research process.

4.5.2 Data management and confidentiality protection

As a researcher, I am responsible for protecting participants' privacy and confidentiality during and after the research process. I took multiple actions to maintain participants' confidentiality. This research involved data transfer between the participants (e.g. emailing signed consent forms), and this process could be linked to participants' identities through email communications. Therefore, all email communications were deleted from the email platform, and only those related to consent obtaining were saved on McGill OneDrive. All initial research data (consent form, audio recordings and initial transcriptions) was assigned anonymized code names and stored in the password-secured master file on my McGill OneDrive. After receiving the confirmed transcripts, I generated new code names to label the final transcripts and stored them in a separate password-secured file on my McGill OneDrive. Based on ethical considerations, the initial transcripts and audio recordings in the master file will be deleted after my final thesis evaluation. After graduation, other research data will be transferred and stored at the faculty supervisor's McGill OneDrive with the password-secured file. The research data will be deleted seven years after this study's completion.

Transcribing and translation are also an important part of protecting participants' confidentiality. All identifiable information was omitted and altered in the transcriptions. Also, as mentioned above, my insider positionality helped me understand highly sensitive political topics mentioned by participants, which are mainly related to Chinese affairs. Therefore, I filtered and replaced specific and sensitive events or organizations from transcripts with general terms or codenames. The organizations named in this thesis are not directly affiliated with the participants or have very low/non-sensitive political elements that influence participant's confidentiality.

4.5.3 Challenges during data collection

The biggest challenge throughout this research was the recruitment process. I anticipated that recruitment would be challenging since civic engagement includes some political participation and topics. To my personal knowledge, these topics might not be popular topics that Chinese students would discuss or connect with their post-secondary education. I used snowball sampling to help, but the situation remained challenging. Initially, I planned to recruit participants from April to the beginning of August. However, recruitment was slower than the original plan. I consulted with the REB department about adding both Chinese and English social media platforms for recruitment, including WeChat — the most popular communication application/social media in the Chinese communities.

Besides social media selection, the time period also caused some difficulties for recruitment. Many international students from China choose to go back home during the summertime if they do not have any courses or internship programs during the spring/summer terms. Also, during summer vacation, many students did not monitor their communications regularly, including group chat posts, emails, and other digital communications. The recruitment process progressed with the approval of additional social media platforms.

During the data collection process, I approached the participants to see if they could refer any potential students who fit the criteria and were willing to participate in the interview. Through the personal conversations, I discovered other reasons that might have caused the challenges from the participants' perspectives, which also fits some of my anticipations of having barriers in participant recruitment. One student, who is enthusiastic about politics and political activities in their civic development, pointed out that many international students from China have political apathy (“政治冷感”/ zhèng zhì lěng gǎn). Based on this phenomenon, there was a possibility that not too many students were interested in this research topic, and she could not

refer any potential participants to me. This reason also appeared during my interview with another participant and our conversation about snowballing recruitment. Other than that, many of my participants studied in majors that did not attract many Chinese international students from their observations. One student expressed the lack of interactions between classmates after the pandemic, resulting in difficulties in providing referrals.

By the end of August, I had interviewed five participants from McGill University and one participant from Concordia University. After discussing with my faculty supervisor, we agreed that the sample was too imbalanced between the two research sites, even for my small-scale study. As a result, the recruitment and data collection were extended to October 2024. By the end of October, I successfully recruited one more participant from Concordia University and conducted the interview. Even though this was still lower than I had hoped, at this stage, my supervisor and I agreed to end data collection in order to ensure the timely completion of the thesis.

4.6 Data analysis

I employed Braun & Clarke's (2022) reflective thematic analysis to analyze the research data. Reflective thematic analysis is a commonly used and flexible approach, focusing on "systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The frequency of the codes and themes in each data sample is not the main indicator of the validity of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The main focus of the thematic analysis is to make sure patterns can help answer the research questions. Reflective thematic analysis offers deductive and inductive approaches to analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I employed both approaches to provide thorough and comprehensive answers to my research questions.

4.6.1 Initial analysis stage

I started the analysis process after each participant verified the initial transcripts of the first five interview transcripts to generate an initial codebook. I used an iterative rather than a rigid linear process (see Figure 4). Typically, reflective thematic analysis follows six steps, including “1) data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 331). Before the coding process, I went through the interview transcripts multiple times and took some notes for my initial observations. According to Braun & Clarke (2021), researchers can adjust this six-step guideline based on their needs. Therefore, I conducted five iterative deductive and inductive coding rounds for all interview transcripts and ended with 51 codes.

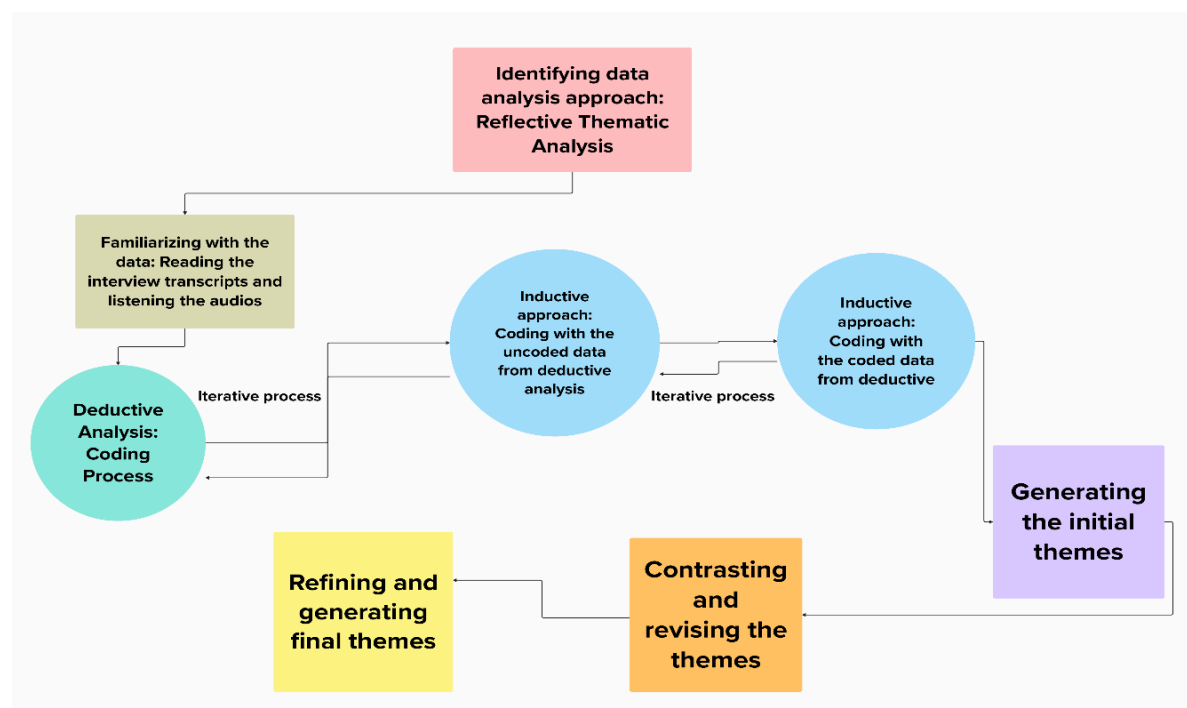
I began with deductive analysis, coding the data based on my theoretical framework. Unlike other deductive approaches for theory-testing (e.g. codebook thematic analysis), reflective thematic analysis focuses on using existing theories and frameworks to observe, explore and explain the research data without pre-identified codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). For the next step, I used an inductive approach, which is “... a bottom-up approach and is driven by what is in the data.” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). After deductive analysis, I started the inductive coding process with the remaining uncoded content in the interview transcripts, including the data segments that could not be explained through the theoretical framework. Afterwards, I revisited the original coded data through an inductive lens to seek new meanings. This deductive-inductive approach allowed me to analyze the dataset comprehensively and further guided the theme development/refinement in the final analysis stage.

In both inductive and deductive approaches, I first focused on coding the descriptive elements. Then, I paid more attention to interpreting data beyond the participants’ words and

unpacked the interpretive elements. The first coding round was an exploratory stage to understand the dataset. I analyzed the passages openly and inclusively to code as many relevant passages as possible and identified new codes in each transcript. After the initial round, I used the developed codebook to review and code whether new codes from the specific transcripts would appear in other transcripts. The initial analysis stage took place in three rounds of inductive and deductive coding, and each code was assigned a definition.

Figure 4

Data Analysis Process



Source: Author

4.6.2 Final analysis stage

The first step in the final analysis stage was refining and iterating the 51 initial codes. I reviewed the codes, definitions and excerpts to collapse similar codes into one broader code with detailed descriptions. This step helped to clean up my initial codebook and make the codes more

concise and accurate. Besides combining the codes with similar meanings, some initial codes were expanded into two codes for interpreting and explaining the nuances of participants' experiences. For example, the initial code of 'benefits' was divided into 'personal growth' and 'professional development' to explain the nuances between participants' growths from their experiences. I also added a new code in this round: 'tensions inside the university,' harmonizing initial codes of 'dissatisfaction' and 'conflicts between university and community' because the initial codes all describe participants' reactions and feelings about civic engagement in their university campuses.

After coding, I started developing initial themes (Phase 3) to find the patterns in this dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Following the guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2022), I clustered the codes with similar meanings into different groups and identified the common patterns from each group. From this process, I developed five initial themes reflecting students' civic engagement/identity development inside/outside their university experiences. Then, I reviewed and refined the initial themes (Phases 4 and 5), allowing me to revisit the data and revise the themes to convey accurate and meaningful messages to audiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I examined the shared meanings behind each theme to verify that the patterns were concise and consistent. After reviewing, I refined the initial themes and developed subthemes to capture the nuances and connections between students' studying and civic experiences. I finalized a total of four key themes: *1.) At the intersection of individual, community and politics: How students understand civic engagement and identity, 2.) Becoming a civically engaged student in Canada: Motivations and barriers, 3.) Civic development emerging from universities and, 4.) Challenges and benefits of being civically engaged.* I use these four themes to structure the findings chapter that follows.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, I explained the detailed steps in my data collection and analysis process, including the iterative and refining process in developing codes and final themes. In this chapter, I discuss my findings using the four key themes developed through thematic analysis. The four key themes are: **1.) *At the intersection of individual, community and politics: How students understand civic engagement and identity***, **2.) *Becoming a civically engaged student in Canada: Motivations and barriers***, **3.) *Civic development emerging from universities***, and **4.) *Challenges and benefits of being civically engaged in Canadian universities***.

Each key theme is underpinned by subthemes to present the nuances of participants' experiences. Theme 1 includes two subthemes to present Chinese students' perceptions of civic engagement and civic identity, respectively. Theme 2 demonstrates students' motivations and barriers to civic engagement and how these motivations and barriers developed in students' engagement experiences. Under Theme 3, I unpack participants' university experiences that influence their civic engagement and identity formation, including the course experiences and interactions and experiences with university communities on/off campus. Three subthemes were identified in Theme 4 to illustrate the challenges and the positive outcomes of Chinese students' civic engagement and identity development in Canadian universities.

5.2 At the intersection of individual, community and politics: How students understand civic engagement and identity

This theme explains the participants' understanding of civic engagement and civic identity as an international student from China. I present these findings in two subthemes to explain these intersections in Chinese students' civic development and how these intersections influence students' behaviours in civic engagement. The first subtheme, ***Forms and methods of***

civic engagement, describes students' perceptions and attitudes of civic engagement in both conceptual and practical aspects from their previous experiences. The second subtheme is *Factors influencing civic identity formation*. This subtheme explains the factors that influence civic identity formation as an active, civically engaged individual for their community and society (Hatcher, 2011; Steinberg et al., 2011). These two subthemes reveal that civic engagement and identity intersect with individual, community, and political participation. Importantly, these intersections are fluid and constantly evolve based on individuals' interactions with the community and politics.

5.2.1 Forms and methods of civic engagement

Some participants had first impressions of civic engagement as a broad concept that made it difficult to give detailed descriptions at the beginning of the interview. However, many students could easily list the activities they participated in or perceived as civic engagement. Based on participants' responses and experiences, I synthesized that civic engagement could support individuals' community development/formation and is a pathway to addressing the social/(geo)political issues in society and communities for others to pay attention to, locally and internationally. Noticeably, for Chinese international students, what they considered 'local' politics and community covered local at two levels, both Canadian and Chinese, spanning social issues and domestic and international policies. Participants mentioned many local and international issues during the interviews based on the time of data collection. These included the war in Ukraine (international), crises and war in Gaza (international), pandemic crisis in China (local-China), human rights issues in China (e.g. gender inequalities) (local-China), China's democratic movements (local-China), democratic movements in Hong Kong (international/local-China), Quebec government's Francization and tuition policy (local-Canada), housing crisis in Canada (local-Canada), teaching assistant and staff strikes in two universities (local-Canada).

Participants all shared their civic engagement and observations in Canada. I summarized participants' experiences, referring to the previous literature (e.g. Adler & Goggin, 2005; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013). Students' responses were summarized as eight types of activities in civic engagement, including *advocacy and activism, being a member of civic, social and political organizations inside/outside the university, communicating personal opinions in politics and social issues to others/the public, elections and election campaigns, joining the events hosted by civic, social, political organizations, following the news, protest & demonstration and volunteering*. Table 3 provides an overview of students' civic experiences⁷ in Canada, categorizing the activities from students' interviews into these eight categories.

Table 3

Students' civic engagement experiences

Civic Engagement Category	Specific Activities Mentioned by Participants (if applicable)	Students' Participation of the Category
● Advocacy and activism	1. Writing advocacy letters 2. Fundraising 3. Signing petitions 4. Reposting activism/advocate information (e.g. advocating for democratic movements) 5. Organizing advocacy/activism events 6. Memorial/honor ceremony organized by university communities 7. Following advocacy and activist groups' social media/online communication	Participant 2 Participant 3 Participant 4 Participant 5 Participant 7

⁷ The interviews might only cover some participants' previous civic experiences due to the interview lengths and settings. For example, some civic experiences students stated in the pre-screening process might not be mentioned during the interviews. As the result, the information on students' participation in Table 3 might be different from Table 2: Participants' overview.

	8. Advocacy activities organized by human rights organizations and advocacy groups	
● Being a member of civic, social and political organizations inside/outside the university	1. University student associations and clubs 2. University office 3. Community organizations/clubs	Participant 1 Participant 5 Participant 6
● Communicating personal opinions in politics and social issues	1. Discussing political and social affairs with family members and friend 2. Discussing or sharing personal political opinions with others on online platforms or in-person	Participant 1 Participant 2
● Election & Election campaigns	1. Supporting/volunteering election campaigns hosted by a community organization	Participant 7
● Joining events hosted by civic, social, political organizations	1. Community development events hosted by local LGBTQ+ community 2. Pride Month Parade 3. Networking events hosted by university students' organizations	Participant 2 Participant 3 Participant 4 Participant 5 Participant 6 Participant 7
● Following news		Participant 1 Participant 6
● Protest & demonstration	1. Protest against pandemic policy in China 2. Protest against provincial public policy or social issues (housing crisis) 3. Student strikes (Francization/tuition policy in Quebec, university policy) 4. Academic staff strikes 5. Pro-Palestine protests	Participant 2 Participant 3 Participant 4 Participant 5 Participant 7
● Volunteering	1. Volunteer for community organizations in Quebec 2. Volunteer for non-government organizations	Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 7

	3. Volunteer inside university 4. Other volunteer participation	
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Guided by dimensions of civic engagement in Section 3.2, the process of categorizing civic activities shows that civic engagement has two directions for the participants: 1.) **community-oriented participation** and 2.) **political-related participation**. However, it is important to note that these are not fixed categories, as community and political elements can intersect. Many students joined community-oriented civic activities to support specific communities, which might not reflect political actions or factors in the activities. However, these community issues and needs are tied or aligned with political issues or communities' political demands/stances. For example, 4 participants were actively following and joining activities with LGBTQ+ communities/organizations in Canada, such as community support projects and Pride March. Nowadays, some activities in LGBTQ+ organizations seem community-oriented to improve members' living situations and community development. However, the histories of the community formation and activities were rooted in advocating rights for the LGBTQ+ community and initiating policy changes (Busby, 2020). Even if community activities in LGBTQ+ groups might not "have high levels of political element. But the existence of [the LGBTQ+ communities] are represented political itself" (Participant 4). Participant 3 also commented, "I couldn't separate social [community] and political sides very well. Like, which is a political [activity], and which is a social [community activity]" from their civic experiences. Since Chinese students have been portrayed as politically insensitive individuals in international education (Li, 2016), using the engagement categories allowed me to observe participants' attitudes and perceptions of political activities in their civic engagement.

Students also joined many political-related activities through community organizations rather than within purely political-oriented organizations. For example, Participant 6 joined an online book club to learn and discuss the history of Chinese politics. Participant 7 volunteered for federal election campaigns initiated by a local immigrant association in Montreal – a community organization to network and support immigrants from the origin of birth. In addition, Participant 1 had a volunteer experience at an international biodiversity conference, which brought together many policymakers to discuss global sustainable development.

Besides discussing political and community activities, many participants shared their **online and in-person civic experiences** in the interviews. Many students joined online engagement during their studies in Canada. Online platforms provide engagement opportunities for Chinese students with fewer time/location restraints. Participant 1 had an online volunteering experience supporting China's rural area development during the pandemic. Participant 2 and Participant 3 both participated in online advocacy activities through human rights organizations and advocacy groups, including signing online petitions and writing advocacy letters. At the same time, online platforms also allowed participants to find up-to-date information about engagement opportunities. Many participants regularly followed civic organizations, university student organizations, and activist social media accounts or online newsletters to seek new engagement opportunities. For example, Participant 6 regularly followed Canadian/Chinese news and sought volunteer opportunities from social media or other online platforms. On top of that, some Chinese students also use digital platforms to access knowledge about civic engagement, including learning about democracy, Canada's public policy, global affairs, and Chinese politics. Participant 3 stated, "I think the Internet is a very good resource. I learned many things from the Internet."

Students' online learning experiences also demonstrated that participants also developed their perception of civic engagement by being indirectly involved in civic activities alongside actual participation. As mentioned, observations were a helpful method for participants to understand civic engagement. Some students talked about the observations of Free Palestine signs and multiple protests around their university and in Montreal. These observations supported them in comprehending civic engagement in a public environment and how democracy is implemented in real-life practice. Beyond observation, interacting with the community also supported Chinese students in learning about social/community issues and the corresponding civic activities. Participant 4 stated that the intentions of civic engagement can be built through "a community experience, or people share the experiences based on their similar identity or identities' intersections." This claim is also reflected in Participant 7's engagement experiences in addressing Quebec's housing crisis. She shared,

"I was walking down the street one day, and then, [I] saw the protest team come over.

They pulled banners saying there is [having] a housing crisis. ... Then, I went to interact with the group. Then, I learnt what they do, and they provide legal support in the organization [for the impacted individuals]."

5.2.2 Factors influencing civic identity formation

In this research, the definition of civic identity is guided by the CMG model (Steinberg et al., 2011). Therefore, civic identity means the ways that students enact commitments to their community/society and actively engage in community and political activities (Hatcher, 2011; Steinberg et al., 2011). Participants shared their understanding of identity, purposes of civic engagement and citizenship. The findings show that Chinese students believe individuals' civic identities are influenced and formed by their personal identities, understanding of civic

responsibilities, and social-political environment in China and Canada, and these guided their civic engagement.

Perhaps surprisingly, most participants' experiences show their **national identity** as Chinese is essential to becoming a civically engaged individual in Canada. During the interview, some participants explicitly pointed out the connections between their national and civic identities. For example, during the interview with Participant 2, we discussed the relationships between their civic experiences and (civic) identity. Participant 2 linked civic identity with individuals' citizenship and remarked on "holding a Chinese passport." Then, she explained, "My nationality is strongly connected with my [civic] identity" to respond to their civic experiences in Canada.

In addition, one student commented that joining the Chinese students' association helps "[Chinese] international students to find their sense of belonging [in Canada]" (Participant 1). Especially, this civic experience helped her maintain the cultural heritage behind her national identity, which is typically not shared with other local communities in Canada. She gave an example that "during the Chinese traditional holidays, you [Chinese students] will feel [that you] particularly miss your home country [China]" and "attending or organizing these events [inside the association] can help people to enhance their self-identity [as a Chinese international student]." This student's experience of joining the Chinese students' association also illustrates that their nationality guided their civic identity formation regardless of their (temporary) settlement location.

Gender identity also impacts students' civic identity formation, interacting with national identity. As mentioned in the previous section, many participants interacted with the local LGBTQ+ community as a part of their civic engagement in Canada. Participant 5 stated she

mainly focused on civic activities “related to political topics and the minority communities in China” and continued to work with the Chinese transgender community while she studied in Canada.

National and gender identities are not the only identities that influence participants’ civic identity formation. As the students come to Canada and study as international students in Canadian universities, their **migrant status** and **international mobilities** also become a part of their personal identity, affecting their civic identity development. For example, Participant 1 expressed her interest in voting if she settles and is granted citizenship in North America in the future. Therefore, if Chinese students’ migrant status changes from ‘international student’ to ‘Canadian citizen,’ they would have new civic responsibilities and increased engagement opportunities in Canada.

On the other hand, studying abroad expands students’ understanding of their commitment to the community beyond national boundaries. Some participants suggested that individuals’ civic identity should not be limited to the traditional concept of citizenship, which is set with national boundaries. Participant 7 stated:

“... you go to a place; you settle yourself in this place. When you go to the place, you have feelings for the place. Umm, you have your life and settle down.

Something like this. Like, I’m in Canada now, so of course, I care about what happens in Canadian politics and economy. Is there a way for everybody to fix it [political and economy issues in Canada]?”

Instead of restricting civic identity to citizenship or nationality, Chinese students’ civic identity is formed **based on their sense of belonging and responsibility** to their (temporary) settlement location. The students did not indicate the process and orders of how to cultivate a

sense of belonging and responsibilities to host countries, although these two features impact their commitment to Canada (host society). Participant 3 had a similar perspective to Participant 7, encapsulated in this quote from Participant 3:

“When the country [temporary/permanent settlement location] is in some kind of crisis, you might have the responsibility or duty. Um, for example, some injustice. Like, for example, if there is the situation of racial segregation, you might have the obligation to break these injustices. I think there is one very important thing, um, like, you live here, you should have the obligation to break these injustices and inequity.”

Participant 3's and Participant 7's opinions also suggested the two features/qualities that Chinese students might integrate as a part of their civic identity: the **awareness of social contexts and issues in both home and host countries** and an understanding of the **purposes of civic activities**. For example, Participant 2 claimed that understanding democracy and its value supported her to engage in related civic activities in Canada. Also, Participant 7 explained that when individuals incorporate these qualities into their civic identity, it will benefit the community's civic engagement to become sufficient with fewer conflicts. Lastly, some students also believe the purpose of civic engagement is to prioritize supporting others and the community in the engagement rather than only focusing on personal interests, which is also a valuable quality in individuals' civic identity.

Furthermore, participants' international mobilities also highlighted social contexts' implications on their civic identity formation, presenting as individual Chinese students' engagement choices and behaviours. By reason of international mobility and educational choices, the participants had experiences living in China and Canada, both of which are crucial

to the participants' civic development. China and Canada have different social, cultural, and political environments, creating different conditions for students' civic identity formation. Many participants' responses showed that an oppressive environment limits students' civic development since some students considered China to be an autocratic country. Therefore, civic engagement represents "[any] sensitive [topics] under Chinese context" (Participant 5).

Conversely, as a "democratic country" (Participant 7), most Chinese students believe Canada has a more open and lenient environment for students' civic development, especially in political participation. Participant 2 described:

"Canada's political environment is relatively peaceful compared to that of the U.S. or Chinese governments. Of course, nothing can compare with the Chinese government. Their repression is really strong, and the attitudes are really tough. However, Canada doesn't have these attitudes. To some extent, Canada still gives you the freedom to participate in political activities."

Participant 1's experiences illustrated the implications of both social contexts on students' community/political participation for their civic identity formation. Participant 1 recognized the effectiveness of using political-related civic engagement to solve community issues by witnessing the strike activities. However, she explained her decision not to take part in political-related activities (e.g. protests, strikes and demonstrations) in Canada because the activities are prohibited in the current Chinese context, and it is "hard to bring these ideas [political-oriented civic activities] back."

In addition, some students pointed out that these qualities and characteristics should be developed in secondary education, and then the behaviour would continue in university studies and further life experiences. For Chinese international students, international education at the

secondary level could be an effective method to cultivate these qualities, given limitations in the Chinese curriculum. Participant 3 explained, “High school is a more important place for an individual about how to be a person,” but “there is little or zero civic education” in China’s K-12 curriculum. Yet, some participants who received international secondary education in China had relatively more learning opportunities for civic development. These international secondary education experiences can support Chinese students to learn Canadian history and social studies, and economic and political relations in global contexts before they arrive in Canada. Even though participants did not explicitly connect these learning experiences with their personal civic experiences, some of them discussed their implications for students’ civic development more generally. Additionally, Participant 7 suggested that knowledge from political science could be promoted in secondary education, which would cultivate students’ motivation and awareness of civic engagement.

5.3 Becoming a civically engaged student in Canada: Motivations and barriers

According to Steinberg et al. (2011), students’ civic engagement experiences are an essential part to form their civic identity. Therefore, the motivation and barriers that participants encountered during their engagement experiences also influences them to identify and shape their civic identity. The findings are presented in two subthemes: 1.) Personal responses to community and social issues, and 2.) Individuals’ relationships with social groups.

5.3.1 Personal responses to community and social issues

Most participants were self-motivated to get involved in civic activities beyond their academic learning in Canada. The first internal motivator is **personal concerns and reactions towards issues and affairs in China, Canada, and other international contexts**. When participants observed the issues in their community and society, many started using civic engagement to express their perspectives to others within/outside their communities and change

current negative situations regardless of the results. Participant 2's dissatisfaction with the current governments in China and Canada encouraged her political participation in protesting and advocating for policy changes, such as the recent tuition policy in Quebec and the pandemic policy in China. Likewise, Participant 7 shared her protest and demonstration experiences because of her awareness of Quebec's housing crisis. Some students also use civic engagement to show support and solidarity with other communities, such as pro-Palestine protests and academic staff strikes. These supportive actions show that community memberships are not essential in directing Chinese students' civic engagement in Canada.

Many participants considered civic engagement an alternative method **to achieve their personal goals** and demands in personal, academic and social areas. First, many Chinese students wish to **connect and make friends** with other Chinese international students while they study at Canadian universities. Participant 1 and Participant 6 stated that their English skills were not good enough when they arrived in Canada. They explained that it is easier for them to make friends with other Chinese students and communicate with them. Therefore, becoming a member of the Chinese student association can effectively achieve these personal needs, as the association is "a platform for connecting Chinese students who study overseas" (Participant 1).

In addition, Chinese students might not set out to use civic experiences to achieve their personal goals, but sometimes, the motivations are built through their journey in personal development. For example, Participant 7 initially joined a local traditional culture club to learn about Quebec's art culture. Through these learning processes, she built the motivation to support the community in the long term. Therefore, she regularly volunteered for these organizations after she completed her learning programs. In Section 5.2.1, participants shared that civic engagement could become a sensitive topic in China and for Chinese students because many

activities related to politics and against the current authorities' governance, especially in Chinese politics. Therefore, **getting more civic experiences that are restricted in China** can also be an internal motivation for some Chinese students. Participant 2 stated that political participation in Canada was valuable to her civic development, and she was interested in exploring different types of political participation during her undergraduate studies.

Using civic engagement to **achieve academic improvement** is also an important internal motivation. Participant 6 shared that her membership in a STEM student club can support her academic development in English proficiency by supporting and joining club events. Participant 1 believed active civic experiences during her undergraduate studies would also become an asset for her graduate studies application.

5.3.2 Individuals' relationships with social groups

Despite the motivation and interests of being civically engaged individuals, Chinese students still face many difficulties and challenges during their participation. Guided by the concepts of internal group behaviours and relations in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), I found out that the barriers that Chinese students encounter are developed from their relationships and interactions with internal and external communities. The analysis shows that students usually identify the **Chinese international/immigrant community as their 'internal community'** since the national identity is a crucial part of their civic identity, and the **local communities inside/outside the university are usually considered as 'external communities.'**

Students' relationships with China and the Chinese community in Canada or back home were crucial to their overseas education experiences. Sections 5.2.1 and 5.3.1 showed that some participants held critical perspectives of the current Chinese government and politics, which influenced their civic experiences in Canada. For example, some students protested China's

pandemic policies, advocating for human rights issues and democratic practices. However, this view is opposite to that of many Chinese communities in China and Canada, and political activities are sensitive topics for Chinese international students, particularly those related to the Chinese government and affairs. In their community, “many, many Chinese students, they may favour China ideologically, like highly preferred to CCP⁸’s ideology and governance]” (Participant 3). Participant 2 explained the situation that Chinese students with critical views would face with their communities, “With the local Chinese community, there will be huge differences and disagreements in political stances. It is not only about political stances but also includes many mindsets and behaviours in social interactions. I don’t agree with the community.” Consequently, Chinese students who are critical of the Chinese government can encounter pushback from Chinese communities regarding their political participation. Many students who had political participation in Chinese affairs in Canada expressed fear or experienced aggressive behaviours from their community, including censorship and surveillance from the local Chinese international/immigrant community and the Chinese government.

Chinese communities’ collective behaviours and perceptions of politics might negatively influence Chinese students who share opposite opinions with the communities. Moreover, following collective behaviours also impedes Chinese students from developing their civic engagement and identity in the political domain. Some participants revealed that many Chinese international students in Canada have low motivation for civic development. The group norms of Chinese international students are focused on academic learning rather than other development (Participant 7) and “let’s do less, and it’s better to avoid any unnecessary troubles” in civic engagement (Participant 3). These behaviours and mindsets are deeply rooted in the Chinese

⁸ The Chinese Communist Party

student community, and it is difficult to change the perspectives of engagement and politics that Chinese students learn from their community (Participant 4). Additionally, if Chinese students are associated with civic, community and social organizations, interpersonal relationships and conflicts are also barriers to their pursuit of further engagement.

In addition to internal community relationships, Chinese students encounter obstacles from external communities, including Quebec's and Canada's social norms and culture. Feeling excluded from the local [external] community is a common experience that many Chinese students face in their engagement experiences. Participant 2 described, "...as an international student, I still feel pretty marginalized in Canadian society" and "I don't feel I belong to any of these communities" despite her participation in Pride Month.

Besides the feelings of exclusion, Chinese international students also experienced more explicitly discriminatory actions from local communities. Participant 7 described her previous civic experiences in Vancouver as "awful" because other community members always asked her about her nationality and ethnicity, regardless of whether she communicated with them in English. Participant 5 also encountered similar incidents during the counter-protests advocating LGBTQ+ education in Quebec's school system. Local police were more aggressive and implemented violent behaviours towards counter-protesters from the queer community. Moreover, because of her international student status in Canada, she was worried about the negative consequences after she experienced and observed the authority's actions.

Furthermore, Chinese students also encountered challenges in language proficiency during their civic development. Language barriers indicate students' interactions and relationships with the local communities in a broader aspect since the interactions and language usage may reflect the local communities' perceptions of Chinese international students and vice

versa. The two research sites are located in Montreal, Quebec, where the official language is French, and nearly 85% of residents speak French (Canadian Heritage, 2024; Gouvernement du Québec, 2024). Although participants studied in two English-speaking universities, they still faced language barriers in both English and French because "...most students are local students from Quebec. Also, many of them speak French" (Participant 1). French proficiency restricted some participants from accessing civic engagement opportunities. Participant 6 could not speak French and was rejected or unqualified for volunteer opportunities in Montreal. Participant 5 had minimal options in choosing her community-based learning site because of her limited French proficiency. She said that this French language barrier significantly impacted her overall engagement experiences in Quebec beyond the community-based learning opportunities. Conversely, Participant 7 was the only student who stated her French skills in the interview and had more positive experiences in Montreal. She shared, "As long as I know French, I am able to communicate with them. I join the activities, then I am one of them."

Besides limited French proficiency, English proficiency also created language barriers. Some participants stated their English ability also impacted their civic engagement experiences with local/English-speaking peers. Participant 1 expressed that although she started learning in an English-speaking environment in high school, she still faced challenges communicating with her peers in her Year 3 community-based learning program. Participant 6 joined a student club for STEM students and said she was the only ESL member in the group. Sometimes, it was hard for her to follow and engage in the conversations during the club events.

5.4 Civic development emerging from universities

This theme shows participants' civic learning and development experiences on campus and within university communities. Students' experiences are presented in two subthemes to explain the factors in universities that impact students' understanding of their civic identity and

engagement in Canada. The first subtheme, *Implications of course experiences*, discusses the connections between their course experiences from their degree program and their perceptions and practices of civic engagement. The second subtheme, *Engaging civically through university: On/off-campus opportunities*, explains students' civic experiences with different university communities both on and off campus.

5.4.1 Implications of course experiences

One of the functions of higher education is to provide students with opportunities to learn academic knowledge in specific fields, potentially shaping their professional identity and guiding their career decisions (Kreber, 2016). Beyond this, even if Chinese students who attend the courses in their program do not have content explicitly related to civic engagement and identity, these academic experiences and emerging professional identities can also indirectly influence students' civic engagement and identity formation processes in Canada.

From the interviews, students identified three factors about their course experiences that impacted their ability to be civically engaged: community-based learning programs, instructors' teaching styles, and choices of discipline/major/subject.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, **community-based learning** in Canadian universities is a common educational method related to students' civic engagement development (e.g. Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2015). University faculties and academic departments design community-based learning programs to support students in linking academic and professional knowledge with the community/field (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2015). Students shared that these learning experiences would benefit their civic development and engagement in Canada. Participant 3 worked with a faculty member to design a community-based project to explore Chinese migrant history in Montreal by collecting letters and text materials from the Chinese immigrant community. She believes this project could support students to build "strong

connections with [their] surroundings” to be aware of “history [and] ... power relations” in their local society. In this student’s opinion, understanding and being connected to the local environment is a crucial but overlooked factor in students’ civic engagement and identity development.

Chinese students also work with local communities in their civic engagement, and community-based learning provides opportunities for them to practice collaboration and interaction with local communities. Participant 1 stated that the community-based learning program helped her to develop her courage to interact and build positive relationships with “foreigners” (students from local communities), which would be helpful for her in her future civic engagement in “foreign countries” with local communities because of the cross-cultural communication and interpersonal skills she developed. Participant 5 enrolled in an internship course with a local non-profit social work/LGBTQ+ organization and a seminar course with collaboration opportunities with local LGBTQ+ organizations. These community-based courses, which were taking place after the interview, would allow her to learn about the issues in the local LGBTQ+ community, share her experiences, and understand the actions that could support community members and community development.

Even in courses that do not include community-based learning, participants said that **instructors’ teaching styles and strategies** in class can also impact their civic engagement and identity development. Many participants said that active discussion and class communication supported their civic experiences. Participant 2 mentioned that the professor encourages “the students to express their values and opinions” and provides discussion space in her lectures. Participant 2 stated, “While expressing your perspectives in class discussions, you become more confident and develop more desires and passions to express your opinions to others,” noting that

these experiences also helped her to share her political views with others in civic activities. Also, Participant 7 stated that the open and active class discussion helped her and her peers' civic development by recognizing political-economic and national security issues in Canada and other contexts, especially when the instructors actively participated and facilitated the conversations.

Besides interactions between faculty members and students in class settings, a few participants noted that **faculty members' positive attitudes toward civic activities** boosted Chinese students' interest in civic engagement, even if the activities happened outside the university. According to Participant 5, many faculty members supported students in organizing student strikes and shared information with students about local civic engagement. She explained that the professors "...call for help from us, like [students] can go together and help." Also, she observed that some faculty members are civically engaged individuals because they "...actually attended these events" that they shared with students. Moreover, Participant 2 stated that faculty members' supportive attitudes toward students' civic participation positively influenced her. She shared a quote from one faculty member in the interview that inspired her: "If you encounter unfairness, don't blame yourself. Blame society, blame it on the system." This statement encouraged her "to actively participate in political movements and work to change the current social conditions." Additionally, one faculty member showed support to the Chinese students in Participant 2's cohort (including her) who were trying to advocate for Chinese communities in China who were impacted by the pandemic. Although the professor is not from China, the student still felt support and encouragement about her actions.

Most participants also believe that the **content of courses in the social sciences and humanities** benefits students' civic development in understanding vital issues in current society and personal responsibility to address human rights, promoting democratic practices, gender

equality and resisting discrimination. Participant 5 reported that her field of study helped her own engagement experiences with the transgender community. From various required courses in her program, she learned about community engagement and ethical considerations for people to initiate civic activities with their community. Her selected courses discussed many “modern and postmodern topics” and what she called “human rights issues” in sexual minority communities.

Similarly, Participant 2 pointed out that the courses in ancient Chinese, contemporary Taiwanese history and Canadian modern history helped her understand the importance of democratic practices in initiating social changes and think critically about government policy disclosures and systems. The course on Canadian feminist movements also inspired her civic engagement since the course discussed “how Canadian feminists initiated reforms from government departments, making top-down changes to improve the situation of women.” After learning this, she used a historical lens and perspectives to understand current issues in society and said she had been provided “with practical examples of democratic participation [that] taught me how to apply the experiences of predecessors to my own.”

Even students who did not attend many social science classes shared similar perspectives. For example, Participant 4 commented that one of the introductory courses in the psychology department supports students’ civic development by learning about issues of injustice and discriminatory actions in the healthcare field. Participant 1 believed that Chinese students studying social science or humanities have more opportunities to learn civic literacy through courses in their degree programs, such as courses on international relations and East Asian studies. Additionally, Participant 1 volunteered in a panel discussion/presentation at an international conference, which required her to interpret the presentation from Mandarin to English for the attendees. The knowledge she had previously learned from sustainability studies

helped her in the session. She explained that “The talk/speech has some specialized terms. I believe only people who know the profession [biodiversity] well [would be able to translate]. Since I learned these terms from the classes, it helped the ... interpretation went very smoothly.” Therefore, even though the content of social science and humanities courses lends themselves more obviously to civic engagement, majoring in other fields might still be helpful for Chinese students’ civic identity development.

5.4.2 Engaging civically through university: On/off-campus opportunities

Outside the classroom, but still in relation to the role of their university, participants view their university as a social environment that is not only responsible for students’ academic learning but also influences students’ civic engagement. As Participant 1 described, her university environment makes her life “...become more open and diverse” and inspired her to seek engagement opportunities. The environment also indicates the university’s location. Participant 2’s campus, located in downtown Montreal, provided a “natural platform” for students to organize civic activities and increase the opportunities for the public to know students’ actions. University can be a resource base for Chinese international students to access on/off-campus **civic engagement opportunities provided by university administration, faculty and student groups**. Participant 1 commented that her university created a sustainability office because “the new QS ranking [one of the main international ranking systems] added an indicator of sustainable development.” She joined it to become a student member in this office. She participated in multiple sustainability projects, such as liaising with other university campuses and the external community to organize events and sustainable evaluation projects. She said these experiences helped her link her areas of study with civic engagement. Participant 6 looked for external volunteer opportunities through her university’s student careers office since “their website has some recommendations, resources and some websites.”

As previously discussed, many faculty members shared information about external civic engagement opportunities with students in Participant 5's department. However, sometimes, the faculty members also hosted civic activities on campus. One student shared her on-campus civic experience of honouring a Palestinian poet who passed away during the recent war in Gaza. A Department of Religious Studies faculty member initiated the activity, "... going to translate this poet's poems into a different language, and they [the faculty members] asked people who speak a different language to read the poems" (Participant 4). Therefore, she chose to participate in this activity as a Chinese student and read a translation of the poem in Mandarin.

Most of the on-campus civic activities that the participants attended were organized by student organizations, unions, and communities. Through student organizations, Chinese students can access both community/political participation for their civic engagement development, which are both crucial in shaping students' civic identity and addressing issues inside their communities/society (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Steinberg et al., 2011). Many participants shared their observations and participation in student or staff strikes, protests and demonstrations during the interview. For example, Participant 5 had multiple student strike experiences with her department and explained the strike process initiated by the student group: "Every department has a vote for students, and students can vote for participating in student strikes or not." The department's student community formed a picket team to monitor and support the strike process. She also shared why these student strikes were against or called for provincial and university policy changes to improve (international) students' learning conditions, including tuition hikes, student break and vacation rules, and student's mental health concerns. University students initiated political participation to address difficulties in their university communities. Through civic engagement, they could express their concerns for student groups and find solutions to help

their community members protect their rights. She specifically mentioned that the largest student strike she participated in 2022 was united with students from other HEIs in Quebec. Similarly, Participant 7 also had student strike experiences initiated by student unions in the political science and history departments.

Besides the strikes to advocate for students' rights and policy changes, Participant 5 also discussed the role of student organizations in her counterprotest experiences in 2024, advocating for sex education in Quebec's K-12 education and rights for transgender youths:

“Our school also went to [join the counterprotest]. Umm, also there are some student organizations or others, like, started calling us [for participation]. And then there were also professors, professors in our program who said this is rallying people together to go and stand on that street to go against these conservative parents.”

Meanwhile, Participant 2 also noticed the community orientation and student-community collaboration in her civic experiences: “...student organizations are the coordinator and one of the organizers for these events. They posted some posters and information on their social media.” Some participants joined these student associations as members to contribute to the student community as their civic engagement, such as the Chinese student association in their university.

Sometimes, these community-oriented activities from student organizations also collaborate with community partners and connect with students' fields of studies. For example, Participant 6 attended a symposium hosted by a STEM student society to connect with the STEM community in the academic and professional fields. However, it is important to differentiate between simply attending these activities and actively participating (e.g. organizing the events). Organizing these events or joining the organizations can allow students to gain active, hands-on experiences and skills supporting community development/building, such as

teamwork and communication. Active participation aligns with the purpose of civic engagement and students' civic identity development (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Steinberg et al., 2011). On the other hand, students who participate in these events as attendees are more likely to passively engage in the community-building process rather than directly supporting other community members.

5.5 Challenges and benefits of being civically engaged

Chinese international students pointed out the many difficulties and limitations they encountered inside their universities that impeded their civic engagement and identity development. The next two sub-sections illustrate these limitations and conflicts. The third sub-section highlights the benefits and positive learning outcomes that participants gained from their civic development experiences while they pursued their undergraduate degrees in Canada.

5.5.1 Lack of development opportunities from course experiences

Participants who had enrolled in community-based learning experiences gave positive feedback on their civic development. However, when I asked other participants about community-based learning, students either had not heard this term before or were not familiar with this concept. After an explanation, one student responded, "It sounds like a course in a master's program" (Participant 2). Some students' current programs do not offer any community-based learning courses or projects. This suggests that there are **insufficient opportunities in the curricula** of different subjects for students to apply their knowledge in communities or learn from communities and real-life situations.

Internship programs were the most common community-based learning that students recognized after hearing my explanation, but there are many restrictions for Chinese international students to access these programs. For example, typically, internship and co-op courses have "really limited spots, and everyone wants to register" (Participant 4). Therefore,

many departments have mandatory minimum GPA requirements for students to enroll. Also, students typically need to find their own internship organizations – the department’s support was not guaranteed, according to Participant 4 and Participant 7. Further, the department’s funding resources also limited community-based learning opportunities for students. Participant 4 commented that their department is commonly known as a “poor” department, which makes it hard to open more spots for student internships. In Participant 5’s department, both community partners and students mentioned that the current internship course only allows students to “...do an internship for one semester; you can’t do a longer internship”, which participant 5 said is insufficient for students to learn about the community organizations and provide enough supports to them.

While discussing barriers specifically to accessing community-based learning, students highlighted the **limitations of conventional teaching and assessment styles** in their civic engagement. Current undergraduate programs have “old school” teaching concepts (Participant 4), using lectures to deliver course content and essays, group assignments and exams to assess students’ learning. These learning methods do not offer opportunities for students to apply the knowledge to real-life activities related to civic engagement. Therefore, most students believe these are not helpful learning methods for their civic development. Participants also noted that active teaching and learning styles are not common phenomena in undergraduate studies. For example, in political science, the regular lecture course felt like “You’re listening to me about the theories. After the lecture, you [students] hand in your essays”, and faculty members did not include “practical application” in the course for students to apply civic literacy in real life (Participant 7). Participant 5 shared similar experiences when she attended the interdisciplinary courses from other social science departments:

“I attended so many sociology courses. [I] realized that these traditional [majors], not these new majors, like, the traditional social science majors... and also political science, [they are] completely different than I thought before. Like, the undergraduate students don’t have ... any research at all. Like, undergraduate students all get standardized education like high school students. Like, you only need to memorize [the contents] and [prepare for] exams etc. It isn’t a positive environment at all, to encourage you to have divergent thinking and write something on your own.”

In her opinion, current learning and assessment styles in social science programs limit students to apply the civic literacy to real-life practice. Her responses also suggested that research can be a method of connecting undergraduate students with the community to learn about issues and get to know community members, which eventually supports students’ civic development.

Participants also said that their area of study is **missing learning about/for civic literacy**, which, combined with political knowledge and knowledge, helps students to understand current social issues and inequalities in global contexts (Broom, 2016; Broom et al., 2017; Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011). Participants from liberal arts majors have relatively more opportunities to learn civic literacy in classroom settings than students from the Faculty of Science. However, all participants expressed that current course selections in their programs do not provide enough civic literacy learning to understand civic engagement and identity development. A student of Liberal Arts mentioned that an academic staff shortage impedes her learning civic literacy from different disciplinary perspectives:

“Ideally, the department should constitute studies for various areas, such as literature, history, politics, economics, social structures and etc. However, in reality, due to a lack of professors, we generally focus on the first two aspects, and courses related to political science and economics have not been offered for quite some time. Therefore, ... we could only gain an incomplete understanding of the political system and social structures of a certain period through the learning of literature and historical texts.” (Participant 2)

On the other hand, participants from STEM majors have fewer opportunities to access civic literacy. Programs in STEM fields either have fixed course requirements or students can only choose electives in STEM subjects in their first year. Participant 6 stated, “... there is not too much learning [civic literacy].” Her course selection was only “...flexible in the major [the subjects related to biology] for choosing and attending many different courses, but you can’t choose other courses [from the faculty of arts].” Meanwhile, Participant 1 also faced similar situations. She explained, “I’m a student from the faculty of science since year 1. Basically, I had classes around biology, chemistry, and physics...like these types of classes. Oh, and calculus too.” Additionally, Participant 3, who previously studied at the Faculty of Engineering, explained that the engineering majors had fixed course requirements for their students, and students could not register for courses in social science and humanities studies. In addition to inflexibility in choosing interdisciplinary electives, **program course requirements** can negatively influence Chinese students’ in-depth civic literacy learning. For example, Participant 5 had almost completed mandatory courses, allowing her more time to learn civic literacy from other social science disciplines, such as Chinese politics, that she was interested in for her civic development. However, she could only enroll in introductory-level courses from other social science and

humanities departments because the policies “don’t allow students from other departments to take 300-level courses [the advanced-level courses].”

The **credibility of civic literacy taught in Canadian universities** was also questioned by one student, who commented that “it is very biased” and “limited” (Participant 4) for supporting students’ civic development. Participant 4 believed that current civic literacy learning cannot connect knowledge with real-life situations, as she described it, “... lacking feelings or sense about real life.” Also, she said civic literacy “... can be manipulated in any environment.” This comment suggested the learning content might be designed to fit social norms or benefit current social structures rather than benefit students’ or communities’ development. Moreover, civic literacy education can lack critical perspectives for discussing social issues in Canadian and international contexts, according to another participant:

“When it comes to Canada, especially about local things in Canada...It usually says we made a lot of mistakes in the past. In the Victorian era, in our colonial era, (we) made many mistakes, but I’m in good shape now, we are good enough for now. Like, when I see these course designs, [I was like] what’re you talking about? ... What does it mean, it’s good enough now?” (Participant 5)

5.5.2 Mixed signals about on-campus civic engagement

Participants discussed various civic initiatives that were available to them at university-wide, faculty, and student organization levels i.e., organized by different groups rather than uniformly initiated by the university. Some participants described three main communities inside their universities: the university (represented by leadership, administrators, and staff), faculty communities, and student groups. Participant 4 explained that the faculty and student groups were more active in initiating civic engagement than her university’s leadership and administration. This student’s comment implies that different communities have their own

understanding and actions when reacting to students' civic engagement. These differences influenced student groups to initiate and carry forward on-campus civic activities because involved student groups need to balance each community's demands and needs in their civic initiatives.

Specifically, participants reported **contradictory values and attitudes from different communities in the university** in relation to political activities. Some students from Liberal Arts believed their faculty and student communities were positioned as active "left-wing" or "far left" communities in civic engagement, and the "department is encouraging students' political engagement in general teaching/learning environment" (Participant 2; Participant 5). However, the university as an 'academic' or 'administrative' institution (Participant 2; Participant 4) was seen to focus on maintaining its current structure and operations. As results, many students believed their universities typically held opposing views to most faculty and student communities in relation to on-campus political activities. The Governing Board and administrators representing the university voice, which "... are conservative. For example, the school's, school's leaderships are pretty conservative" (Participant 5).

The different standpoints between university communities influence Chinese students' perceptions and actions in on-campus civic engagement, especially in their political participation. For example, from a "conservative" (Participant 5) standpoint, students' on-campus political activities are considered as "trouble" for their university as an academic institution:

"The management wants students to make less trouble to influence the university's reputation. Causing as little trouble as possible so they would not impact the university's reputation. Or don't influence the university's funding or offend university patrons" (Participant 2).

The relationships between students and administrators caused conflicts and tensions at both research sites that impeded (Chinese) students from on-campus engagement. For example, the university administration frequently sent out emails to address on-campus political activities that “disturb” academic activities and “blame the activists” (Participant 2). As a student who is passionate about political activities in civic engagement, Participant 2 felt the university’s messaging discourages the student groups’ political participation, and students received negative consequences from on-campus political participation. However, she pointed out that Canadian universities still provide some space for students’ political participation compared to China’s social context. Beyond political values, universities also show contradictory attitudes toward different on-campus activities from students’ experiences.

Participant 5 received pushback from university management when she supported a student club’s advocacy that was publicizing political perspectives and movements against fascism. Her answer suggested that this advocacy and the perspectives/movements can be considered as left-wing, as she described the university’s stances as “conservative.” When she and other club members handed out pamphlets at the entrance of university buildings, university security guards asked them to move their activities outside the university premises. The student commented, “From the security and school’s sides, [they] think conservatively, like pretty conservative. Then, [they] believed it wasn’t suitable [activity to initiate inside university].” Furthermore, these actions conflicted with the university’s policy, which stated that students were not required to report these activities for permission and that student groups have the autonomy to initiate activities on university premises. Additionally, she shared that another group was allowed to hand out pamphlets promoting bible studies and was not asked to move off campus by security.

Participants' responses also showed that sometimes **their universities did not take any action** in response to students' civic initiatives that were related to them. Participant 1 shared her understanding of the recent student demonstrations and strikes around tuition policy changes in Quebec. She assumed these were organized due to the provincial Francization policy, which would possibly damage the university's reputation. She felt that the consequences of these provincial policy changes would not be acceptable, and that civic engagement could help universities and students prevent these negative results. However, Participant 5 explained that the university administration only sent out emails to determine the potential intervention of law enforcement based on the possible risks of physical conflicts during the strikes. Participant 5's responses indicated her university did not mention any further interventions from university administrators regarding student strikes on tuition hikes, unlike her experiences with other politically related experiences on campus.

Different student group decisions also caused conflicts in students' civic engagement. Typically, the department student unions' vote results would determine whether a student strike will occur. Participant 5 pointed out that fewer student associations participated in voting and striking than in previous student strikes in 2022. Therefore, the students who registered for electives from other departments could not fully participate in the student strike because other departments might still hold classes during the strikes. Also, no universal guideline in the university suggests or regulates individual student and faculty member's participation in student protests or strikes. Participant 7 shared that one lecture was held unexpectedly during the student strike since her department had a collective decision to cancel lectures for student protest. Participant 7's responses show that conflicts can also develop between students and faculty members if the faculty members do not fully acknowledge students' decisions during on-campus

engagement. Additionally, this student shared that student unions and organizations were dysfunctional after the pandemic, causing fewer on-campus engagement opportunities for her.

5.5.3 Benefits of being civically engaged

Notwithstanding the difficulties and barriers, participants said that their overall civic experiences during their undergraduate studies in Canada brought positive outcomes for their future lives, as expressed through the intention for further civic participation. Many students mentioned their interests in **future civic engagement**, regardless of their settlement plan (to stay in Canada, return to China, or move elsewhere). Participant 2's civic experiences in Canada helped her to understand the issues in racialized communities, encouraging her to continue her political participation for her civic development.

Chinese international students' civic development in Canada not only favoured their civic identity development but also brought positive implications for their **personal growth** and **academic learning**. Self-empowerment is the personal growth that many students said they experienced through civic engagement. Participant 1 understood that individuals can "participate fairly in the decision-making of some things, and then also have power to speak up." Some students suggested civic engagement let them share their personal perspectives on social and political issues with others, and they gained skills in self-expression. Participant 1 stated her engagement experiences allow her to build a better understanding of her course content and apply the knowledge from her academic field to real-life sustainable practices. In social areas, civic experiences allowed Chinese students to **find and join communities** when they moved to a new environment. The members of these communities usually have similar interests, values and beliefs. After Participant 7 joined and volunteered for a traditional dance/art organization in Quebec, she made many new friends with similar interests through her volunteer sessions in this organization. Participant 1 and Participant 6 both connected with the local Chinese international

community during the civic engagement in the students' association, which supported them to feel belonging in an overseas setting.

In the professional area, students felt that their civic experiences would **positively impact their future career pathways** and **professional networking**, including finding a career direction in social work (Participant 2) and boosting their competitiveness in the future job market or pursuing graduate studies (Participant 1; Participant 3). Besides career-focused outcomes, Chinese international students also developed different professional skills when joining student associations and organizations as part of their civic development. As members, they often needed to collaborate to plan events and activities for other members or communities. Therefore, they developed their practical skills in organization, management communication and teamwork skills, which is also important for a civically engaged individual in their civic life (Steinberg et al., 2011).

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses this research project's key findings and contributions in the following four areas. Section 6.1 discusses the relevance and limitations of applying the CMG Model (Steinberg et al., 2011) in studying international students' civic development at two Canadian universities. Section 6.2 unpacks the roles of national identity/citizenship and immigration status in influencing Chinese international students' civic engagement. Section 6.3 investigates the universities' different approaches to students' community/political participation to illustrate the tendency of students' civic development in Canadian universities. Section 6.4 discusses the role of international mobility in supporting Chinese students' civic development in both in-person and online engagement, highlighting the importance of online civic engagement in the Chinese international community. These four discussion areas can demonstrate the connections between findings, theoretical frameworks and previous studies in (Chinese) students' civic experiences in Canada. Additionally, the discussion areas illustrate the most significant findings from this research.

6.2 The CMG model's limitations in understanding Chinese international students' civic development

Although the CMG model supported this study in examining the implications of students' course experiences, I identified two important limitations in understanding Chinese international students' identity in their civic development process. These limitations stem from the fact that the definition of the identity component in the CMG Model is too ambiguous to understand the complexity of Chinese students' civic engagement and identity formation in Canada. The identity component refers to "[a] person's self-understanding, self-awareness, and self-concept. This

attribute can involve knowing oneself as an individual, including values and commitments” (Steinberg et al., 2011, p. 20), which seems to include all personal identities in a broader term.

After my data analysis, I found that **Chinese students hold various personal identities while they study in Canada**, and each identity is interconnected and has a different role in participants’ civic development. For example, some participants were actively engaged in civic activities with local LGBTQ+ community and student organizations, suggesting their gender and academic identity influence their engagement focuses. However, this framework (Steinberg et al., 2011) does not show the multidimensions in students’ identities. Rather, it seems to view all university students as a homogenous group from similar cultural/social backgrounds. It leads the framework to assume everyone has a similar civic development process through higher education programs. These limitations do not support the researchers’ in-depth inquiry to understand the nuances and intersectionality of international students’ identities in their civic engagement and identity formation.

Further, the implications of international students’ national identity and immigration status are also neglected in the identity-civic experiences sections. The model claims that students’ civic development happened and was influenced by one specific social context (Steinberg et al., 2011). However, the home/host countries’ social contexts influence international students’ civic development because of their national identity and immigration status in their host country. For example, Participant 5 worried about the negative consequences of interacting with law enforcement during the counter-protest due to her international student status in Canada. The formed civic identity or engagement behaviours of international student groups should be considered differently.

The second limitation of this framework appears in the conceptualization of student identity in the identity-educational intersection. Steinberg et al. (2011) suggest that student identity is “[a]t the intersection of identity and educational experiences is one’s identity as a student” (p. 21), including the knowledge learned from students’ curricular and co-curricular activities. My findings suggest that the CMG model’s descriptions of students’ identities did not effectively differentiate the nuances of student identity. This limitation hinders this framework from addressing the roles of ‘student identity’ in Chinese students’ civic development. Through my analysis, I discovered the participants emphasized different features in their student identity in their on/off campus civic engagement and educational experiences, which can be conceptualized **in two parts: 1.) academic identity and 2.) professional identity**. ‘Academic identity’ refers to the student status (e.g. international student and university student) in the participants’ universities. ‘Professional identity’ means the academic fields that students currently study (e.g. political science students) to differentiate from the term ‘university student’ to address students’ academic experiences. For example, Participant 5’s and Participant 7’s department student union passed a strike vote, connecting their professional identity with their participation in student strikes. On the other hand, Participant 1 emphasized her academic identity when she participated in volunteer sessions outside her university.

Distinguishing different features in participants’ student identity suggests that course experiences in Chinese students’ degree programs can become a starting point to initiate their civic development in Canada. International students’ academic and professional identity represents their social groups in the universities, impacting their on/off campus civic experiences. These findings challenge the claims in this framework that student identity is not connected with students’ commitment to their community, and “if the student engages in civic

activities, those activities are not merged with educational experiences” (Steinberg et al., 2011, p. 21). In this framework, the educational experiences are limited to courses or course-related programs (Steinberg et al., 2011), making student identity less relevant to civic development. For international students, **the university can be an educational environment and a social environment/platform for them to access and initiate civic engagement through their academic and professional identity development.**

6.3 Chineseness in Chinese international students’ civic development

Chinese international students’ personal identities are multifaceted and significantly connected to their civic engagement and identity formation. The salience of their social identities, such as nationality, gender, immigration status, and academic/professional identity, are different but interconnected in their civic development in Canada. Among these personal identities, Chinese students’ **national identity usually has a leading role in their civic engagement/identity formation.** Many participants showed more concern and civic experiences related to Chinese communities in China/Canada than social or (geo)political affairs in Canada and international contexts during the interview. Also, some Chinese students developed their engagement preferences in Canada based on the socio-political environment in China. For example, Participant 2 focused on political participation during her post-secondary study because there were fewer political participation opportunities in China than in Canada. These findings align with previous research that Chinese students usually observe and find differences between China and Canada’s socio-political environment to understand their roles in political participation (Li, 2016). It highlights that during civic engagement/identity development, Chinese students’ understandings of their home country’s social context reflect their national identity.

Additionally, two participants noted their civic experiences as members of the Chinese student association at the beginning of their undergraduate studies, which is in line with previous research (Lew, 2006) that international students from Asian countries usually support ethnicity-based student organizations as a part of civic engagement in Canadian universities. These students' experiences indicate that Chinese students might join the community participation on campus related to their national identity as the starting point of their civic development while they study abroad.

Further, only two students noted voting in an election as a civic activity, and no response explicitly stated the voting process outside the election as civic engagement. These findings align with the claims that Chinese students might have less interest in and experience voting as civic engagement (Broom, 2016). These similar findings imply that Chinese students might not have enough opportunities in both Chinese and Canadian contexts to join in the voting process and incorporate this activity into their civic engagement. These findings can, therefore, be assumed that Chinese international students' national identity becomes a part of their civic identity to guide their decision-making process in engagement focus despite their (temporary) settlement location.

Other than influencing students' civic engagement focuses and intentions, Chinese students' **national identity also intersects with their immigration status**, impacting their civic experiences and behaviours. My study indicates that the barriers that Chinese students encountered demonstrate the intersection of their national identity and immigration status. For example, some participants experienced language barriers and feelings of exclusion in their civic development, which connected to participants' identity as 'Chinese international students' in Canada. These findings align with those of Guo-Brennan et al. (2020), who also found that

immigration status can sometimes be related to or cause difficulties in international students' learning experiences for civic engagement. My study further supports that language barriers and cultural differences are the main difficulties in (Chinese) international students' civic development experiences (Guo-Brennan et al., 2020; Lew, 2006).

Unlike previous research, which shows that some Chinese students chose to be not civically engaged in Canada due to language barriers and academic pressure (Lew, 2006), many participants in this study continued their civic engagement after facing challenges with local communities in Canada. These findings may be taken to indicate that some Chinese students view attending civic activities in Canada as a practice opportunity to help them overcome the barriers to further civic development. As some participants highlighted the connections between their civic experiences and personal development, it seems possible that cultivating Chinese students' civic engagement/identity can positively impact their studying experiences and outcomes in Canadian universities.

The findings also suggest that Chinese communities' collective norms of politics and political participation are also another representation of Chinese students' national identity in their civic development through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). For example, some participants explained that Chinese international students typically have passive attitudes toward civic engagement, especially in political participation. Although this was a small-scale study, participants' responses and experiences showed both Chinese students with active and passive political participation in Canada. Some participants with active political participation gained their civic experiences and knowledge from their university experiences. These findings confirm Li's (2016) claim that post-secondary education experiences in Canada can positively influence Chinese international students' awareness of politics and interest in

political participation. Yet, students with passive political participation did not deny the political elements in civic engagement during the interview but focused on community participation and passively engaged in politics, such as following the news and observing others' political participation. These findings might indicate that Chinese students' personal values towards politics and communities intersect with their national identity, influencing the factors of group norms in their civic engagement/identity development.

6.4 Imbalanced university strategies and practices

I distinguished civic engagement by community and political participation to explore participants' civic experiences and identity formation, as previous literature and the CMG model both mentioned community and political activities as a part of individuals' civic life (e.g. Adler & Goggin, 2005; Keeter et al., 2002; Steinberg et al., 2011). The findings suggest that Chinese students engage in both community and political activities and that the community and political levels often interconnect. However, my research highlights that **the two university research sites provide more community than political participation opportunities** for students to develop their civic engagement/identity while they pursue their undergraduate degrees.

In the community participation area, both research sites offer opportunities for participants to gain experiences during their undergraduate studies, including community-based learning courses/projects, student-run organizations/clubs, and offices developed by university administrations. These educational/non-educational activities provide opportunities for Chinese students to interact with local communities and Quebec/Canadian society, understanding the roles of community in their civic development. Nevertheless, the current opportunities and practices of both universities are still insufficient for Chinese students' civic identity/engagement development. Participants' experiences show that community-based learning is not prevalent and accessible for (international) students. This also reflects the claims that community-based

learning is a developing educational method and pedagogy for Canadian higher education (Calvert & Montemayor, 2018; Taylor et al., 2015). Many participants mentioned the implications of student-run organizations/clubs on their civic development, suggesting student initiatives are the primary sources for Chinese students to access engagement opportunities. However, the civic initiatives that are led by the university (e.g. administration, academic department) appeared less from students' responses. This implies that the current two research sites provide an environment for students to initiate community participation rather than developing and promoting community projects for students from the administrative level.

On the other hand, the two universities in this study seemed to want to avoid linking themselves with global political events and appeared to be discouraging students' political actions on campus. These actions reflect the trend of 'institutional neutrality' in the Western higher education landscape, maintaining the university's role in academic development (de Wit & Altbach, 2024; McCann, 2024). For example, participants from both universities received emails from university administrations that claimed students' political participation (e.g. protests, strikes) disturbed the university's regular operations. As a result, this finding slightly differs from previous studies showing that students in Quebec have more autonomy to initiate formal activism and movements under student organizations/unions than students from other Canadian provinces and territories (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014; Chicoine & Ancelovici, 2021; Drago, 2021). However, these research findings suggest that university administration has a more (negative) direct impact on students' political participation experiences than Quebec's socio-political environment. The university administrations' practices decreased participants' sense of autonomy to civically engage in political activities.

Furthermore, participants connected universities' actions as being influenced by considerations of their standing in international rankings, reputation and funding. This implies that the two universities might have deliberately developed and implemented current practices to prioritize institutional demands and interests over cultivating students' civic identity and engagement interests. The two universities' strategies and practices in community/political participation raise critical questions for Canadian universities: What role should the university play in (international) students' civic engagement/identity development? How does the university value (international) students' civic initiatives on campus? Further, what are the purposes of universities in designing educational programs for civic engagement learning and on-campus activities?

6.5 Civic engagement across borders

Because of their choice to be internationally mobile, participants were provided with opportunities to experience in-person community/political participation in Canada. These practical opportunities also allow them to connect the knowledge in their studied fields with their civic development. For example, Participant 2 had classroom learning experiences about democratic practices in different social contexts, influencing her interest in political participation. Her civic engagement experiences suggest that **Canadian social contexts allow international students to practice civic knowledge in real-life practices**, such as protesting and demonstrations. As Chinese international students, many participants attended political activities in Quebec. It also highlights that international students from an authoritarian background can have in-person experiences in political participation for their civic development, which might be restricted in their home countries. Many participants addressed social issues in different contexts while working with local communities in/outside their universities. These findings reflect those of Guo-Brennan et al. (2020) and Lew (2006), who found that international students gain

connections with local communities and support them through civic engagement and relevant educational experiences. Participants' experiences indicate that international mobilities might impact Chinese students' perceptions of civic engagement beyond their national identity by providing in-person engagement opportunities with local communities.

On the other hand, **online civic engagement** is also a crucial format for Chinese students' civic development. My findings also revealed that Chinese international students use digital platforms to engage in both community and political-related activities. Some participants joined online advocacy activities for both local and international communities (e.g. signing petitions and writing letters) and followed and reposted the activities/events from human-rights organizations. In line with previous studies that show that university students in Canada successfully use online engagement to address their demands in student movements (e.g. Dumitrica, 2016; Harell et al., 2020; Raynauld et al., 2016), my study suggests that online engagement is also a popular and effective method for Chinese international students studying in Canada. Participants' experiences and perceptions of online engagement also challenge university instructors' views, which suggest online social media activities are less connected to civic engagement than in-person activities (Bell & Lewis, 2015b). Additionally, digital platforms can provide resources for Chinese international students' civic development, including engagement opportunities and learning resources. This supports them in learning civic engagement that might be missing in their university education in Canada.

Although, in principle, online forms of engagement could happen from anywhere, the role of place (in this case, Canada) was meaningful for participants in this study. Many of the activism and advocacy efforts students mentioned are sensitive topics in Chinese contexts, including those related to Chinese politics. International mobility might provide easier access for

them to learn information due to the Chinese government's Internet surveillance and censorship (Wang & Hong, 2010). Additionally, since some participants were interested in advocating for communities in China, Canada and internationally, online engagement allows Chinese international students to maintain connections with communities in China and outside Canada while studying in Canada. This supports Chinese students' advocacy for social affairs/issues without the restrictions caused by national borders. These findings highlight that both home/host countries can represent 'local' to Chinese students and influence their engagement intentions during their post-secondary education in Canada. It can also be assumed that international mobilities support Chinese student to develop their perceptions of civic engagement beyond focusing on their surrounding environment. Further, the analysis may be taken to indicate that the meaning of 'local' is multifaceted and often shifts in Chinese international students' civic identity formations, which is reflected in their engagement experiences. These findings also reveal to investigate Chinese international students' civic experiences through the lens of 'translocality' in future studies, which aims to understand "the dynamics, linkages and interdependencies of the multidimensional social space connecting migrants' areas of origin and destination" (Greiner, 2011, p. 601). Drawing on the concept of 'translocality' (Bromber, 2013; Greiner, 2011), these research findings also signal the importance of understanding the relationships between Chinese students' international mobility experiences and their perceptions and belongings of host countries' social contexts and how these relationships impact their civic development.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This study explored Chinese international students' civic engagement and identity formation in Canada and the implications of their university learning experiences. This research was guided by the following research questions: ***Research Question 1: What are Chinese international undergraduate students' perceptions and attitudes toward civic engagement?*** ***Research Question 2: How does studying in Canadian universities impact civic engagement and civic identity development among Chinese international undergraduate students?*** ***Research Question 3: What factors outside university experiences impact Chinese international undergraduate students' civic engagement experiences and civic identity development?*** This chapter summarizes the key findings of the study, presents the implications of the research findings on Canadian international higher education and provides recommendations for Canadian HEIs. It also addresses the limitations of this project and recommends future research directions in international higher education and international student studies.

7.2 Summary of key findings

Chinese international undergraduate students' perceptions and attitudes towards civic engagement (RQ1)

These Chinese students typically have positive attitudes towards civic engagement and joining in activities in Canada. There are eight categories of activities that Chinese international students consider as civic engagement, including 1.) advocacy and activism, 2.) becoming a member of civic, social and/or political organizations, 3.) communicating personal opinions in politics and social issues, 4.) election & election campaigns 5.) joining in the events hosted by civic, social and/or political organizations, 6.) following the news, 7.) protest and demonstration, and 8.) volunteering.

Many students believe some civic activities contain both community and political elements. Also, some participants chose to have both community and political participation for their civic engagement/identity development in Canada. However, each Chinese international student has different focuses and interests in engaging in political activities for their civic development, although they recognize political participation as a part of civic engagement. Moreover, some participants had regular civic engagement (e.g., joining a student/civic organization) rather than occasional participation. For Chinese international students, civic engagement can serve two purposes: 1.) supporting community development and/or initiating social changes, and 2.) supporting personal development in academic, professional and social areas.

Impact of studying in a Canadian university on civic engagement and civic identity development among Chinese international undergraduate students (RQ2)

Participants recognize that the social sciences and humanities courses provide civic literacy that is most related to civic engagement and identity. Students usually study civic literacy within their field of study, such as social injustice issues in gender minority communities, histories of feminist and democratic movements across different contexts, and international/Canadian political and economic issues. Through courses like these, students can understand the current social and political issues surrounding them and what happens in a global context, which is also connected to the features of commitment/responsibility in their civic identity.

Participants also gained civic development opportunities through community-based learning. Even though these learning opportunities are not popularized in the two research sites, participants' experiences demonstrate that community-based learning can enable Chinese

international students to connect with local (student) communities, understand the Montreal/Quebec/Canadian social contexts, and collaborate with local communities to support the communities. These learning experiences and outcomes can help students' future civic engagement regardless of their future settlements.

Faculty members are the other academic factors influencing Chinese students' civic development. In the academic setting, when the faculty members build an active learning environment, students can build skills and a better understanding of civic literacy to apply to their engagement. Beyond academic learning, faculty members' positive and supportive attitudes toward civic engagement also help Chinese students shape their civic identity as civically engaged individuals. Faculty commonly show their support by disseminating engagement opportunities to student groups, organizing advocacy activities and supporting students' actions.

Beyond course experiences and the role of faculty members, student communities – represented as either formal student-run organizations or grassroots collective actions – impacted participants' civic engagement. By participating in these student initiatives, Chinese international students gained community and political participation, expanding their understanding of civic engagement in real-life practices.

Participants' on-campus civic engagement experiences were also impacted by the university's administration. University administrations seemed to emphasize community activities, showing passive and discouraging attitudes toward incorporating political activities into participants' civic development.

Through university experiences, Chinese students can apply academic knowledge to support their civic engagement in Canada, cultivating their motivations and behaviours to participate in civic activities to shape their civic identity. However, course experiences and the

on-campus environment still have many limitations that need to be improved to build an open and inclusive civic environment for (international) students to gain adequate developmental experiences, such as integrating international and critical perspectives into the curriculum and increasing community-based learning programs.

Factors outside of university experiences that impact Chinese international undergraduate students' civic engagement and civic identity development (RQ3)

Outside of university experiences, many factors influence Chinese international students' civic engagement experiences, further impacting their civic identity formation and how they perceive their civic identity.

Chinese students' civic engagement and identity formation are strongly linked with their personal identities, particularly gender, nationality, race and ethnicity. The findings indicate that students' national identity is integral to their civic identity regardless of their political stances towards Chinese politics and government. Participants' attitudes and reactions towards political, social, and community affairs/issues also influence their civic identity formation, as shown in their choices and preferences for political activities. Moving further from personal identities, the study reveals that social context is also a factor in students' civic development. In this case of Chinese international students, the social, political, and cultural environments of both countries are significant, even if Chinese students are currently studying in a Canadian setting. The implications of social contexts are sometimes reflected in students' interactions and relationships with the Chinese community and other local communities in Canada.

7.3 Implications and recommendation for universities

7.3.1 The significance of this study

This research contributes to understanding Chinese students' civic engagement/identity formations through international education experiences (in this case, the studying experiences in Canada). This has two key implications.

First, this study advanced the existing knowledge of students' civic engagement by conceptualizing civic engagement as community/political participation from previous literature (e.g. Alder & Goggin, 2005; Broom, 2016; Ekman & Amnå, 2012) and applying it to an empirical investigation. By using this approach, this study highlights the political and community elements that often intersect in Chinese international students' civic engagement. The conceptualization of community/political participation, therefore, assists us in understanding which element takes the leading role in students' engagement experiences. This approach also helped this research investigate the two studied universities' practices in (Chinese) students' civic engagement/identity development.

Second, this study is one of the first empirical investigations into the impact of studying experiences in Canadian universities on Chinese students' civic engagement and identity development. This study provided an international perspective to Canadian higher education in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their current practices in cultivating (Chinese) students' civic engagement/identity. This research has also provided a fresh perspective to incorporate civic development into (Chinese) international students' post-secondary education experiences in Canada, which extends from students' academic/social experiences in previous literature (e.g. E. Yu, 2020). Moreover, this research provided empirical evidence to practitioners in the international education field that initiating civic activities in HEIs can further support

(Chinese) international students in transitioning to new learning environments and building relationships with academic communities.

7.3.2 Recommendations for universities

This research found that there is **untapped potential for community-based learning courses to benefit Chinese international students' civic development in undergraduate programs**. However, community-based learning is still underdeveloped at the two research sites for international students, including Chinese students, as many participants were not familiar with this learning concept. Many undergraduate programs do not integrate community-based learning into their curriculum. In addition, participants' experience shows that accessibility is a main limitation for (Chinese) international students to gain community-based learning experiences. This suggests that university administrators and faculties from two research sites need to add more educational resources and funding to **promote community-based learning for undergraduate (Chinese) students**. My research findings suggest that credit-based courses/programs are a common method for Chinese international students to participate in community-based learning. University administrators and faculties need to review and adjust their current community-based learning course requirements to **increase accessibility for (Chinese) international students**. Faculties should assess their current application process for internship courses/programs to consider adjusting their GPA requirements as needed. The academic departments also need to ensure that international students can transition to the internship smoothly, including supporting international students in connecting with community partners and finding placement organizations/communities. Additionally, faculty members can consider incorporating community-based learning into lecture-based courses for international students to gain experience, such as field learning projects or assignments. Then, due to the course format only providing community participation experiences in a time parameter, both

universities should work with community partners to develop or extend projects and learning beyond course formats. One direction can be **developing online community-based learning projects** based on the tendency of online engagement in Chinese students' civic development.

This research also indicates that social science and humanities subjects are more likely to provide Chinese international students with civic development opportunities and that STEM students have fewer opportunities to learn civic literacy through their course requirements from their departments (although the experience of Participant 1 showed that it is possible for STEM students can apply their academic knowledge to civic engagement). Yet, Chinese international students often learn civic literacy from their field of study, and this benefits their communication skills through active class participation. These educational experiences can also effectively support their on/off-campus civic engagements. As such, a recommendation for faculties and departments in STEM fields is to evaluate and adjust their current program design, such as course selection and requirements, to **seek opportunities to introduce social science and humanities knowledge to STEM students through elective courses**.

Also, the Arts and Sciences faculties can **collaborate to create cross-disciplinary community-based projects** that connect students from different departments. In this way, students from the Arts and Science fields can collaborate and address the community/social issues through different perspectives. Given how internationalized Canadian universities are, universities and faculty members should recognize international students' needs and nuances in their civic development, avoiding treating university students as a whole student community. For example, when faculty members design community-based learning and interdisciplinary projects, they must create a learning environment for local and international students to initiate **cross-**

cultural communications, which would benefit all student groups' civic engagement/identity formation in a multicultural context.

Two research sites have passive attitudes toward on-campus political participation in (Chinese) students' civic development, which contradicts some Chinese students and their peers' perceptions of civic engagement. Based on these passive attitudes, the two universities' leaderships and administrators use a top-down approach to address on-campus political participation, creating tensions between different university communities. Two research sites should also adjust their current approaches by increasing student governance opportunities at the university level, especially by including international student groups. For example, universities' leadership and administrators need to **initiate open and transparent communications with (international) student groups to discuss on-campus political participation** and build mutual agreement. By participating in the governance process, (International) student groups can express their perspectives and reduce the potential negative impacts of a top-down approach (e.g., conflicts between university and student groups). Student governance opportunities can also become a part of political participation for (international) students' civic development, as they can interact with university leadership/administrators and participate in decision-making. In this way, two studied universities can incorporate political-related civic engagement in (international) students' studying experiences.

7.4 Limitations and future research direction

Due to the **small participant size and imbalanced participant ratio between the two research sites**, this study was unable to provide a comparative perspective between the universities and, therefore potentially show different approaches and how these nuances impact Chinese students' civic development and learning experiences. Additionally, both research sites are located in Montreal, Quebec, which restricts this research to exploring universities'

geographic locations and provincial social environments' influences on international students' development process. Future research could expand the participant population and use a comparative scope to examine Chinese international students' civic engagement learning experiences in different provinces, exploring university strategies in civic engagement education for international students in their unique provincial social contexts. Future studies could also expand to work with other groups of international students from Asia or other parts of the world.

This research did not focus on the role that participants' **gender identities** might play in civic engagement and identity formation. However, the findings suggest that gender identity is a crucial factor that often intersects with Chinese students' race/ethnicity and immigration status, influencing their civic engagement in Canada. Critical internationalization researchers have found that studies of international students are focused on students' immigration status and overlook international students' other identities and their intersectionality, such as race, gender, ethnicity and class (Hutcheson, 2023; S. Zhang & Mittelmeier, 2023). Based on this limitation, future studies can incorporate gender identity as the scope to examine international students' civic experiences while they study abroad. Also, future research can explore how/if learning experiences in overseas post-secondary institutions influence international students to integrate their gender identity into their civic identity. On top of that, one of the key findings in this research highlights the importance of national identity in Chinese international students' civic engagement/identity formation in Canada. In light of this finding, the lens of *translocality* could be helpful to apply in future studies since it emphasizes the implications of migration experiences on individuals' identity formation and social groups' development (Bromber, 2013; Greiner, 2011). Therefore, future research could examine how (Chinese) international students' social identities intersect with home/host countries' socio-cultural environment and the

relationships with communities in home/host countries that influence their civic engagement and identity formations.

In addition, this research was limited to only those Chinese international students who were civically engaged in Canada and interested in this research topic. Therefore, this study missed the voices of Chinese students interested in civic engagement but had **no engagement experiences** in Canada, or the students who are **not interested in being civically engaged** in Canada. The recruitment inclusion criteria could be adjusted in future research to select Chinese students with different engagement levels in Canada, exploring the rationale behind the phenomenon.

Although this project had a small participant size, it still shows that Chinese international students have different levels of political participation demands and motivations for their civic development. Due to the research scope focusing on both community and political participation, this research did not provide an in-depth investigation to understand how international education experiences influence Chinese students' **motivation for political participation**. Future research can focus on studying political participation/demands development in Chinese students or international student groups from authoritarian backgrounds to explore how international education experiences influence their political values and participation behaviours.

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Appendix A

Consent Form



McGill University

Department of Integrated Studies in Education (DISE)

Rm244, Education Building
3700 McTavish Street
Montreal, Quebec H3A 1Y2
Tel: 514-398-2941

Consent Form

Research Project: *Chinese International Undergraduate Students' Civic Engagement in Canada*

I. RESEARCH TEAM

Student Principal Investigator:

Yvonne Zhang, MA student
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Supervisor:

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II. PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study aims to learn about Chinese international students' civic engagement experiences during their undergraduate studies in Canadian universities. The study will help us understand Chinese international students' perceptions of civic engagement during overseas studies. The study especially wants to learn more about how post-secondary learning experiences influence Chinese international students' perceptions and practices of civic engagement. The goal of this study is to learn Chinese international students' civic learning/development while they study abroad and transition into their host country socially and civically.

III. STUDY PROCEDURES

If you decide to participate in this study, the following procedures will guide us in conducting this study:

1. The principal investigator will invite you to participate in one individual interview (approximately 45 to 60 minutes). The interview will take place at in-person or via Microsoft Teams meeting. The interview will take place at the location/time in your convenience. You can choose to conduct this interview either in Chinese or English. The interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated. If you do not give permission for audio recording, the student PI will use a laptop or handwriting for notetaking.

2. After 10 business days of completing your interview, the student PI will send you a copy of the interview transcript in both Chinese and English. You will have an opportunity to revise, change and delete anything as you wish. You will have 5 business days to revise your transcript after you receive the initial copies. Please using the tracking changes function to inform the student PI about the changes you made for your transcript. If we do not receive your responses of your initial transcript copies within 5 business days, the student PI will assume you confirmed the content of your interview transcripts and generate your final transcripts.

IV. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation is entirely voluntary, which means you will have the right to withdraw from this study anytime. If you decide to withdraw your consent, the student PI will remove and destroy your consent from the data collection immediately. However, if you wish to withdraw your collected data (interview transcripts), you will need to notify the student PI within 5 days after you receive your initial copies of transcriptions. After the 5 days period, the student PI will generate another anonymized code name for your confirmed interview transcriptions, therefore, the data will not be identifiable and removed from the data collection.

V. POTENTIAL RISK

We don't think participating in this study will harm you physically. However, some interview questions related to political topics are sensitive and personal to you. These questions might cause emotional and psychological discomfort to you. You can refuse to answer any questions during the interview process. Your status as an international student in Canada will not be affected in any way. Please let us know if you have any concerns or questions about the study.

VI. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

You will have opportunities to share your opinions and experiences of civic engagement as an international student in Canada. Your insightful perspectives will support other Chinese international students' civic life development in Canada. The research findings will provide new knowledge in civic education and international higher education.

VII. COMPENSATION

There is no compensation will be paid for participation in this research project.

VIII. CONFIDENTIALITY

Your identity will be kept confidential in this research project. The directly identifiable information (e.g., name, student number, email address etc.) will not be associated with final thesis. You will be assigned a pseudonym only for the interview process. The researcher will use an anonymized code name (i.e., participant 1) for writing the final thesis. The audio recording will only used for analysis purpose (i.e. transcribing) by the student PI. The interview will be recorded on the researcher's personal device, and the recording will be destroyed immediately after the researcher uploads it to a password-protected file on McGill OneDrive. All the audio-recordings of interviews will be using McGill's Word Online to transcribe in transcripts.

The research data (consent form, audio recording, initial/final interview transcripts) will be labelled in anonymized codes and stored in password-protected file on McGill OneDrive. The

researcher will select and transcribe the relevant information in the interview. Indirectly identifiable information will be altered and omitted in the initial/final transcript and the thesis. For example, the specific organization name or events you mention in the interview will be replaced with general terms. After receiving your confirmation of the interview transcripts, the student PI will generate new anonymized codes separately for your final transcripts and consent forms, which will be different from the initial codes. The audio-recording and initial transcripts will be deleted from the master file on McGill One Drive after the student PI submit her final thesis for evaluation. The quote from your interview transcripts may be used in the final report with anonymized code name.

Only the student PI and the faculty supervisor (Dr. Emma Harden-Wolfson) will have access to data. All research data will be stored for seven years, and the supervisor will destroy data after this time period.

Since the research will discuss some sensitive topics during the interview, we suggest you do not disclose to others your participation in this study or other detailed information regarding this research project. We also suggest you delete all email communications after the study to reduce the risk of losing your confidentiality.

IX. DISSEMINATION RESULTS

The research data and findings will be disseminated in the student PI's Master thesis. It may also be published in journal articles and presented at academic conferences. The student PI will email you a copy of the final report.

X. QUESTIONS

You can ask any questions and concerns about this research project anytime. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Emma Harden-Wolfson or the student PI, Yvonne Zhang.

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, and want to speak with someone not on the research team, please contact the Associate Director, Research Ethics at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca citing REB file number #024-01-023

Please sign below if you have read the above information and consent to participate in this study. Agreeing to participate in this study does not waive any of your rights or release the researchers from their responsibilities. To ensure the study is being conducted properly, authorized individuals, such as a member of the Research Ethics Board, may have access to your information. A copy of this consent form will be given to you and the researcher will keep a copy.

There are three options of giving consent for this study:

- 1.) If you choose to attend in person interview, the student PI will collect the consent in person. You will receive a hard copy of the consent form. When the signed consent form is scanned and uploaded to student PI's McGill One Drive, the physical master copy will be destroyed immediately.
- 2.) If you choose to have virtual interview session, you can send the signed consent form to the student PI's McGill email account. After receiving your email, the student PI will transfer your consent form and email records to McGill One Drive. The email communication will be

deleted immediately after uploading all documents. We encourage you to destroy the signed consent form.

- 3.) If you wish to give consent through verbal communication, the student PI will provide you a copy of consent form and audio-record the verbal consent.

Participant's Name (Please print): _____

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello, my name is Yvonne Zhang and I'm a master's student in the Department of Integrated Educational Studies at McGill University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. Our interview will start with some warm-up questions and follow up with nine topic questions. You don't have to answer the questions right away, please take your time as you need. You don't have to answer all the questions. If you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, please let me know and we will skip it.

Beginning/Icebreaker Questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
 - a. What university are you currently studying at?
 - b. What major are you studying at?
 - c. How long did you study for your program?
2. What's your favourite class in your program?
3. What activities do you like to do outside your studying time?

Topic 1: Civic engagement/identity and University Learning

1. What does civic engagement mean to you?
 - a. What kind of activities do you think can count as civic engagement?
 - b. Is the definition/activity list changed after you attend your undergraduate study in Canada? If yes, what's changed?
2. What kind of civic engagement have you participated in within the university?
 - a. Why did you decide to participate in these civic engagements?
 - b. What are your roles in these civic activities?
 - c. What did you gain from participating these civic activities (e.g. skills, knowledge etc.)?
3. What kind of civic engagement have you participated in outside university? (e.g. with community organizations in Montreal or Canada, personal activities- signing petitions/online postings)
 - a. Why did you decide to participate in these civic engagements?
 - b. What are your roles in these civic activities?
 - c. What did you gain from participating in these civic activities (e.g. skills, knowledge etc.)?
4. Do you think there has been anything you learned from or participated in your undergraduate program that helps your civic engagement and identity development?
 - a. If yes, which specific class or programs helped you the most?
 - b. Follow-up sub-question A: How about your course instructors? Do you think they have helped you to learn and apply the learning to civic engagement (e.g. their teaching methods, the course content design, etc.)?
 - c. If not, why it doesn't help or relate to your engagement experiences? What other methods support you?

5. Do you have any community-based learning classes in your current program? (If the participants mentioned in previous question, the sub-questions will be potential follow-up questions)
 - a. If yes, do you think there has been anything from community-based learning that helps your civic engagement?
 - b. Do you think there are any components in this type of learning related to civic engagement?

Topic 2: Factors outside University Learning Influences Civic Engagement/Identity formation Experiences

6. What are the challenges that you face during your civic engagement in Canada?
7. Are there other reasons or interests motivating you to participate in civic activities? Can you give me some examples?
8. There are some studies that mention having political knowledge (e.g. the government structure, knowing global/national affairs, democracy) and knowledge of social issues are important to civic engagement, and these types of knowledge can be learned from university (Bell & Lewis, 2015; Steinberg et al., 2011). Also, many Chinese international students don't engage in some civic activities in Canada because they don't understand democracy well (Broom, 2016).
 - a. What's your opinion of these study findings?
 - b. Are there any of your experiences connect with or against with these claims?
9. Do you think your current civic engagement experiences in Canada support your future life and civic identity formation? Can you explain why or why not?
10. How can you apply these learning/experiences when living in other countries or returning to China?