A Dramaturgical Perspective on

North American and Chinese Students' Social Integration in Israel

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Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Sociology

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Abstract

Through the lens of dramaturgy theory, this study conceptualizes Israel as the stage, North American and Chinese students as two groups of actors, and social integration as their play, seeking to answer this question: how do the different roles North American students and Chinese students play in Israel lead them to different experiences of social integration? This study attempts to understand what roles American and Chinese students initially wanted to play and what shaped them, where, how and with whom they conducted their performances, and if the roles they played were adjusted during the process. Eight sets of semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with four American students and four Chinese students. The research findings and analysis reveal that although American and Chinese students do have different experiences of integration, they nonetheless share similar strategies that a dramaturgical framework can successfully elicit. Moreover, the analysis presented in this thesis, also, suggests that the experience of international students is likely much more layered than what is reflected in much of the literature that addresses the integration of international students.

Key words: Chinese international students, North American international students, Israel, social integration, dramaturgy theory.

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Introduction

In 2019, I came to Canada as a Chinese international student. I have experienced all the typical problems that thousands of International Chinese students in this country have experienced: identity crisis, solitude, lacking a sense of belonging, cultural shock, difficulties in making local friends, etc. I've found myself time and time again wondering if I made the right decision in coming to Canada to start a new life. I couldn't reconcile the gap between my expectation and reality.

In January 2020, I ran away from the unbearable coldness in Ottawa and spent four days in Israel. I lived as an international student in Tel Aviv from 2014 to 2015, which changed the trajectory of my life. It was this very experience that gave me the audacity to imagine spending the rest of my life outside of China. Hence, in a way, Tel Aviv might have been the place where all my problems started.

I brought this up when I was having lunch with my old roommate, who is a Jewish American currently living in Israel for a 5th year. He told me his experience in Israel was very similar to mine in Canada: he arrived in Israel hoping to find a sense of belonging, but could not properly speak the local language and felt a lack of motivation to improve it: most of the people in his social circle were Americans, and he found it very difficult to make local friends, etc.

I was hung up on this conversation for days. My old roommate's story is not a singular case. Americans account for 20% of the 12,000 international students in Israel, which makes them the largest group (OECD, 2019). The majority are Jews who hope to strengthen their Jewish identity and develop a sense of belonging to the Jewish homeland. However, there seems to be a gap between their expectations and reality.

In my first draft of the proposal for this research, I wrote without too much thought that "my experience of being an International student in Israel was different because, as a non-Jewish Chinese student, I was comfortable being an outsider". Since then, I have been wondering if this could actually be a solid point. That is, did it somehow empower me in Israel because I was comfortably an outsider? Did I feel frustrated in Canada because I desperately wanted to have a sense of belonging and be seen by Canadians as "one of us"? These are questions that I pose beyond my individual experience and guides this research.

The academic potential of these apparently navel-gazing questions is that when a person expects to be an insider/outsider, or to be seen as an insider/outsider, it could be, according to dramaturgical theory, interpreted as they choose a certain role to play. Hence, I want to explore how it might influence international students' experience of social interaction when they play different roles in occasions of social interaction.

My study focuses on Israel as the stage, and Chinese and North American students as two groups pf actors. While, the literature suggests, that North American students want to strengthen their Jewish identity and find their roots in the Jewish state, which gives them an in-between identity of being an outsider (American) and insider (Jewish), Chinese students simply can only identify themselves as outsiders. This study tries to answer the question: do the different roles North American students and Chinese students play in Israel lead them to different experiences of social integration?

By applying dramaturgical theory, I want to explore what motivated the two groups of students to choose different roles prior their arrival in Israel, how they have conducted the

performance of social integration in Israel, and their impression management during the performance.

In the fowling chapters, I first give a review of the literature and identify two major problems that I want to address with dramaturgy theory: first, I want to question the working of cultural difference and language proficiency in international students' social integration; and second, I seek to take the experiences of international students out of a binary and two-dimensional narrative of self-segregators/ integrators. Next, I build my theoretical framework by conceptualizing two hypothesized roles that North American and Chinese students went to Israel to play, and suggesting angles from which I analyze their performance of social integration.

After that, I explain my methodology and methods. I conducted a qualitative study that consisted of eight sets of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four American students and four Chinese students. These interviews are summarized in the finding section, where I tell the stories of my participants individually. The findings are presented largely without a theoretical, analytical gaze, for the purpose of not omitting the individualized, nuanced experiences of my participants, including details that are important to them but do not necessarily fit into my theoretical frame work. I then, in the chapter of discussion, engage with the findings guided by dramaturgy theory, and analyze the roles my participants played, as well as their performance strategies. In this chapter, I also address the two problems I identified in the literature review and suggest my perspectives to interpret them.

In the last chapter, I conclude my study, talk about its limits, and make suggestions for further studies.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1. Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy as a sociological paradigm was introduced and developed by Goffman. The theory builds on the foundation that individuals are sensitive about how others see them, and this sensitivity structures social interaction. When individuals interact with other people, they look for positive feedback from their performance. In this sense, individuals in social interaction are essentially like actors on a stage. By using the idea of drama, Goffman uses a whole set of theatrical terms such as “props”, “actors and audience”, “front and back stages” and mostly importantly, “role”, to explain the presentation of self (1956).

One thing that needs to be clarified in dramaturgical approaches is that the “self” that is presented in certain occasions does not equal the “individual” (Schwalbe, 2013). The “self” is an image, an array of information, or a “virtual reality” that is presented by the individual. Furthermore, although dramaturgy focuses on explaining people’s everyday behavior, it does not mean that it is not concerned with larger social structures. When individuals enter a situation, there could be a role that awaits them to be played (Goffman, 1956). Individual may feel the urge to distance themselves from the role, but although autonomy is essential for behavior to be seen as expressive, social arrangements also limit individual freedom and the possibility of self-creation (Goffman, 1956). Thus, social structure shapes the creation of selves by constraining expressive performance (Rogers, 1980). If there is an unbalanced power dynamic between the audience and the actors, and the audience has the power to identify actors as members of a particular category, it places the actor in a status hierarchy.

There have been numerous amounts of studies that use dramaturgical theory to analyze professional socialization (e.g., Hass and Willams, 1982; Tewksbury, 1994; Salter, 2008). However, this theory has not yet to be adapted to the study of international students' social integration. One of the few, if not the only, social integration study that applies dramaturgical theory, is Sohrabi and Farquharson's study on Australian Muslims' social integration. The study sees the willing-to-integrate Australian Muslims as a team of actors who want to convey the message that they are "normal Australians". To achieve this goal, they develop a set of tactics that include defining where the front stage should be, which members should be chosen as main actors and how they should perform : On TV, in public forums and schools, and in mosque open-days, young Muslims who were born and schooled in Australia, who have obtained the cultural capital and feel more assertive about being rightfully in Australia, are chosen to give speeches, make conversations, conduct mosque tours or even host barbecues (2016).

By presenting how Australians form and run teams to convey their message to non-Muslim Australians, this study shows the potential of using dramaturgical theory to conduct social integration research. Besides, it indicates that a certain set of roles come with a certain set of performance strategies. However, because this study doesn't include Australians Muslims who are reluctant to fit in the mainstream culture/society, it doesn't explore the possibility of seeing them also as actors who chose to play a different type of role and hence developed different performance strategies. For the same reason, what this study seeks to explore is what happens after actors chose a role, but not what motivates actors to choose different roles in the first place.

2. Chinese students in western host countries

There have not been studies which specifically focus on Chinese students in Israel, so I am drawing on studies about Chinese students in western host countries with the hope that these will shed light on my research. Several of these studies show the potential of being analyzed dramaturgically.

Chinese students' experiences in America have been in researchers' interest for decades, with the earlier studies dating back to the 1970s, when Chinese students studying abroad in significant numbers emerged as a phenomenon. Several studies in that decade drew attention to Chinese students' lack of English proficiency (Reiff, 1972; Guglielmino and Perkins, 1975; Perkins, 1977). In the later decades, while English proficiency still remained as a common theme, more studies also started to pay attention to Chinese students' struggle with cross-cultural adaptation (e.g., Zhong, 1996; Wan, 1999). Sun and Chen's study is one of the more typical, which concluded that "3 dimensions of difficulties subjects encountered were: lack of language proficiency; a deficiency in cultural awareness; and academic achievements" (1997).

Interestingly, these earlier studies seem to have set a long-lasting tone. Until the recent decade, language proficiency and cultural differences were still the common themes that can be easily found in studies about Chinese students' experience in various western host countries: e.g., Song (2013) on Chinese international students in Italy; Li and Pirkko, (2013) on Chinese international students in Finland; Yu and Shu, (2011) on Chinese international students in Germany; Lu et al. (2012) on Chinese international students in Australia; and Spencer-Oatey et al. (2017) on Chinese international students in Britain.

Su and Harrison's investigation of Chinese international students' higher education experience predictably pays attention to Chinese international students' English insufficiency and the high density of Chinese students in certain programs, both of which, it is claimed, damage their experience of integration (2016). The focus of their study is not drastically different from the ones mentioned above, however, there are several details in it worth noting. First, the article mentions that some Chinese students deliberately chose programs/schools/countries with less Chinese students. It makes me wonder if choosing study-abroad destinations can be seen as choosing the role they want to play, or at least it would have consequences for the available choices. Second, the article quotes a Chinese graduate student who says "I don't know why but every time when I speak English to the westerners, I am not very nervous; however, when there is another Chinese student present, I would get nervous." This is at odds with my own experience. In Israel I had a good Chinese friend who always worked with me as a duo when we tried to make Israeli friends. I still remember how we sat together in my living room and made plans – plans such as "we should host a Chinese dinner and invite Israelis who have cars, so we will have someone to drive us to Jerusalem". However, these two different experiences both indicate that the selection of team members and audience is significant for subsequent performance.

One other interesting detail is that this article suggests that for Chinese students, cultural learning is as important as language learning, and to avoid self-segregation, they may "need encouragement from the institution to stretch out of their comfort zone" (917). This raises two questions: first, does social integration necessarily require learning and fitting into to the host culture? Second, do international students have spaces outside of school for social integration? Thus, is the school campus the only front stage available to them?

Rose-Redwood's (2013) research, on international students' social interaction in the US, provides possible answer to my questions. The research suggests that the hosting schools are not the only source of social capital for international students and that they can obtain support from people other than the locals. For example, the "self-segregators", who only interact with people from their own ethnic culture, also manage to form groups and help each other to adapt to the new society.

However, this research raises, for me, more questions than it answers. In the research results, international students are put into three categories: self-segregators as mentioned above, global mixers who form their social circles exclusively with other international students, and host interactors who, as the name suggests, interact with host nationals. Unsurprisingly, most of the self-segregators are East and South Asian students who are not fluent in English and see a huge gap between their own culture and the host culture. In contrast, the host interactors are all white-passing students who speak English very well, and express a strong attraction to American culture. Although this study acknowledges the positive role of a co-national social networks, "self-segregators" are still portrayed as the ones who have unsatisfied experiences in American universities. In fact, many other studies have also examined the correlations between international student's academic performance, social integration, and correspondent satisfaction levels (e.g., Merola et al, 2019).

Similar winners-take-it-all results can be found in a number of studies that attempt to categorize international students. For example, Bang and Montgomery interviewed 21 international students in a Midwestern American university and found that students from Northeastern Asian countries had more linguistic difficulties which interfered with their social networking and made them more worried about landing a job after graduation

(2013). Rienties and Dirk survey 1275 international students in the Netherlands and found that students from “Confucian Asia” struggle significantly more than their counterparts in terms of academic adjustment and social adjustment (2013).

It is of course not a coincidence that the categories fit racialized lines. Racialization or even racism, are of course the elephants in the room. However, it also raises a question for those so-called self-segregators: if they can be seen as playing a role, did they choose to play this role, or is this role chosen for them by the audience – thus, the host nationals? When these actors walk into a situation where the audience has stereotyped them, they might find themselves with no option but to play the role that is ready-made for them and limit how they perform the social dance of social integration.

There could be role-distancing, which is probably why even within the same ethnic group, the winners-take-it-all phenomenon can also be observed. In Zhang and Zhou’s study on Chinese students at a Canadian university, the result indicates that Chinese students who have made friends among native English speakers tend to be more satisfied with their studying experience and more confident about successfully finishing their programs. They are the small group of winners in a study that shows that in their spare time 50% of Chinese students hang out with Chinese friends and 33% stay in their own rooms. Half of the Chinese students feel unsatisfied with their experience in the University. The word “boring” was often used when Chinese students were asked to describe their life experience as international students. Prior to their arrival, many Chinese students expected to make Canadian friends yet later found it extremely difficult. In the end, the study’s conclusion, again unsurprisingly, lands on cultural difference (2010).

Another string of studies applies ethnic enclave theory to understand Chinese international students, as well as other ethnic minority students' co-national social networks (e.g., Page, 2019; Person and James, 2006; Sidanius, 2004; Shammas, 2009). Chen and Heidi conducted a study on Chinese international students in a Midwest institution in America. By using ethnic enclave theory as an analytical tool, they suggest that the perceived impression of Chinese students being passively self-segregated is far too simple. In fact, by forming and joining exclusively co-national groups and organizations, Chinese students created their own strategies to provide and receive important information, support and social spaces, which facilitated their adaptation and their success in the host institution (2015).

The importance of this study is that it acknowledges the positive effect of co-national social networks. Furthermore, it questions the necessity of international students integrating themselves into the host society, or at least expands the scope of meaning of the notion of integration beyond its traditional boundaries. When the goal of studying abroad is to achieve academic success, which a co-national network can sufficiently facilitate, the need to master the local language or make local friends becomes less important. Thus, to understand international students' experience, it is important to start from a point where their subjectivity and agency are acknowledged.

3. North American students in Israel

Several major studies have been conducted on North American students' experience in Israel throughout the last decades. Cohen's (2003) that analyzed US students' motivation for studying abroad found that the academic factor was the least important motivation, while the most frequently-mentioned reason for studying in Israel was living in the Jewish

homeland, enhancing Jewish and Israeli knowledge, improving Hebrew, as well as gaining Israeli friends.

I believe Chinese students who choose Israel have drastically different motivations. This adds to the hypothesis I mentioned above that when choosing different study-abroad destinations, international students may be choosing to play different roles. Equally, when international students from two different countries are choosing the same study-abroad destination, they could be choosing different roles to play as well. The hope of this research is that by inquiring into students' motivations and expectations, it can yield some understanding of the roles they play in Israel.

Once role selection has taken place, the next stage is then presenting the roles. Herman interviewed 87 Jewish American students in a one-year study-abroad program in Israel. He found that after spending only four months in Israel, students' positive attitude towards the country, the Israeli people and the Hebrew language dropped significantly, as they experienced a sense of not-belonging and perceived Israelis as having negative stereotypes of Americans. They also experienced disappointments in terms of making local social contacts. However, the students did succeed in building a stronger Jewish identity (1970).

Similarly, Friedlander surveyed 626 North American students in Israel for a study-abroad program, and found that students had negative experiences because of the social distance between them and their Israeli hosts, and a lack of contacts with Israeli students. Similar to Herman's study, most of the students also built a stronger Jewish identity. However, this study also found that those who improved their Hebrew more adjusted better to their surroundings (1991).

If I were to focus a dramaturgical lens on these two studies, the thing worth pointing out is that American students' positive attitude declined as they perceived the negative stereotype Israelis had of them. It could be interpreted as suggesting that the role they originally intended to play was denied by the audience. Thus, because of their in-between identity, although American students wanted to be seen as "Jewish", the Israelis still saw them as "Americans". This draws our attention to the existence of social hierarchy: actors cannot always play the role they want. In fact, as mentioned above, they might find that the audience has picked a role for them that is at odds with the role they have picked for themselves. I want to explore the functioning of role-taking when there is an unbalanced power dynamic between the actors and the audience, as the latter has the power to categorize the actors and place them into a status hierarchy, thus shaping the types of roles that actors can undertake.

Another interesting thing worth exploring further is that Americans students still managed to strengthen their Jewish identity. This adds another dimension to dramaturgy: the self that is presented on stage is outwardly related to the social structure, and also inwardly related to the individual(Schwalbe, 2013,76). I hope my study can properly address this double-ended dynamic, and how it is experienced by international students.

Donitsa-Schmidt and Vadish's study of North American students in Israel focused on the importance of Hebrew proficiency. The results showed that first, students improved their Hebrew level. Second, the students valued Hebrew as more than they did at first, and became more favorable towards Israel. Third, students who held more positive attitudes towards Hebrew, Israel and Israeli people were also the ones who displayed considerable improvement in Hebrew proficiency(2005).

What this study inspired in me is the intuition that the presentation of self is a dynamic process. When a role is first denied by an audience, the actors can still work on their technique—for example, language proficiency—to make the role more convincing. However, most of the international students live in bigger cities in Israel where the majority of Israelis they meet in everyday life can at least speak English at a passing level. I do want to explore if the function of Hebrew here is to make the role more convincing to the audience or to the actors themselves.

Allison Good's (2010) article also illustrates the potential to analyzing some more technical details of a performance. The article argued that a disconnection still exists between American students and Israeli students who attend the same Israeli universities, and she attributed it to the universities' program design. Most of the American students are enrolled in programs that are designed only for international students and taught in English. For example, Hebrew University of Jerusalem does not allow international students to take classes in its regular course programs.

This touches on two concepts of the idea of performance: the selection of front stages and the audience(Goffman, 1956, 17 and 47). If social integration is seen as a performance, the occasions for social interactions as the front stages and locals as the audience, Israel is then a very special case because international students are de-facto segregated into an English-speaking international bubble on a Hebrew-speaking Israeli campus. While Chinese students in other host countries complain that there are more Chinese students than local students in their programs (Su and Harrison, 2016), international students in Israel might find themselves in classrooms without even one

Israeli student. In this context it is worth exploring how international students look for stages and audience for their performance.

Statement of the problem

There are two major problems I see in the literatures concerned with international students' social integration that I believe can be properly addressed by dramaturgy.

The first one is the fallacy of fitting-in. All the reviewed literatures mention English/Hebrew proficiency and cultural difference. This is problematic because first, they fail to address the existence of host nationals' racism, or at least racial-profiling towards the international students (Zhang-Wu, 2018). More importantly, it is questionable that if international students want to integrate to the host society, all they have to do is speak the local language well and adapt to the host culture.

In the case of Israel, North American students, for whom "living in the Jewish land" is a more significant motive than academic achievements, are seeking a sense of belonging and want to play the role of an insider. At least in comparison with their Chinese counterparts, they are supposed to have more social and cultural capital to integrate, and be more motivated to learn Hebrew, yet they still report having a negative experience in Israel because of their social distance with Israelis. It is worth asking if it is because they didn't try hard enough to fit in, or because the role they wanted to play was denied by the Israelis in their audience. For Chinese students in Israel, living in a Jewish state is very different from living in other host countries - such as America, Canada, Australia and Britain - that seem to present the illusion that international students can and are supposed to "learn and fit in the mainstream culture". As non-Jewish, visible minorities in Israel, Chinese students don't even seem to have the option of "fitting in the mainstream culture.", This means that they have no choice but take on the role of an outsider. It is

interesting to explore if this inevitably leads to a negative experience, or if it actually frees them from the haunting idea of “fitting in”, allowing them to enjoy the benefits that come with playing the role of the outsider.

The second problem I see is that these studies are telling the stories of international students in a very binary and two-dimensioned way. It frustrated me reading these studies that suggest that international students are either hanging out with their host-national friends and talking about their fascination of the host culture in perfect local language, or staying at home with their co-national friends while complaining about the cultural shock they are experiencing and how hard it is to speak the local language. Both of these two characters are, however, very two-dimensional.

When I tell my story in Israel, it always sounds like a life-changing experience of seeing the world and hanging out with fancy international friends. Yet during the time I spent there, every day was a reminder that I did not and would not belong there. When I am sitting in a Canadian classroom, sometimes I remain silent throughout the class and think “nobody expects a Chinese student to talk anyway”, yet I still have learned so much by listening to and observing my classmates from different countries. However, if I were to be interviewed for a study on international students, would my story be presented as two-dimensional too?

When researchers have a pre-determined image in mind for “what a good study-abroad experience should be”, it is not surprising that they will design studies to measure international students with an imagined “model international student” who speaks the host-national language fluently and has numerous host-national friends, and concludes that the international students they measured either fit or fail to fit the model. To break out

from this dichotomy, it is important to understand the nuanced and individual experience, and to find a new set of framework and language to re-tell international students' stories with their own voices (Page and Sobh Chahboun, 2019), and to develop a more complex understanding of the structure of the interactional contexts in which students are engaged.

My hope is that dramaturgy theory might be a way of taking international students' experience out of this disappointing narrative. I hope to see the students in my research as actors with agency and motives, and to explore the tactics they use to conduct their performance and manage their impression, as well as the social structures through which they have to navigate.

Another shortcoming of the reviewed literature is that the majority of existing studies on Chinese international students are also conducted by Chinese international students or researchers. This raises several questions. The first one is the researchers' positionally. In most of the studies, the researchers position themselves as objective observers. One exception I found is Li's study on Chinese doctoral students' integration in American universities. In the introduction section, Li starts with a personal reflection, giving readers insights on how his personal experience brought their interest to this topic, as well as how his research had always been intertwined with him making sense of his own experience in America (2013; pp.1-3). I believe that a self-reflective perspective can provide readers with a different perspective of the experiences analyzed here. More importantly, it allows the researcher to not only be honest to the readers, but also to themselves. We as researchers conduct studies to produce knowledge, to converse with extant literatures, to advocate for our subjects, but also, sometimes equally importantly, to make sense of our own lived situation.

The second question is that although it is understandable that researchers will focus their studies on subjects of their own ethnicity and experience, it is also meaningful to locate the phenomenon on a larger scale and to make comparisons. I am grateful that my own experience brought me valuable insights —after all, although I lived with my American roommate for almost a year in Israel, if it wasn't for our conversation in 2020, I would have never known the disconnect he perceived with the Israelis. I hope that the comparisons I make in this project will bring new perspectives to the understanding of international students' social integration as a global, cross-cultural and cross-racial phenomenon.

Research Question

North American students go to Israel hoping to find their roots and strengthen their Jewish identity, whereas Chinese students in Israel are very aware of the fact that they are not only non-Jewish, but also visible minorities. Even though they become classmates in the same programs in the same Israeli universities, they take on different roles. I want to explore the following: Do the different roles North American students and Chinese students play in Israel lead them to different experiences of social integration?

This question entails a series of smaller questions: What roles did they choose to play and why? How have they played these roles in everyday life? How have they perceived the locals' responses and how have they reacted to that?

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

1. The roles

I begin by unpacking the binary concepts of “insider/outsider” that I have used above. For North American students, it is worth exploring where they locate themselves between being “Canadian/American” and “Jewish”, because this would then affect what sort of expectations they had regarding their study period in Israel. Their expectations could then involve different aspects: academic achievement, cultural exposure and the strengthening of the Jewish identity/finding the sense of belonging. It is also necessary to unpack the sense of belonging and see what it involves: religious practice, the improvement of Hebrew, gaining knowledge of Judaism and Israel, making Israeli contacts, etc. As for Chinese students, they would certainly not identify themselves as “Jewish”; it is then interesting to see how their expectations vary from their North American counterparts, and explore the nuance: for example, both Chinese students and North American students might want to make Israeli contacts, but the reason might differ from practical ones and ideological/emotional ones.

By referencing two sets of concepts, I will conceptualize the roles that North American and Chinese students choose to play in Israel. George Simmel defines the concept of “the stranger”, as a person who lives in a place where they do not belong and “carries on the qualities that do not, could not, belong”. He believes that a stranger’s objectivity means a “curious combination of closeness and distance, of detachment and engagement”. The stranger can have close relationships with the locals, but they experience these relationships from a bird’s-eye view (2008, 324) .Simmel’s narrative gives the figure of the “stranger” an interesting dialectical character. What makes it particularly interesting is that due to this dialectical character, social integration is

possible for a stranger, but the very experience of social integration is also at the same time reminding them that they do not belong.

Another interesting set of concepts is the local/the cosmopolitan binary. The local values knowledge of acquaintance, group identities and the sense of belonging to a neighborhood, a community or a nation. The cosmopolitan, similar to the stranger, does not seek the sense of belongings, and even prefers not to be included by the local. They are not limited by the borders of a town or a state, but they are also valued by the locals because of their knowledge, degrees, credentials and professional capabilities. (Ossewaarde, 2007)

It is fruitful to categorize Chinese students as the stranger/ the cosmopolitans, as they do not and can not seek to be included by the Jewish culture or the state of Israel, and they go to Israel to acquire an education. It is, however, harder to fit the North American students in the binary narrative: although they are new-comers to Israel, they share significant similarities with the local Israelis and hope to find their common roots. In this case, to conceptualize their roles, I would like to see Israel as a house, and the Israelis as the host family. There are two types of roles for these guests living under the same roof with the host family. Both are learning a set of skills from an elder member of the family. The first, the house guest, comes to this house mainly for the purpose of skill-learning. Because of his relatively long stay, he might very well build close relationships with some of the family members, but he is still very aware that he is not part of the family and he will leave someday when he finishes his apprenticeship.

The second guest, however, comes wanting to play the role of the distant relative of the family, even though his parents, or even grandparents might have never set foot in the

house. They come to this house not only for the apprenticeship, but also to find their roots, to learn more about the family history, and they expects to be treated not just like a house guest, but also a member of the family. Thus, Chinese students are the house guests, essentially strangers/ cosmopolitans. They come to Israel mainly to attend university, they are very aware that their stay is temporary and they do not, cannot, and even prefer not to seek the sense of belonging. North American students are the distant relatives, an in-betweeness of a stranger/cosmopolitan and a local. They want to be seen by the Israelis as “one of them”.

With respect to social integration, playing the roles of “the house guest” and “the distant relative” would both come with their advantages and disadvantages. In terms of the advantages, because of the shared cultural and religious practice, it should be easier for North American students to appear similar to the locals and “fit in” as “one of them”. As for Chinese students, being a house guest also equips them with a set of knowledges, and even other-worldly charismas. For example, my Chinese-cooking skills had come in great use when I was trying to make Israeli friends, and I also know several Chinese students who managed to make local contacts by teaching Chinese language and calligraphy.

In terms of the disadvantages, The in-betweeness of North American students’ role could cause inter-conflicts as they want to be seen as a family member yet find out that they are treated as a house guest. This could lead to frustrations that Chinese students might not encounter. As for Chinese students, the danger of being a house guest is the consistent sense of not-belonging, and the difficulty of forming deep relationships. There is also danger of becoming the target of xenophobia and racism.

2. Social integration as a Performance

To see social integration as a performance is then to observe and analyze how they conduct their performance in everyday life. This includes:

(1) Forming of team of actors.

In occasions of social interaction, an international student might show up by alone, but they might also show up with a member of a team(Goffman, 1956, 47). The team of actors could be a small group of close friends who strategically work together to make local contacts, or it could also be several co-nationals who sit in the same classroom. More interestingly, the forming of a team does not always occur alongside the national line—for example, if Chinese/North American students are at a school event with Israeli students and international students from other countries, would the international students from other countries be considered as actors or audience? Another possible setting is that if a Chinese/North American student manages to make a close Israeli friend, who then introduces them to a wider group of Israelis, would this Israeli friend be seen as an actor or member of the audience? My goal is not to dwell on classification, but to see from a strategic point of view, with who the international students choose to work together and present their performances.

(2) Spaces.

The spaces could be on campus, kitchens, dining hall, night clubs, synagogues, grocery stores, etc. One thing I want to stress is that these occasions can be both front stages where actors perform, as well as the backstage where actors interact without the presence of audience(Goffman, 1956, 13 and 69). I want to explore the function of the backstage to see if the behaviors that might have been seen as “self-segregating” is an integral part of social integration. I mentioned above that in Israel I would sit with my

friend in my living room to plan Chinese dinner and invite Israelis. Similarly, the information that is shared within the Chinese students or North American students' communities can also be useful when they need to know which bar has special offers or which stand-up club has English nights.

(3) Everyday Presentation.

For this I want to explore the more detailed, technical aspects during the process of performance. This can include several dimensions. The first one is information control. I want to analyze the way actors use the advantages of their roles and avoid the disadvantages in front of the audience. The second one is concerned with when their performances receive negative feedbacks, or their roles are denied by the audience, I want to see how they manage their impression and reshape their roles.

3. The dynamic of individual, role and social structure

Individuals choose the role they want to play according to their agency and motives, this role might be accepted or denied by the audience. In occasions, an individual might walk on the stage and find that a role has been chosen for them(Goffman, 1956, 17). If my study were to see the international students solely as individuals, it would not address the nuanced differences between the "self" they present on social occasions and the "true self" they perceive themselves to be. If my study solely stresses the power of social structure, it would then have the danger of becoming another study that depicts international students as two-dimensional victims. By using dramaturgical theory, I hope to see the "role" as a bridge between the individual and the social structure. Through this, I attempt to find a way to acknowledge the social structure without depriving students of their agency.

In seeing social interaction as a play, as I do in this research, I want my study be a documentary of the play rather than just a play review. While a play review primarily focuses on whether certain roles are well-written or certain actors are great, a documentary tells the story of actors' bumpy journey: role forming, team building, rehearsals, debut, good and bad days on stage, reflections, backstage talks, etc. Instead of analyzing/judging if the students have integrated well into the host society, I want to tell a more layered story of why, where, with whom, and how they integrated. In other words, I want to not see social integration as a final goal, but a series of acts.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

1. Philosophical Underpinning

I conducted a qualitative study, because I aimed to understand the Chinese and North American students' lived experience and the meaning of their experience (Tuohy et al., 2012). The dramaturgical perspective of my project also suggests that it suits qualitative research because dramaturgy has a theoretical elasticity: instead of a closed theoretical position, it is more like a way of describing human behavior (Brissett and Edgley, 1990).

My original intention was to apply a critical ethnography approach, as I wanted to challenge the narratives of international students in existing studies, namely, that they are two-dimensional subjects who "fit-in" the host society and culture either well or badly. I wanted to explore the international students' journey of social integration, to tell their stories in their own words. However, Covid-19 conditions prevented me from undertaking an ethnography. However, I have attempted to adapt some of the insights of critical ethnography to my qualitative analysis of my interviews. By doing so, I hope my study can show the agency of my respondents, their capability and power to make changes, while analyzing the structural relations in which they are engaged (Harvey, 1990).

Inspired by the protocols of a critical ethnographical study also, I have consistently reflected on my own position, as I was once a Chinese student in Israel, and started this research with the memory that "I integrated well in Israel", I needed to avoid consciously or unconsciously telling the story of "Chinese students integrated well in Israel". When it comes to telling the American students' story, it is equally challenging because it is complicated to present others, whose lived experience I do not share with (Madison, 2011). However, I also believe that my own experience have offered me help: I lived with three American students in Israel for a year, and a big part of my classmates in Israel were

also Americans. For this reason, I was cautiously confident to at least have a good knowledge of their vocabulary and get access to understand their experience.

An article that gave me inspiration was Goldstein's study on a diverse Canadian high school. Not only did she conduct a critical ethnographical research, she also wrote her findings in the format of a play. By doing so, she addressed the tensions between second-language-learner immigrant students and their Canadian-born peers (Goldstein, 2001).

Taking another insight from critical ethnography that I have applied to my qualitative analysis of the data, a researcher does not only challenge the existing knowledge that misrepresent the subjects' lived experience, they also seek alternative ways to create and present new knowledge, and to better represent the subjects' lived experience from their perspective. For this reason, I have experimented with new ways to present my findings.

2. Research Methods

I conducted eight in-depth semi-structured interviews. I implemented a series of questions to ask each interviewee in a consistent order (Berg and Bruce, 2017), included in the appendix. This allowed me to encourage the interviewees to reflect on their experience in a chronological order, from their decision to study in Israel to their everyday performance in Israel and the change of their performance strategies. I also hoped that these semi-structured interviews create would enough space between questions to encourage my participants to describe their world and tell their stories in their own words (Berg and Bruce, 2017).

When discussing the craft of interviewing, Myers and Newman refer to Dramaturgical theory and suggest that a qualitative interview should be a “play”. From this perspective, as an actor in the play, the interviewer’s impression management is very important. In order to gain the interviewee’s trust and make the interviewee feel comfortable, some researchers will even “go native” and dress and speak in exactly the same way as the interviewee (Myers and Newman, 2007). For this reason, I believed that interviews could facilitate my collection of the data needed for my research because my own experience in Israel was a great help for my “impression management”. During the interviews, I showed my familiarity with Israel, or shared my own experience with my interviewees. It proved to be a useful way to express empathy, and inspire my participants to open up or reflect deeper on their experience.

3. Sampling

I interviewed 4 Chinese students and equal number of American students, details of each of the participants can be found in the findings section. My contact in Israel helped me to get in touch with students in Israel. I initially reached out to 1 Chinese and 2 American students, and then used the technique of snowballing (Myers and Newman, 2007), and asked them to recommend more participants. My participants enrolled in 3 different universities in 3 different cities in Israel.

A challenge I expected to have was related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of lock-downs, the occasions and frequencies of social interaction had both changed significantly. In order to not conduct a dramaturgical research where the only front stage is zoom meetings, I recruited participants who had spent at least 6 months in Israel before the first national lock-down in March 2020. As required by the University of Ottawa, participants were asked to sign consent forms before the interview.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

8 Interviews were conducted over zoom in the time span of 2 months. All the interviews were recorded. 6 interviews were conducted in English and 2 were in Chinese. I initially engaged with the collected data through watching the recordings and reading the transcripts. At that point I realized that in order to present the individualized, nuanced details in the interviews, including details that are important to my participants but do not necessarily fit into my theoretical frame work, the better way would be to present the 8 interviews as 8 individual stories. I experience challenges due to the time limit of each interview, I did not have enough materials to write 8 vivid stories covering all the important milestones in their journeys of social integration. Besides, I wanted to be honest about my presence in the interviews, including my shared experience and resonance with my participants, as well as, more importantly, my immature interviewing skills, pre-existing bias, and subjective expectations that inevitably affected the interviews. Taking these factors into consideration, the findings were eventually written in the format of interview summaries, in which I hope readers can both have access to my interviewees' stories, and a glimpse of the interview process.

Also, for the purposes mentioned above, the findings were written largely without a theoretical, analytical gazing. I then interacted with the findings with dramaturgy theory as a tool, to find themes and patterns and presented my analysis in the discussion section.

Chapter 4: Findings

In the finding section I present my 8 interviews individually. The first four pieces, Emma, Olivia, Peter and Vincent, are on my American participants. The later four pieces, Diandian, Xiaohua, Bailing and Yanfeng, are on my Chinese participants. All the names are pseudonyms, to protect my participants' privacy.

Emma

Emma is now living in Jerusalem doing her master program. This is her third time studying in Israel — after high school, she spent two years attending seminaries, and during her undergraduate studies, she also spent half a year being an exchange student in an Israeli University.

"We don't totally belong in America."

When I asked her about her motives for studying and living in Israel, she said that growing up in a Zionist family, Israel had always been the country she knew she'd migrate to. Several of her family members had immigrated there, and growing up, elder family members had always told her she must go to Israel. She said that they wanted to ensure that the younger generations would obtain a strong Jewish identity.

"I mean, I was brought up by strongly Zionist parents, so I think there was always this sense that, 'we don't totally belong in America, and look how wonderful Israeli culture is.' So having your kid to spend at least a year in Israel…it's sort of seen as a very good way to ensure that your kid stays Jewish, has close friends who are Jews, has engagement in Jewish texts, as well as exploring Israel as land of our heritage and so forth. This is seen as one of a really good educational tactic to get your kids to stay Jewish."

There was also a sense of safety that elder members in her family wanted her to have by moving to Israel:

“Because there was sort of a sense that…like the generations after the Holocaust, their parents, or their grandparents were immigrants. There’s this sense of like, there is no safe place for Jews in the diaspora, and the future of Judaism is in Israel. And that's where you're really going to be constructing a Jewish community that's going to last forever.”

“I’m actually an American.”

Because of this strong family influence, Emma felt that before she started her studies in Israel, she knew what to expect and was fully prepared — in terms of language and culture. However, her first year in Israel did not go quite as she expected.

“The first time I was here for a prolonged time, I was realizing that just because I had been raised in this sort of Zionist, pro-Israel, Hebrew speaking environment, didn't mean that I actually had an automatic connection to Israel and the Israelis. I remember in the first year, I suddenly realized that I actually did connect to the Americans a lot more, or that the conversations with Israelis were actually really hard to have. And I also realized that I wasn't actually speaking good Hebrew, and that I didn't understand army and things like that…I think I was sort of raised as like, ‘you are a Jew who belongs in Israel and you should be in Israel’, and then when I got to Israel, there was the realization of like, no, in some ways I'm actually an American.”

As she was telling me about this realization, I remembered that before I went to Israel, I believed that I was not going to be a “typical” Chinese person and was determined to only socialize with non-Chinese people. My ambition was, however, soon shattered. In my

first week in Israel I went to an orientation dinner and made a deliberate choice to not sit with the other Chinese students. However, I soon realized that even though I obtained good scores on the English proficiency exam, it didn't necessary mean that I could understand everything people said to me. Later that night, the dinner somehow turned into a dance party. When most of the students stood up and danced, I looked around and saw that the few Chinese students remained seated, with the same awkward smile on their faces, just like me. I left the party early and kept thinking in my taxi that, "God I am so Chinese."

I shared my experience with Emma and asked her if she also had moments when she felt that she was "so American". She said that she could recall several failed conversations with Israelis due to Hebrew proficiency or lack of common interests, and then she told me one of her observations in the seminary:

"It was sort of a place in which you had to self-motivate to learn. Nobody was standing over you, you chose how much to learn. And I was noticing that it was the Americans who were waking up early in the morning, sitting down and learning. Um, coz we have that crazy protestant work ethic or whatever it is."

Apart from the "crazy protestant work ethic", there were also other things that made her feel more connected to her American friends in the seminary:

"In my circles, we are people who have been through liberal arts education, who were fed with a certain amount of books that are relevant to their field of study, you know, we know how to talk about them and how to engage with intellectual curiosity. And those aren't

values that are so central to Israeli society. I think it's probably because people go to the army and during exactly that time when Americans are sitting and reading various books."

Emma was the first American student I interviewed. After her, from my other American participants, I heard more "interesting" distinctions they made between Americans and Israelis. I want to stress that it is not my intention to argue that their observations are accurate — just as I am fully aware that "I am so Chinese because I don't dance" is not a provable statement. What intrigued me was that many of my participants went through a similar process of identifying distinctions, as a way of making sense of their disconnect with Israelis, during processes in which they were not only trying to understand Israelis, but also re-discovering their own identities.

"We count success in that way."

Although it was much easier for her to connect with her American friends, Emma did feel guilty about being in the American bubble. She said that there is a significant pressure for American Jews in Israel to integrate and "be as Israeli as possible". "We count success in that way", Emma emphasized. She has been making efforts to break out of the American bubble. In the seminary, where programs were offered in both Hebrew and English, Emma chose the Hebrew one hoping that she'd make connections to Israeli classmates, as well as improving her Hebrew proficiency. She did manage to become friendly with some of her Israeli colleagues, although many of them were Israelis with American parents, "which is sort of its own phenomenon," Emma said.

Even among her American friends, Emma found a noticeable difference between people like her, who were concerned with fitting into Israeli society, and people who enrolled in English-speaking programs, many of whom Emma described as "American Jews who

came to Israel to spend a year hanging out with American Jews, and then would go back to America and spend the rest of their lives hanging out with American Jews." Seeing them reinforced Emma's belief that it was not what she wanted, that she wanted to improve her Hebrew and engage in Israeli culture and society.

Emma told me that at that time she often talked with her American friends about their struggles to connect to Israelis. I told her how having a good Chinese friend in Israel helped me a lot with making Israeli friends, as we would always strategically act together. Emma found this quite interesting, "Because you have people you're comfortable with, it allows you to, to reach out to people you're less comfortable with… So I always thought the reverse of that." She then went on to tell me that she found it harder to connect with Israelis when there were other Americans at presence.

"Right before my master's program, I did an intensive one-month program with a bunch of Israelis. And there were a couple of American Israelis who were sort of Americans who had moved to Israel. And they naturally buddied up with me. And I remember there were several times when I was a little bit annoyed with them. There was one woman there who I had known from high school already — because American Jews knew each other and we came from the same crew. And her Hebrew wasn't so great, so she naturally came to me, and wanted to talk in English and whatever. And every time we talked in English that meant that Israelis wouldn't come and chat with us. And I remember actually feeling like very annoyed with her. I was sort of at the beginning of trying to fit in with this society, and I felt like she was constantly making me an American who's sort of not available to have a conversation in Hebrew."

I laughed when Emma said “making me an American”. It seems that Emma was realizing “I’m actually an American” with a stress that, “but I’m still not that kind of American”.

Looking back at her first attempts to make Israeli friends, Emma felt that they were “a little bit fake and forced”, as if she had to “prove that I can be besties with Israelis”. Now, Emma feels that the friendships and connections she has have become more genuine. She thinks it is partially because she has obtained a higher proficiency of Hebrew and a better understanding of the Israeli cultural norm, and partially because she has found the right group of Israelis in her master program, “they are the Israelis that I can really often talk with and, and really feel like there's a strong connection.”

A recent changed in her life has also made her feel that she has been seen by the Israelis more as “one of us”. I got in touch with Emma because she is dating my friend’s friend, who is an Israeli man, when I asked her if having an Israeli boyfriend helped her to integrate, she said:

“Yeah. I think after I started going out with him, I noticed that when people in the fellowship found out about our relationship, I suddenly felt like, and it is possible that it was entirely in my head, but they did feel like there was like a closer connection of like, Oh, you're actually one of us, you're not just like a traveling student who's kind of coming and going or whatever. You actually do have a closer connection here.”

“I also increasingly feel like I really don't care.”

For a long time, Emma would intentionally avoid being “too American”; she would make sure to lower her voice and not feel entitled that “everybody wants to hear what I have to say.” Even in her male-dominated department in school, she’d restrain herself from being

the one who brings up gender theories in a discussion, because she didn't want to be seen as the American in the room who was "obsessed with identity politics". However, over the years, she has gradually come to a reconciliation with her American identity.

"For a long time it was like, anytime we talked about Americans, I was the first to say, Oh my God, they're so terrible. They're so awful. Especially after Trump got elected. So…it felt like there was nothing to be proud of. But I lately have become a lot more defensive —might also be because it's easier to be proud of America again after Biden got elected…But I am more willing to say, you know, there's a lot, that's screwed up about America, but it also has a lot of things that you guys are missing."

She is not only defensive about American politics, but also the food.

"My boyfriend is very into Mediterranean diet. He likes his "Israeli food" and whatever, and he likes to say that Americans consume so much sugar and whatever. When we first started cooking together, I would make these opulent desserts with tons of, you know, sugar and honey and butter. And he would be like, 'Great…' Um, but I think I actually have made a conscious point of being like, yes! Americans know how to make desserts!"

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Emma's social life has changed drastically. She has been more focused on a small number of people who were close to her, and paid less attention and energy to maintain casual friendships. Over this period of time, she has felt that she has taken the burden of "making as many Israeli friends as possible" off her shoulders.

"Even this time when I first got here for this master program, there was this sense of like, I'm not going to hang out with Americans, I'm not going to reach out to them or be in their

communities… Um, And I think at this point, I'm actually not so connected to too many Americans, but I also increasingly feel like I really don't care. I think it took me some five years of being here to realize that, just because you're not living in a completely immersive Hebrew Israeli environment, does not mean that you're like a lesser experienced of Israel."

Emma moved in with her boyfriend and spent most time together during the lockdowns. Naturally, she has become close to her boyfriend's good friends and family. "It was a big change of my social circle".

Emma was the most collaborative interviewee one could ask for, she knew my project was about social integration, and she always gave me answers that were relevant. We spent a long time talking about her social circles and her reflections on her social life. When I asked her about her best memory in Israel, I received one of the very few answers that were not related to anything "social", yet this answer left me with a strong impression.

"I think it was the trips I've done with my boyfriend during the second lockdown. We just drove down to the South and spent a week, like backpacking and hiking around. They caught us on the way and gave us a fine…And I was like, 'Oh, so we have to go back'. And my boyfriend was like… 'No, we just keep going.' Um, and it was just gorgeous and there was no one there, cause it was still during lockdown. Um, and then we also went rafting on the Jordan river at one point…Yeah, I think it was a lot of things we've done together, that was my best memory."

In fact, it was a lie when I said this answer left me with a strong impression. As she was giving me this answer, I was simply thinking “not related to anything social, I shall just move on.” It was after watching the interview recording several times, that I finally included this answer into this finding section. I felt that for Emma her social integration was not just for herself, but also for her family’s hope for her. When social integration had been the thing she gauged her success on, it was not an easy thing to say “I really don't care now.” As she was telling me her illegal trip with her boyfriend, I saw in her face that, she had finally come to peace with her identity, and her journey of social integration. She is finally at a comfortable place where she could have a bit of fun.

The time I interviewed Emma was the first and only time I talked to her, and it only lasted for one and a half hour. Hence, to borrow Emma’s words, “it is possible that it was entirely in my head”. However, I still want to feel happy for her.

Olivia

Olivia is now in the third year of her master program in Tel Aviv. Similar to Emma, Olivia had had a long history with Israel before her MA program. She spent two gap years in Israel after high school, and during her undergraduate study, she did an exchange semester in a university in Jerusalem. In addition to that, there had also been many short-term visits.

“I liked the people and the culture.”

I asked Olivia why she chose to pursue a master degree in Israel, and she gave me a very straight-to-the-point answer: “I wanted to live here, and then I was interested in doing the degree”. For her, it was important that a lot of the leading scholars in her field are in Israel, which did impact her decision, but “to live here” was still the bigger motive.

I asked her what made her want to live in Israel. She mentioned several factors Emma mentioned: she also grew up in a religious Zionist family and community, and a big part of her family already lived in Israel before she moved. Israel had always been talked about in her family and had been part of her education. It was, however, when she did her gap years in Israel, that she decided to move and live in Israel for longer term. Olivia gave me another very straight-to-the point explanation here: “I liked the people and the culture.” She went on to explain the difference she perceived in America and Israel.

“ I found things in America to be much more fast-paced. There’s just a lot of pressure around accomplishment, and profession, and career and all these things. I just found Israelis to be like, more laid-back… like there's a value of enjoying how you spend your time, like hiking and going out. In America, I haven't found people who are as down to just take a day, go for a hike or like things like that.”

What Olivia said resonated with me. I remember finding Israelis laid-back too. After I moved back to China from Israel, I constantly told people that I had a reverse cultural shock noticing that many people around me were driven by a sense of urgency, a sense of “time is running out”. However, I also personally know several driven/ workaholic Israelis who would disagree with what Olivia or I said. In Montreal I lived with an Israeli who never stopped working even during weekends, and once told me “a vacation doesn’t need to be longer than a 2-hours walk.” I’ve also met abundant Chinese people who are actually laid-back. I did wonder if it was because when one goes to a new place, they would pay more attention to finding evidence to prove that “people here know how to enjoy life better.”

“ I kind of found myself within an American bubble here.”

I asked Olivia if she found it less hard to “fit in” since she loved the Israeli culture, her answer started from a yes but gradually turned into a de-facto no.

“Yeah, I definitely, yeah. I mean, I don't know if I expect it to be able to really fit in with Israelis. I kind of found myself within an American bubble here. Um, I think I sort of knew that it might happen when I was coming, but I wasn't worried about like, being able to succeed in university, or being able to develop community or things like that.”

I have to admit, it was exciting to have my interviewee bring up the phrase “American bubble” before I did. I asked her how she found herself in the bubble. She said it had a lot to do with her deciding to live in Tel Aviv, instead of Jerusalem. When she was an exchange student in Jerusalem, she did find it easier to make Israeli friends, because the religious community in Jerusalem is a “mixed” of Israelis and Internationals. In Tel Aviv, however, the religious community has much fewer Israelis, because the city is too expensive for young religious Israelis to live in.

Olivia chose to live in Tel Aviv, where she knew she’d be more likely to end up being in an American bubble. Now, she is engaged with another American in Tel Aviv, and her immediate family is about to move from America to Tel Aviv, it seems like she is even deeper in the bubble. She told me there are certain advantages of being in this bubble.

“I think it helps me integrate, it helps me feel more settled here that I have friendships that are like really deep friendships, which I wouldn't have with Israelis. So it definitely provides that support system for me, having that community and those relationships.”

Yet she still had guilty feelings about not being sufficiently “integrated.” A huge part of this guilt comes from not being able to live and work in an immersive Hebrew environment. I asked why it matters so much to her.

“I went to Jewish day school my whole life, and I was in Hebrew class from a young age, that was always something I was taught in school. Um, I guess it's like the most obvious thing to me here that's different than my life in America. Being able to function in that new language to me is like, okay, I can function in this new context. If I can speak Hebrew, then it's like, I can really connect to people who are not necessarily so influenced by American or other international culture… Um, so it’s just like really being able to connect with the society here on a deeper level.”

In order to give me a clearer picture, she compared two of her work experiences:

“I was teaching at a summer camp, like an English immersion camp. But while I was doing that, in order to just have enough money on the side, I worked in a pottery shop. And my job at the pottery shop was completely in Hebrew. Um, and that to me was really cool. I'm able to fully have a job in Hebrew and speak Hebrew with all my clients and with my boss. And that to me is like, Oh, I've succeeded here, you know?”

“My best goal is they realize I'm not a tourist.”

What she said reminded me that in my proposal, I said I wanted to see local language proficiency as a tool to make the actors’ roles more convincing to the audience. However, Olivia also feels that even if she speaks fluent Hebrew, she is still not seen by the Israelis as one of them.

“I think even when I have relationships with Israelis, I feel like they're still processing me as an American. And I know that part of it is definitely because even when I speak perfect Hebrew, I speak it with somewhat of an American accent.”

Apart from the accent, Olivia also felt that how she dressed and how she behaved also gave Israelis clues that she was an American. However, even though she still cares about fitting in, she has also reconciled with the fact that she would not totally fit in. In fact, before she moved to Israel, she already knew that not being able to fully integrate was, in her words, “part of the deal”, and she didn’t have unrealistic expectations.

“I'm not going to try to fake an Israeli accent. That's not important to me. Like, this is who I am. It’s just not worth it. I think my best goal is that okay, when I speak fluent Hebrew, they realize I'm not a tourist, and I am here long term, so they can really like, have deeper conversations with me.”

“I'm more able to live outside of people's expectations.”

As she kept on explaining why she had no expectation to fully integrate in Israel, Olivia touched on another interesting subject.

“I feel like there's a very strong…like, there's also so many Americans here that I think Israelis have come into contact with Americans a lot. So there are certain biases where they're like, Oh, like you're one of the Americans. I don't think I'm going to ever shed that. I think that it's just going to be how people process me here. And I'm not trying to change that.”

I was again pleased that she brought up something on my question list before I brought it up—stereotypes. I shared with her my personal experience of trying to distance myself from the stereotypical image of a Chinese international student, and asked her what her experience had been.

“I wasn't trying to hide it, that doesn't really bother me. When I'm having casual interactions, it's like, yeah, whatever. And then when it's the more serious relationships, then I think I definitely am trying, in some sense, not to come off as a classic American. But I also think I have those stronger things as part of my identity I can rely on, so those kind of helped me to not fit into that box.”

I went on to ask her about her identity and her not fitting into the box.

“Part of why I moved here was I realized early on that, If I live here, I don't have to fit into any specific cultural box, because I'm not from here in the first place. So nobody's expecting me to fit into any specific Israeli pocket of society. Because I didn't grow up in here, there’s no natural transition of like, Oh, I grew up this way in America, so I would fit in this way. In Israel, there's no expected match for me.”

For her, being an outsider is her choice of not conforming to an expected role.

“It gives me more freedom to just do whatever I want. And I feel like I'm kind of off people's radar, and I'm more able to live outside of different people's expectations… Because nobody really knows how they would expect me to be. I feel like I'm able to conform less.”

“If I go back to America, I'll be like, this is too easy.”

Towards the end of the interview, I asked Olivia how her experience in Israel has changed her.

“I think it's made me more comfortable with working really hard on things. I think I just sort of expect that, and I’m used to that, things day to day will be more challenging, because I'm trying to really set myself up here and really integrate here. Um, so it's like if I go back to America, I'll be like, this is too easy…I think it’s just made me look for challenges. And, to me, that's why it's exciting.”

What really impressed me is, it seems that for Olivia, moving to Israel was just what she knew from an early age that she would do, what her family and community had expected her to do. However, she also did it out of a sense of dissatisfaction—about culture and lifestyle in America, about the roles she was expected to play in America.

We so often hear a cliche immigration narrative: immigrants come to a new land full of hopes, and then are hit by the reality, and then struggle to make sense of their lived situation, and then after years of hard work they finally integrate. But Olivia’s experience is much more nuanced than that: she moved to Israel knowing that she’d never be seen by the locals as a real Israeli; she likes the fact that in Israel she does not need to fit into a specific box. She is in an American bubble and the bubble is getting stronger and bigger, yet she has also been trying to work in immersive Hebrew environments, to not make Israelis feel like she is a classic American or a tourist in Israel.

This is not just a simple story of an American Jew moving to Israel for the simple purpose of finding Jewish roots. This is her constant negotiating with her family, her education, her

two cultures, her religion… Amid all these influences and expectations, she has managed to find a space to live “off people's radar”.

While it might seem that she’s been working hard to please everybody, she’s actually been working to satisfy herself all along. That is some amazing agency.

Peter

Peter is currently doing his PhD in Jerusalem. This is his second time studying in Israel. When he was doing his undergraduate studies, he spent a semester in Israel as an exchange student.

“I still feel like a foreigner in Israel”

Similar to Emma and Olivia, he grew up in Jewish communities, and Israel had always been the place he had a deep connection with and expected to spend time in. In fact, before his studies in Israel, he had had several long or short term stays, the longest was a two-year stay after high school. Also before his studies in Israel, he was already able to at least, as he put it, “get around in Hebrew”, and he had had family members and “tons of friends” there. For these reasons, he did not feel at all like coming to a foreign place when he first went to study in Israel.

At the time of the interview, he had spent a sixth of his life in Israel. However, only a few minutes into the interview, and almost right after he told me he did not feel like Israel was a foreign place, he said that “I still feel like a foreigner in Israel”.

He expressed his frustration about his American accent:

“Regardless of how well I speak Hebrew, I still speak Hebrew with an accent. People… especially in Jerusalem, are very easy to identify Americans just based on how we speak. Like all these Israelis, when the second they hear my accent, they're like, Oh, I'm just going to speak to you in my broken English, which is always so annoying. Cause it's definitely gotten to the point where like, most of the time, my Hebrew is better than their English.”

His American accent is just one of the things that make Peter feel that he is a foreigner. He feels that he does not share a lot of cultural references with Israelis, and he is not “as hyper masculine as a lot of Israeli men are”. Another thing that makes him feel different is that because he started his undergraduate studies at the age when Israelis joined the army, he feels that he doesn’t share the same life trajectory with them. “I'm 25, almost 26. But Israelis around my age are all doing their first degree. So when I tell people that I'm a doctoral student, but I'm 26. It's just very clear that I'm not from here.”

The difference doesn’t only show on campus. He is now living with two Israelis around his age, for whom it is their first time moving out from family and renting an apartment, something Peter started doing at the age of 19. “I like to have a clean kitchen and nice furniture. But things like these, when you first rented an apartment, aren't on the top of your list.”

“it’s just the way that I’m dressed.”

Peter told me an anecdote about his fashion taste. He spent a month doing a language program in the North of Israel, where there are not many buses. In order to get between places, he had to go back to the old fashion practice of hitchhiking.

“I remember I just always felt like I had a much harder time getting picked up than the Israelis did. And that's when I realized that it’s just the way that I’m dressed, it's just abundantly clear to Israelis that I'm not Israeli, and they were just…that’s the reason why they might've been less interested in picking me up. I could have totally made that up, but like, I do definitely think like that.”

As he was telling me this anecdote, I recalled that Olivia also mentioned the way she dressed would give away her American identity. I asked him how exactly Americans and Israelis dress differently.

“I can't put my finger on it either. I just…I think I wear a lot of button-down shirts, like the kind of short-sleeved button-down shirts that have like, fun designs on them. Israelis just don't wear them. I…I just think it's abundantly clear. It could totally be in my head, but Israelis wear, like, a lot more T-shirts than I would wear.”

Peter said that the different wardrobe choices might also be because of the fact that he is at a different stage of life than Israelis at his age. It does make sense that undergraduate students would prefer T-shirts and PhD students might want to look more mature. For any of my potential Israelis readers, next time when you see a young man hitchhiking in a button-down shirt, do please pick them up. They are not strange, they might just be a PhD student.

“We are Bohemians.”

I didn’t ask Peter if he’d considered buying more T-shirts, but he certainly has tried, and still is trying, to integrate. For example, the reason he went to the North of Israel was to attend a Hebrew-learning program. He also is, as mentioned above, currently living in a

Hebrew-speaking apartment with two Israeli flatmates. There are times when he felt that he has integrated enough that he has “the ability to participate in everything”: on national remembrance day, he’d know which cemetery would have ceremonies, and he believes that his Hebrew proficiency and Israeli cultural knowledge would allow him to participate with thousands of Israeli there and understand everything that’d happen during the ceremonies. He also knows that hiking has been quite popular in Israel and he has been going to hiking school too.

However, most of his friends in Israel are still Americans. He also mentioned that people he has dated in Israeli are also mostly Americans, and he has never gone on a date with Israelis. To him, it is important to have friends and romantic partners who have shared cultural references and speak the same first language, but it is also much more than that. For example, when he encounters things that are normal to Israelis but strange to him, he appreciates that his Americans friends, as well as his other non-Israeli friends, can understand him. Together they’d make fun of how “bank is open for like two hours a day at random times”, “the bureaucracy here just doesn't work”, and “customer service isn't a value here”, so “if you're not yelling, then it means this isn't important and there's no reason for them to help you”. I told Peter it sounds like he has found himself an outsiders’ club, Peter smiled and gave me a more poetic term, “yeah, it’s like we are Bohemians.”

These Bohemians friends, are also important when it comes to holidays.

“We don't all have families here, and so much of Israeli culture is built around families. Um, you know, people are constantly going back to be with families every week or two, all the holidays are with families. And like when you don't have that, then it makes sense

that you're gonna want to be with other people who also want to be with you over holidays."

Memories were flushing back to me as Peter told me this. I remember being surprised by the amount of holidays Israel had, during most of which the majority of shops and restaurants were closed, and public transport stopped operating — in fact, it was not only during holidays, but every week from Friday evening to Saturday evening. For international students, there might be lucky days when they are invited to Israeli friends' families for holiday or shabbat dinners, but most of the times, especially if they just had a busy week and forgot to buy groceries before supermarkets closed at 3pm on Friday, they'd need some non-Israeli friends to go to for company, comfort, and food.

"There's a place you can go back to that is in your comfort zone."

After I told Peter how, at multiple Shabbat nights, my best Chinese friend in Israel and I had saved each other from boredom and hunger, Peter went on and reminded me that it is also comforting to just have conversations in our first languages.

"So there are three people who live in my apartment — me, who's entirely American, a guy who's entirely Israeli, and then another guy who was born in Israel, but whose parents are American. So, he speaks English and Hebrew, both fluently. So, our apartment operates in Hebrew, but it's just helpful and convenient for me that like, maybe there's a word I don't know in Hebrew, or for something else, I'm able to just talk about it in English with him. I think it's just nice knowing that when I get home, if I might just be in a mood where all I want to do is speak English, I can do that."

We both agreed that regardless of how proficient we are in our second languages, it could still be tiring at times to express ourselves in them. Sometimes there are words and references we only know in our first languages, sometimes we are just out of energy, at which times it is always nice to have someone around us who allows us to switch back to our first languages.

Peter pointed out that having a comfort zone does not imply a failure of social integration. In fact, it could be an integral part of social integration.

“I think it's easier to go out of your comfort zone if you know that there's a place you can go back to that is in your comfort zone. I have my friends who get me and I can speak to in a language that's comfortable for me, then it's much easier to then go out and be like, okay, like I'm willing to kind of experiment with other cultures and people.”

In Peter’s case, the concept of comfort zone is even more interesting, considering the fact that many Americans in his comfort zone are also technically Israelis.

“I have so many friends here who live here permanently and have the Israeli identity cards. They have every intention of living here for the rest of their life. Bur for a lot of them, my Hebrew is better than their Hebrew. Um, so in that weird way, I can have local contacts who… I might feel a greater sense of cultural integration here than they do, but they're the ones who are local contacts, theoretically. I have plenty of friends who live in Tel Aviv, they do not speak a word of Hebrew. Um, and they just live here. And it's like, I don't know when I go hang out with them, am I hanging out with Israelis or am I hanging out with foreigners?”

“The second I come back, I’ll want to leave again.”

As I was talking to Peter, two themes kept showing up: he has been making efforts to integrate while knowing that he would not be able to, and would not want to fully integrate.

“ I'd love to feel, kind of culturally bilingual, in the sense of both like speaking the language perfectly and just to kind of like knowing how to operate as an Israeli, but like, I have no interest in becoming Israeli. I have no interest in throwing away my American cultural identity in exchange for an Israeli cultural identity.”

These two themes also showed up when he talked about making Israeli friends and improving Hebrew:

“It just feels like every single time I have this idea, like, hey, I want to go make more Israeli friends, I just realized, like, why would I want to hang out with people who I don't like as much? Like I'd just much rather prefer hanging out with people who I want to hang out with. And then I think also I’ve just kind of accepted the fact that I'm never going to be super fluent in Hebrew. Once you accept that, then you're like, okay, like it's not worth suffering to get there, and I just feel comfortable with the level at which I am.”

At the time I interviewed Peter, he already knew that he would transfer to an American university to continue his studies. He told me “I’m sure that the second I leave Israel I'll want to come back, but the second I come back, I’ll want to leave again.” Maybe because of the same reason, he has a very interesting sense of belonging to Israel.

“I think belonging is connected to the feeling of long-term roots, like, I look around here and be like, ah, yes, I can live here for the rest of my life. So a few months ago I was

feeling a strong sense of belonging, you know? Cause I was imagining that I was going to end up being here for the next few years. Um, but then I got an email that said that I was going to go to America for my PhD, and then that belonging disappeared."

Not only did Peter give temporality and fluidity to this sense of belonging, he also redefined it from a goal of social integration, to a feeling that he could decide whether he had or not, a self-negotiation between being an outsider and a local, a tool that he could use to make sense of his experience.

Towards the end of our conversation, Peter beautifully summarized his views on having the sense of belonging while remaining an outsider. Through these words, I could also see that although he spent quite a bit of time criticizing Israel and talking about his frustrations in Israel, he still has a strong emotional bonding with this place. I will use his words to end this section.

"I feel like going back to America is kind of a bummer. Cause it's just more interesting to feel like an outsider. Um, it definitely isn't is like annoying to feel like you don't belong, like, I wouldn't want to feel like I don't belong, but I really enjoy having this outsider's perspective. But I think like, even if I lived here for the rest of my next 60 years, I'd still feel like an outsider because I still might have this accent, I would still dress a little bit different, probably I still speak to my kids in English if I had kids here. I think I can still feel the sense of belonging and at the same time feel like having that outsider's perspective."

Vincent

I have known Vincent for 7 years. He was one of my roommates in Tel Aviv — I lived with 3 American students. At that time, he was in the last year of his undergraduate studies.

“I fell in love.”

Unlike my other American participants who grew up in Jewish communities on the East coast, Vincent grew up in the South, and is half Jewish from her mother’s side. His family celebrates both Hanukkah and Christmas, Easter and Passover. His parents are not devout to either of the religions —or as Vincent put it, his parents are “lukewarm religious at best”. Vincent did not feel motivated to strengthen his Jewish identity or build a deeper connection to Israel. In fact, until he started his undergraduate education in America, the idea of moving to Israel had never crossed his mind. After all, in comparison to Jerusalem, he feels a stronger connection to “the deserts in Arizona and the green hills and mountains of Tennessee”.

What brought him to Israel was, to borrow his words, a “fairytale”. When he was a third-year student in an American university, he went on a “birth trip” to Israel (“which was for folks of any Jewish ancestry to go for free to Israel”, as Vincent explained), and during that trip, he met an Israeli woman, who is now his fiancée. “I met her on the trip. I fell in love. I remember calling my mother telling her I'd fallen in love and I needed to move here to be with her.” Just like that, in 2014, he transferred to an Israeli university to complete the last year of his bachelor degree. Love makes people do crazy things.

“Those Americans to me felt very foreign…They were the real Jews.”

Although Vincent’s girlfriend helped him to settle in, the first month in Israel was still overwhelming for him. It was his first time living in a big city, and, more significantly, living in a non-English-speaking country. Even going to supermarkets gave him anxiety, because he did not understand Hebrew at all. He also very soon realized that at the university, people in his program were very different from him.

“I'd never really known many Jewish people. I was used to being the only Jewish person. I mean, my school in America had a lot more Chinese students than Jewish students. I was probably…out of 2000 or 3000 people, one of 10 people of Jewish descent.”

However, in Israel, he felt like he was the least Jewish person in the classroom:

“They all knew all these terms about Judaism and really grew up on it. And I felt, uh, you know, I didn’t know Jewish stuff. You know, I didn't even know all the kosher laws. I knew Jews couldn't eat bacon, but I didn't realize I couldn't mix meat and cheese.”

Later in the interview Vincent reminded me his true love to American burgers. I could imagine how devastated he must have been while learning kosher laws are against consuming meat and dairy products at the same time.

Because of these differences that he perceived between him and his classmates, although Vincent enrolled in an English-speaking program where half of the students were Americans, and there were also a few Canadians (who, according to Vincent, were basically “lukewarm Americans”), Vincent did not become friends with a lot of them. He was aware that there was an “American bubble”, but he did not become part of it.

“I didn't have many American friends, although there were a lot of Americans, but I didn't hang out in those circles because those Americans to me felt very foreign. We are not from the same part of America. They have a different culture. They are real Jews from New York or Miami, uh, I don't have that same culture.”

“They made a conscious effort to speak English.”

Apart from his roommates and a few non-American international students in his program, Vincent mostly made friends through his fiancée. Naturally, these friends were all Israelis. In fact, he felt that he got along better with the Israelis than he did with many of the Americans.

“ The Israelis were very welcoming, very nice, very down to earth. Uh, and they were very nice about introducing me to their culture and to their religion in general. And I met quite a few good Israeli friends who I still talk to. They were very welcoming to me, and very respectful and courteous.”

There were other things about Israelis that impressed Vincent too. For example, he found that Israelis were much less afraid to discuss sensitive topics. As someone who grew up being told to “never really talk about politics, religion and race”, Vincent liked that he could have a heated conversation with Israelis at a bar, about the Israel-Palestine conflicts or American politics, and they’d ask him “would you like another beer?”

After he graduated in Israel, Vincent went to London for graduate school. He noticed that while he was the only native English speaker at the table, he received different treatments in London than in Israel.

“In London, when I was going to grad school, a lot of times folks would speak in their native languages to one another, even if I was at the table…which is obviously fine, and I'm a stupid ignorant American and only speak one language. But you know, I'd be at this table with German people and they would switch to speaking German. And in Israel, when I sat down at the table, they would ask me first if they could speak in Hebrew, but they would also try to speak with me in English. Even if there were five Israelis and I was

the only American at the table, they made a conscious effort to speak English. And I thought that was very…it made me feel very welcomed and not as much as an outsider."

In fact, what usually happened was that Vincent would make the effort to introduce himself with the few sentences he knew in Hebrew, and the Israelis would say "Ok, you're American, let's speak English." To my other American participants, they perceive that their American accent in Hebrew is a give-away to the local Israelis that they are foreigners, and they find it frustrating when Israelis switch to English because of that. Here, however, the same thing made Vincent, whose Hebrew proficiency is significantly lower than my other American participants, feel the exact opposite way.

"Coz fuck them, I like burgers."

As I mentioned above, many Israelis loved to discuss American politics with Vincent. He even had people straightforwardly ask him "Do you support Donald Trump" many times. I asked Vincent if he felt that he was treated as a stereotypical American. Not really to my surprise, Vincent was not bothered with it at all.

" I fit a lot of the stereotypes about Americans. I like to think that I'm not dumb, but I probably…I probably am dumb. I don't speak multiple languages. I do like burgers and I like barbecue and steak and, you know, uh, I drove a Jeep."

Vincent also owns a gun.

Sometimes Israelis would make fun of how American he was, which did not really bother him too.

“We might go to a restaurant with friends and they'd be like, Vincent, don't worry, there’s a good burger here, you can get a burger. And sometimes I would get the burger coz fuck them, I like burgers. And sometimes I wouldn’t, but it never bothered me.”

I was really impressed by how Vincent was different from my other American participants, especially how he just didn’t bother. He didn’t bother to distance himself from the American stereotype, and he didn’t bother to try to fit into the mainstream Israeli culture.

“I knew I wasn't going to be Israeli just like I know I wouldn't be Chinese. Uh, you know, if I moved to Shanghai or to Beijing and lived there for the rest of my life, there's no way a Chinese person would ever consider me Chinese…So I didn't care. I got to just go to Israel and experience a new culture and have fun. Like I got to go to the beach and enjoy and learn new things that were just different, and so wonderful and unique.”

“I achieved all these because of the people I met in Tel Aviv.”

Towards the end of the interview, Vincent and I started being nostalgic as we recalled the things we did and the food we had together. He told me he still remembered cooking Tex-Mexican food for me and our other two roommates, and he also remembered liking the dumplings I made. I never confessed to him or our other roommates that I only boiled the frozen pelmeni I bought from a Russian supermarket, added soy sauce and called it Chinese food. Just as Vincent put it, those were “stupid, but simple and joyful times”. Although we later learned that the ultra-orthodox Jewish roommate we had is in fact not Jewish at all, which was not that simple, but that was a different story.

I still remember Vincent as the American guy who carried around a guitar all the time and introduced me to American internet culture by relentlessly playing the song “It’s raining

taco” on loop— which was actually also the first time I learned about taco. However over the years since I left Israel, as I have finally learned to make real dumplings from scratch, it seems that Vincent’s life has changed tremendously too. Not only that he is now engaged with the love of his life, he has also obtained a master degree in London, worked as a teacher in Israel for several years, become an Israeli citizen, attended law school in America, and even taught in an American university.

“I had no real dreams before going to Israel. I mean, I was like, ‘I'm just going to work for my father and that's going to be my life.’ But you know, I had no intention of ever living in foreign countries or expanding my pallet of food aside from barbecue, fried chicken and mac and cheese. Israel just expanded my whole worldview, my ability to study, to learn, to become more inclusive of different cultures. I would’ve never gone to the UK. I would've never gotten a grad degree. I would’ve never become interested in teaching and becoming a professor. To an extent I achieved all these because of the people I met in Tel Aviv, and I credit most of them to my fiancée, who was the biggest impact on my life. She’s the one who pushed me to be a better person, uh, and to work hard and to aspire for dreams.”

A fairy tale with an unexpected happy ending.

If I have to be honest, I only contacted Vincent because I ran out of American students to interview. I knew before the interview that he was only half Jewish, and his studies in Israel finished several years ago back in 2017, both of which were at odds with my other American participants. However, I am now glad that I interviewed him, for the very reason that he is different. Not only did I learn from him a different sets of strategies to interact

with the local society, I also got to see how the experience of once being an international student would influence the next chapters of a person's life.

I still remember my first dinner with Vincent and my other two American roommates in 2014. I sat at the table, listened to them talking about American pop culture and politics, while only understanding 20% of it. I just laughed when everybody laughed, and pretended that I got the jokes. Before Israel, my plan was just to finish my graduate school in Shanghai and find a 9-to-5 job. I had never had a real conversation in English—in fact, I barely passed my English exams in college. However after Israel, I worked as an English teacher for 4 years. And now, I am sitting in a room in Montreal, writing a thesis for my second master degree. I do not think that any of this would have happened if it were not for my experience in Israel.

If our experiences in Israel were plays, then what we did on that stage has led us to play new roles, on multiple new stages, that we had never even dared to think about.

Diandian

Diandian is the first Chinese student I interviewed, and she was also the person who introduced me to the three other Chinese participants. Most importantly, she is one of my best friends, although we had only met in person 3 times over the course of our 5 years long friendship, and always in Israel.

"I don't care about their nationalities."

The first time I met Diandian was during her first trip to Israel for a seminar. Soon after that, she decided to apply for a master program in Archeology in Tel Aviv. Now, Diandian has been living in Israel for 4 years. Before this program, in a Chinese University, she

obtained a degree in Jewish studies, which is one of the reasons she chose Israel for her further studies.

I asked her if she had, before her arrival, acquired any knowledge of Israel from her first master's program. She said that she had studied about Jewish culture and the religion, but she had not really studied modern Israel.

"I got most of the impression of Tel Aviv and the young people's life from my previous schoolmates in China. They did the program I did before me. So through their posts on social media, I could see that, oh, the life is colorful and they have the beach and the young fashionable people, and people there are open-minded…My schoolmates seem to be happy living there. So before I came, I didn't imagine Israelis as like, oh, they are religious and wearing weird hats and clothes."

Another thing she didn't imagine was if she'd be able to make Chinese friends in Israel. I asked her if it crossed her mind that Israel is a very special study-abroad destination for Chinese students, where, unlike America or Canada, she wouldn't find a lot of Chinese students. She said that she was not a person who was really eager to find a group of co-national friends.

"I didn't really care about how many Chinese friends I will have. This is because of my personality. Because I had some experience of going into a program or seminar with many Chinese People from all over the country and different universities, different majors. But usually I didn't really make many friends."

This I can confirm. We both attended a seminar in Jerusalem for Chinese students and educators. We had around 30 colleagues. Neither of us made many friends.

“I don't care about their nationalities. I just care about what we can talk about and how many common hobbies and how many common ways of thinking we have. It also depends on the experience we could have together.”

One of the experiences for her, which took place during her first week in Israel, started in the “notorious” orientation party that we both suffered. In 2014, I left the party early and alone to take a taxi home. In 2017, Diandian made a friend who left the party with her.

“I met my best friend in the first day of the orientation. We were in the same program, so we went to orientation party in a bar together. And after that, we thought, ‘Oh, what is this? This is boring.’ And we left the bar and found a place to eat falafel. During the time of that to meal, I told her everything about myself, including the secrets in my life. I had really good feelings of this girl.”

Interestingly, this girl is Chinese. Around the same time, she also became friend with Xiaohua, another Chinese participant of this research, who was her roommate at the time. When talking about these two friends, Diandian emphasized that “ I have to mention their nationality — their Chinese nationality, was only one of the reasons I love them. The reason why I felt I could get along well with them in the very beginning was, as I mentioned before, we have some really good connection. We have the same attitude to life and challenges.”

“Our conversation was always about the weather.”

Her first experience with classmates, however, was less fortunate. She was in an program for International students:

“We had 13 people altogether in my class. Half of them were from America and five of them were from China. My feeling towards my classmates in the first month was that… okay, everyone was friendly, but I couldn't make deep communication with them. My English was not that good at the time. For example when the English girl in our program talked to me, it was like…our conversation was always about the weather and, ‘oh, how are you’, and ‘you are so fashionable’…”

However, she believed that language was not the only barrier.

“For non-Chinese students, they were stressed to socialize with us Chinese students everyday. I think they didn’t have bias towards us. They just didn't know what to talk about when we were eating lunch or snacks together. And in the beginning, we could sit and chat together. But after about five minutes, you would obviously see that we didn't have common topics.”

Things did get better gradually.

“Gradually we started to have things in common. Gradually we became closer in my faculty. We study archeology, so we have so many field trips and we had so many experiences together, and this was very helpful.”

I was always amazed when she told me about her field trips. They got to do hands-on excavations. Once she was assigned with an American colleague to spend an entire week digging out a thousands-year-old wall. At the end after all the important information was collected, they also were assigned to kick down the wall together. I assume there was no better way to develop friendships.

"Our English is at the same level."

We then dragged the timeline back to her first week in Israel, to talk about the first Israeli friend she made. In fact, it was my best Israeli friend that I introduced to her. I sent her his number right after she arrived at Tel Aviv, and they arranged to meet up a few days after.

"First time I met him, he was driving me to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv. We spent one hour on the way. Before I met him, I was nervous, but he was very outgoing. And, he talked about everything to make you relaxed."

Another thing that helped was our Israeli friend's English proficiency. She agreed that because we talked with him in English, knowing that English was his second language too, it just felt much less nerve-racking than talking to native English speakers. "His English…I think, uh, in the first year his English was like, um, you know, better than mine. But I think now our English is at the same level."

But this was just the beginning of her friendships with Israelis. In fact, as Xiaohua mentioned when I interviewed her, Diandian was the Chinese student she knew who had the most Israeli friends. Diandian has been teaching Mandarin and Chinese calligraphy in her free time, through which she became friends with many of her students. We recently also found out that one of her student-turned-friend's brother is dating my Israeli-

roommate-in-Montreal's good friend. Israel is a very small country, but that's another story.

"I felt I was closer to the Israeli team."

Diandian's extra curriculum activity didn't stop at teaching. Through her connection at the Chinese embassy, she also got to do translation jobs for a theatre in Tel Aviv when Chinese groups came for performances. Because of these translation gigs, she got to experience something quite interesting.

"When I helped the dancers from China to give a performance in Israel, I need to be with them during the whole process of their rehearsal and the arrangement of everything. I was standing in the middle between that Israeli team of the theatre and the Chinese team, and I felt I was closer to the Israeli team."

This is even more interesting if we consider the fact that because her Israeli visa didn't allow her to work, she was not employed by the Israeli theatre, but the Chinese embassy. She felt that the Chinese group was giving her a lot of pressure and taking her help for granted, "I didn't feel their friendship or their consideration." Whereas at the same time, she was always treated nicely by the Israeli team.

"I know everyone there. I know the secretary, who later became my good friend. I know the director and the technicians. So each time I went there, they were all really friendly and warm to me. They'd tell me I can rest in their office, and if I needed something they could help me. And they even helped me to negotiate with the Chinese team to raise my paycheck."

Diandian's duty was beyond translation. When conflicts occurred, she had to be the mediator between the two teams. During this experience, she got to stand in the Israeli

team’s shoes and saw that what is considered normal in China could be a cultural shock for the Israelis.

“When the Israeli team had to cooperate with Chinese teams, the thing they complained the most was that Chinese people don’t have the concept of time, they don't have the concept and habit of scheduling. Israel is a small country, and that theater is also small. They have really limited staff members. So they needed a really specific schedule for each day. Chinese people never understood it.”

“ I don’t want to be a walking Chinese calligraphy brush.”

I asked her if her experience in the theatre made her feel like less of an outsider in Israel. She said she felt differently on different occasions.

“I think in my daily life, my teaching, and also working with theater, I felt really like an insider. I feel more confident when I am with my Israeli friends, students and theatre colleagues. But when I’m in my faculty, I still feel like I am an outsider all the time. Of course I'm not blaming my faculty. I love it. I love my teachers and the environment, but I think…especially for archeology, there is nothing related to China, and I am a newbie, and everybody's better than me. When doing the research and when meeting my professors, I'm always like, I'm not good enough, and I don’t have the courage to say my request aloud. I’m not confident enough.”

As a terrible interviewer who desperately wanted to pin everything my interviewee said down to identity labels, I asked her if her having and lacking confidence in the two situations are for the same reason: her being Chinese. She agreed with this, but she also went on to explain her attitude towards her Chinese identity. In her faculty, she sometimes

perceived that her professors had lower expectation for her than her colleagues from Israel and other western countries, yet she did not appreciate this special treatment — in fact, it only made her feel bad that she didn't work hard enough. In contrast, there were also situations she felt a stronger sense of achievement because she did not receive special treatment.

"I had the opportunity to do a personal Chinese calligraphy exhibition in an art center in Israel, sure it was because I am a Chinese calligrapher, but I also didn't receive any special treatments from the art center. I still had to negotiate, and sometimes argue with them very hard."

She said that she had benefited from how the Israelis valued her Chinese identity and related expertise and skills, but she also didn't want to see her Chinese identity as a "panacea" she'd use everywhere all the time.

"My supervisor and my classmates also knew that I am a calligrapher, but I rarely talk about it with them. It just doesn't feel natural, I want them to like me for me, for who I am, for my personality. I don't want to be a walking Chinese calligraphy brush."

What she said really impressed me. There definitely had been times, both in Israel and Canada, when I had been a "walking Chinese-government-condemner". I admired that she has reconciled herself with her Chinese identity so much more beautifully and comfortably than I have.

In the summer of 2021, Diandian stopped teaching Chinese calligraphy to focus on her studies. Her last calligraphy class turned into a house party. All her students came, some

brought their family members, some old students who had moved to different cities even drove back to Tel Aviv for her. It might have been her Chinese identity that let her meet these people, but it was definitely her personality that made so many of her students become her friends.

"I didn't realize that I have known Tel Aviv so well."

Towards the end of the interview, Diandian told me that her years in Israel have made her much stronger, tougher, and more confident with respect to new challenges. I thought I understood what she meant. After all, over the years, she moved homes more times than she could count, lived through a pandemic, and even hid in bunkers during airstrikes. But to her, this was just part of the story.

She showed me a paragraph she posted on social media.

"I didn't realize that I have known Tel Aviv so well. I know which cafe has the best espresso or the greatest bagel sandwich. I know if I walk a few minutes further I can take a different bus to school, which always has empty seats. I know which grocery store has bigger and sweeter blueberries and which neighborhood makes me feel safest living in… These wisdoms are my accomplishments over the years. But now as I look back, they are also the footmarks of my suffering, struggling and bustling. These blocks in Tel Aviv, in other people's eyes, might just be small, irregular shapes on the map, but in my eyes, I see my bistro, my old cellist neighbor, and the sunset and clouds I see everyday. I am this little person who walks in these streets and lives my life. It's been quite some life."

This is Diandian's love letter to Tel Aviv. Although it has little to do with human interaction, but who can say that the emotional bonds she has built with Tel Aviv, is not a form of social integration.

Bailing

Bailing has lived in Tel Aviv for 7 years. She started her undergraduate studies there in 2014, and now she is in the last year of her master program. I met Bailing several times when I was in Israel—from 2014 to 2015, we lived in the same residence hall. However, we didn't become close friends, and didn't manage to stay in contact. In 2020, when Diandian was telling me about a Chinese friend of hers in Israel, this friend started to sound familiar— it turns out we knew the same Chinese woman in Israel. I was so surprised that after so many years, Bailing is still in Israel, so I immediately decided to interview her.

"I didn't want to study abroad at all."

From the first question, I knew this would be an interesting interview. I asked her what made her choose Israel, and she said it was not her choice at all. After she graduated from high school, her parents heard about a bachelor program in Israel that provided scholarships for Chineses students, and persuaded her to apply. At the time she was already accepted by a university in China, with a subject that she was interested in. Although in the end she listened to her parents, applied and was accepted by the university in Tel Aviv, she was not feeling at all optimistic, excited or even curious about what her life in Israel might be.

"I knew nothing about Israel, and before I came I felt reluctant to learn anything about it. Because I didn't want to study abroad at all. I didn't know anybody there, all my friends

and family were in China, and it cost a lot to study abroad too…I remember in that summer before I came, my dad pushed me to watch those documentaries about Israel, and I didn't find anything interesting in them. I just felt that, when it comes to food, all those documentaries presented the same few things, and they didn't look delicious at all."

At this point I didn't know yet, that we would spend a lot more time than I expected on the topic of food. I went on to ask her about her first impression of Israel. Although she almost had no expectations for liking Israel, her first month there was still worse than she had imagined.

"I came here in September, a month before school started. And right after I came, it was Jewish new year and…everywhere was closed, supermarkets were closed, restaurants and malls were closed…it was very boring, the first month."

One lucky thing was that she quickly became friends with other Chinese students in her program—there were 7 of them, 4 of which were even from her province in China. In the first few weeks, these new friendships played a huge role in her survival in the new country.

"I never cooked before, so in the first few weeks I always went to the other Chinese students' places for lunch and dinner. There was a guy who cooked better than the rest of us, and he pretty much took care of my dinner every evening. But later I decided to learn how to cook because they had dinners too late".

“Let me think who was helpful to me…”

Bailing then went on to tell me how her first attempt of making dinner turned into a disaster, that she didn’t know how to handle frozen vegetables properly, cooked it before it was properly defrosted, and had a bite of popsicle-like broccoli. As she kept adding details on this anecdote, I was just smiling and waiting for it to be finished, so I could go back to human-interaction-related questions.

In fact, 20 minutes into the interview, I gradually realized that although Bailing gave me long answers for every question I asked, we did not have a good rapport. I somehow just didn’t know how to ask follow-up questions, or even how to react to her answers. Here are two examples.

I asked her about the first times she met her classmates, to which she answered, “Our program had an orientation dinner, so everybody was like, sitting together at a long table. And I met many dark-skinned Indians. Like…it was sort of late at night, and we were sitting outside, and their skin color was really dark….” As she started laughing, I awkwardly smiled, while thinking “am I interviewing a racist?”

And here is her answer when I asked if her Chinese friends helped her to settle in Israel.

“My life was actually very tedious, every week from Monday to Thursday, I was at school from 9am to 6pm, and after that I spent the evenings at home doing assignments, and I pretty much just spent the weekends on assignments too. So…let me think who was helpful to me….probably a Chinese girl who’s a year above me in the same program? She had answers for these assignments.”

As I look back, I regret that I had too many expectations with respect to her answers, and that I did not manage to follow her stream of thoughts. As I was doing the interview, however, when she gave me unexpected answers I only felt frustrated because I was constantly thinking that she was not giving me helpful data. I felt that she was walling herself up because I had not created a friendly, trustworthy vibe. As she was telling me that some of her Chinese classmates would go to clubs after class but she'd usually decline their invitations and stay in, I heard her mention several names that I also knew, and finally, after a decent amount of gossiping, our rapport got slightly better.

"I only went for the free food."

I finally managed to get a glimpse of her social life. We talked about the social events on campus, and Bailing made it very clear that the only thing that would make her go to social events, was free food. She was not motivated by the idea of mingling and making new friends. In fact, she had a strategy to minimize the amount of socializing she had to do at these events.

"I only went for the free food, and every time after dinner, if there were games or dance, I always felt reluctant to join. I always went to those social events with a really good friend of mine, we could just talk to each other in Chinese, so people would not come and talk to us. We did't need a third person to mingle with."

I did not realize at the time that Bailing just gave me a very important insight; had I followed up, I might have gained better access to a new understanding of the reasoning and agency of what has been mislabeled as "self-segregating" behaviour. I also did not realize at the time that what she did was the exact opposite of what Emma did at social events — she avoided talking to Americans in English as she was worried that Israelis

would not come and join their conversation, whereas Bailing talked with her friend in Chinese to prevent people from coming and joining their conversation. At the time, I was just very eager to find out Bailing's attitude about dancing.

I asked her what she would do when people started dancing at social events, and her answer sounded familiar. "My friend and I would just hide in the corner of the room, hoping and praying that no one would notice us." However, she also mentioned something I hadn't expected, "Every time when people were dancing, we Chinese students would just sit together with the Indian students, and be bored together." She told me that as years went by, she became friendly with many of her Indian classmates in her undergraduate program. I felt sorry for silently labeling her as a racist.

"They always like these things that I don't like."

After she obtained her bachelor degree, she stayed in the same university for her master program. While her undergraduate program was an international program with students from over the world, most of her classmates in the master's program are Israelis. I asked her if she has made more Israeli friends since. She told me that although when she needs help from Israelis—for example, when she needs someone to make a phone call in Hebrew for her— she'd know who to go to, but she still thinks that she hasn't made any Israeli friends over the 7 years of her stay. When she explained why, we went back to talking about food. Even today, she is still not a fan of Israeli food. She can have it once in a while, but still refuses to have it more often than that. In fact, not only does she not like Israeli food, she also doesn't like the ways Israelis consume food.

"I think…I really don't have even one Israeli friend because… You know first of all…when I am with Israelis, I don't want to eat the stuff they'd eat. Like at lunchtime if they invite me

to…have sandwiches and sit under the sun…I don't want to. If I did that, I'd definitely have stomachache right after."

She had similar opinions on beverages too.

"My lab mates would have lunch breaks together, and after lunch they'd go and have coffee. But I don't drink coffee, I definitely can't fall asleep if I drink it. So I would sit with them and drink hot water…They also like to go for beers, but I don't go with them…I don't drink, alcohol really just doesn't taste good! You see, they always like these things that I don't like! There's nothing I can do."

For her, it is still more enjoyable to spend time with her Chinese friends. She enjoys making Chinese dinners with them, and watching Chinese TV shows with them. During vacations, they also travel together to countries near Israel.

"I'm not a person who enjoys socializing, so it's just enough for me…to have these Chinese friends. I mean, I wouldn't say no to new friendships, but I also wouldn't be the one to initiate it."

"I only felt bad for my supervisor."

When I mentioned, as an example of being racial profiled, that several Israelis told me I didn't look Chinese because I dressed well, Bailing laughed and said, "but it is kind of true that you can recognize a Chinese student from a distance, based on the way they dress. Especially science and tech students, they just always wear grid shirts in fall and big shorts in summer…very typical very recognizable." This is yet another regret of mine. At the time I thought I brought up my experience hoping that it would resonate with her,

however maybe I just felt good being the one who was “better educated” on racial issues. The only thing that made me feel less disappointed with myself was that, at least I did not get out of my role as an interviewer and mansplain to her that “ you should feel angry about it.”

I was surprised by how she didn’t mind being mistreated as a result of her racial/national identity. Once she took a course for her master’s program where all her classmates were Israeli. During the final exam, she found out that all her Israeli classmates could have 30 minutes of extra time, but she, the only non-Israeli in the class, could not. She assumed that Israeli students were given extra time because the exam was in English and it was not their first language. “It was not my first language too!” She laughed when she told me about it. However, she didn’t really bother to ask the examiner for an explanation. “Our program seems to have a policy that when international students choose a course, that course will have to be taught in English. The Israeli students had to take this course in English because I chose it, so I think it was like, their compensation.”

Another anecdote is equally, if not more shocking to me.

“I always have an umbrella with me in summer, coz it’s too sunny. One day I had lunch with my supervisor, and after that we were walking together back to the campus. She said it was so sunny, so naturally I just shared my umbrella with her. And as we were walking under the same umbrella, we met a colleague of hers. And the next day, that colleague said to her, ahh I’m so jealous, it’s so smart of you to have found an Asian student who’d hold an umbrella for you.”

I asked her if she felt angry or offended when she heard about it, she said, “I only felt bad for my supervisor, after that time she’d just walk under shades, and never shared an umbrella with me again.”

“I walk on Einstein street every day.”

Towards the end of the interview, I asked her how her experience in Israel has changed her. She said that it has made her love China more. “China is a much better place to live in. In Israel take-outs are so expensive and taste so bad, I can’t use my phone to pay for things, and everywhere is closed at Shabbat…”

I again tried to use my experience to engage her. However, after I gave her a long talk about my feelings with identity and sense of belongs, she simply told me she never thought about these things.

Throughout the course of the interview, Diandian was sitting in Bailing’s room and listening. At this point she finally interrupted and asked Bailing, “Did’t you tell me you feel like you want to and not want to go back to China at the same time? You can tell him why.”

Her answer was still not about identity, but it was informative.

“I want to go back to China because I haven’t gone home for a long time. But I also don’t really want to leave Israel because…After all I’ve lived here for many years, I still have bonds with this place…Like I’ve spent so much time in this area, I walk on Einstein street every day between campus and my dorms…I’ve been used to this life.”

This answer immediately made me realize that my interview failed her. Before Diandian put us in contact, she “warned” me that Bailing was a very “typical” Chinese student who has spent all her years in Israel in a Chinese bubble. And I was so eager to prove that even the most stereotype-fitting, bubble-staying Chinese students have their ways to socially integrate. Yet I just didn’t realized that social integration is far beyond making human-to-human relationships. It could be a relationship between a human and a bag of frozen broccoli. And it could be a relationship between a girl from China and a street named Einstein.

Many times during the interview, I felt frustrated because, as I was so desperately trying to make her tell me that she was not a stereotypical Chinese student, what she said made me scream inside that “God but she is so stereotypical! And how can she be so comfortable with that!” I was still seeing myself as a Chinese student who “integrated better” — who had learned that it was inappropriate to make fun of skin color, who spoke allegedly better English. And because of that, I had a bizarre sense of responsibility that I had to prove to my potential “Western readers” that “Chinese students actually integrate better than you think.” I was furiously asking Bailing to join me in the imagined fight that I started in my head, and got upset when she showed no interest.

What I failed to realize is that Bailing is indeed not a stereotypical Chinese student, because she challenges the underlying condescendence of the stereotyping — that Chinese students stay in a co-national bubble because they lack the ability and skills to fit in the host society. She didn’t fail to fit in the host society, she chose not to fit it.

Xiaohua

Xiaohua has spent 4 years in Israel. She obtained her bachelor degree in Tel Aviv. At the time I interviewed her, she was in the second of a master's program.

"There was a part of me that wanted more special and challenging things." Xiaohua attended an international high school in China. At the time, she had always thought that she'd go to a university in America or Canada, as most of her high school schoolmates eventually did. However, she took a trip to Israel and fell in love with this place, "I really enjoyed traveling in the Middle-East. Before my trip, I felt like Israel was a very mysterious place that I'd probably never go to. But after I travelled here, I started to feel like the people here were really friendly, and also this place was very interesting." Soon after that trip, she decided to study in Israel. I asked her if it had crossed her mind that she'd meet much fewer Chinese students in Israel in comparison with America or Canada. She told me it was a significant reason for choosing Israel.

"Maybe there was a part of me that wanted more special and challenging things. So, for example, in the States, at least they have Chinatowns. They have so many Chinese students, you don't even have to talk to other people because you have a lot of Chinese students you can make friends with. But here in Israel, I heard before I arrived that, there were not that many Chinese students here compared with other countries. So I thought this might be a good opportunity for me because I am that kind of person who doesn't really want to step outside of my comfort zone. So, if there are so many Chinese students around me, I won't be motivated to make friends with foreigners."

What Xiaohua said reminded me that when I chose to go to Israel, I was also hoping to challenge myself. In fact, I was somehow "excited" about the fact that it was not a

popular destination for Chinese students. I couldn't remember if I already had the idea of learning from different cultures, but I was at least looking forward to speaking a lot more English than Mandarin every day. However, I, as well as Xiaohua, both realized in the first few days in Israel that some challenges were beyond our expectations. For example, we both remembered that we expected everyone in Israel to be fluent in English, yet in our first trips to grocery stores, we found that many cashiers did not speak a word of English. However, when we talked to native English speakers, it could be challenging too. Xiaohua told me about her experience in classrooms.

"I thought that it would be challenging for me to go to a place with not so many Chinese people. And it's indeed very challenging because I was in an international program, we had 4 to 5 Chinese students and all the other 20, 30 students, they were from different countries. And it was my first time to be with so many foreigners. Many of them were from America, and some of them were from Europe, but their English was really good, just like native speakers! I was really, really nervous. And I didn't dare to talk to them. Sometimes we were put into one group for a discussion or presentation. And I was so afraid, and nervous, to not only speak English, but also express my own opinions in English."

"I can talk, eat and live in an Israeli way."

Another challenge was making local contacts. Because there was no Israeli students in her BA program, she didn't find it easy to make local friends, although she still met Israelis at school events and became friendly with some of them, to her it was still not "real friendship", as it was superficial, especially compared with the Chinese friends she made. "I guess Chinese students do have this tendency to be together, and also I lived with 3 Chinese girls in the dorms. So, I managed to make more Chinese friends than Israeli friends."

I asked her how she reconciled the gap between her expectation and the reality.

“I wished myself to be more open to new things and new people. But after I got here, I realized that I still needed this process. You know, I still needed time to adapt myself little by little to the Israeli society.”

One thing she has appreciated about Israelis is that, because she knew that English was also not their first language, she felt less self-conscious with her English proficiency when talking with them. Now, she feels that she has adapted herself to the extent that not only has she made “real” Israeli friends, she also feels comfortable knowing that “I can talk, eat and live in an Israeli way”. I asked her to elaborate on each verb. She started with an anecdote that taught her to talk in a more straightforward manner.

“Sometimes strange men in the street would just start to talk to me and they want to get my phone number. And at first it was so embarrassing for me and I was like, 'Oh, okay, no problem.’ But I didn't want to give it to them. I just didn’t know how to refuse. Until one time I went out with Diandian, and we were in the supermarket and there's a man coming to me and he said, ‘wow, you are so beautiful, where are you from’, and then of course ‘can I get your number’…Again I didn't know how to turn him down, you know? And Diandian suddenly came to me and she told the man that , like, ‘No, no, no, no, we're not interested.’ ”

Xiaohua’s take-away from this experience was that “I learned that when I don't want to give my phone number, I just say it straightforwardly because it won't be considered rude.” I remember when I lived in Israel, several of my Chinese female friends told me

about their similar experience. At first, they were pleasantly surprised that Israeli men would always come up to them and offer help, whether to carry their grocery bags or translate information boards at bus stops, yet later they realized that many of these encounters would also end with those men asking for their numbers. What I did not realize at the time was, it took time for them to practice how to say no.

Xiaohua went on to tell me her relationship with Israeli food.

“Because I really love food, but just Chinese food, you know, or maybe some Korean food. So after I came here, it really took me a long time to adjust myself and get used to Israeli food. I think until today I won't say that I completely love Israeli food, but I can deal with it now, like I can eat it.”

Xiaohua can enjoy eating a shawarma now, although she is still not a fan of falafels. Her favorite restaurant in Tel Aviv is still not an Israeli restaurant but an American style steakhouse, which her boyfriend first took her to. Xiaohua’s boyfriend is also a Chinese student in Israel, they met each other because they were both Chinese Christians in Israel, which was a whole other conversation I did not have with her.

As for the “live like an Israeli” part, Xiaohua meant that she has learnt to orient her life in Israel, from pre-shabbat grocery shopping every week (before all the grocery stores close at Friday afternoon), to attending events and activities during Israeli holidays and festivals. Not long before our interview, she had just attended a street costume party at the city center of Tel Aviv, to celebrate the Purim festival.

Over these years, Xiaohua managed to not only make Israeli friends in her program, but also with Israelis who wanted to study Chinese. Her Chinese friends had introduced some Israeli friends to her too.

"Chinese students are supposed to be quiet, and not so wild, you know?"

At some point during the interview, I mentioned my orientation dinner story to her too, and she told me she had a very similar experience. "I think it was in my first year here, the school was taking students in international programs on a trip. Um, and there's one night we were all on a big ship, and there's music, alcohol, and people were just dancing around. I think there were, like 4 to 5 Chinese students, and we were just sitting there and it was very awkward. Um, like I can watch them Dance, but when our classmates came to us and say, 'Oh, come on, let's dance together.' And like, all the Chinese students were like, 'no, no, no, no, no, no, we just want to watch, we don't like to dance.' And, uh, and we were just sitting there and doing nothing. Like we just chatted with each other, but we didn't want to dance."

However, she felt like part of the reason she remained seated was that it was something she was supposed to do:

"All the Chinese students were sitting there. And I guess, like, I imagine if at that moment there was one Chinese student who joined the dance, I would think that, maybe he or she, uh, is different from us. You know, like this Chinese identity, it creates this kind of stereotype in my…in my own way of thinking, like, I would think that Chinese students are supposed to be quiet, and not so wild, you know?"

What Xiaohua said is very telling — Chinese students also stereotype themselves. And when there were several Chinese students present, there seems to be a form of peer pressure that they should act according to the stereotype, to not be different.

I went on to ask her if Israelis had fit her into the Chinese stereotype, and she told me she did not have the impression. However, she did share with me an interesting story.

“it's not a stereotype about personality but the physical appearance. There's one time…I was with my classmates. They were both from the States. And we were just chatting. And then some local Israelis came to us and started to talk with us. and suddenly, one of them asked me, ‘are you from China’, and I said yes. And she said, um, ‘some of my friends said that I look like Chinese, because I have really small eyes.’”

Xiaohua told me she did feel embarrassed and shocked, but she also realized that her American friends appeared to be even more shocked than she was. She also told me she believed that the person didn’t mean to be rude.

“I know that someday I will go back to China.”

Reflecting on her 4 years in Israel, Xiaohua feels that she has integrated much better than at the beginning, but she still sees herself as an outsider who doesn't belong there. Most of the time, she speaks English and Mandarin, instead of Hebrew. Besides, although she has Israeli friends, the people she feels closest to are all Chinese. However, Xiaohua believes that it is a normal thing that she doesn’t belong.

“I think I'm an outsider, it’s the fact that I can’t change. I can’t become Jewish, or Israeli. And…I am OK with that. I think I'm OK with the way that I'm living now, because I know

that someday I will go back to China, you know, like I know if I will live here forever, I will maybe try harder to integrate myself into the society. But I know that I'd only live here for my study, and then I'll go back to my hometown. So, I think it's quite okay for me to feel not belong. So…I will say I feel like the Israelis I know are pretty accepting, and the Israeli society, it's pretty open to outsiders. But I just don't feel like a real Israeli."

When Xiaohua said the Israeli society was "pretty open to outsiders", I couldn't help but think, it is not very difficult to cite a link of Israeli news, or any random book on Israeli society, to make a counter-argument. In fact, even putting "big" narratives aside, just during our chi-chat before the interview, she told me that because she was an international student, it would take her longer to acquire a Covid-19 vaccine passport. However, I also understood why she would take a soft tone on Israel. She told me her four years in Israel has changed her so much. She is now much more open-minded to new challenges and experiences. She also told me that studying and living in Israel was by far the "coolest" thing she's ever done. Every time when she went back to China for a holiday, she could always tell people she studied in Israel and expect an impressed, or surprised "wow".

I can quite relate to that.

A few months after our interview, Xiaohua finished her studies in Israel and moved back to China. On her last day in Israel, she posted a photo on social media: a wall she saw in Tel Aviv that says,

"Welcome to Israel, your life will never be the same."

Yanfeng

Yanfeng went to Haifa, a small city in Israel, in 2016 for a master's program in archeology. During his stay in Israel, he also moved to Tel Aviv to attend a tour guide certificate program. By the time I interviewed him, he has finished both of these programs.

"I wanted to step outside of my own culture."

Yanfeng was accepted for master's programs in Canada, Britain and Israel. He chose Israel because this program offered him the most generous scholarship, and because he had travelled to the Middle East before and was fascinated by the land. I asked him if he thought about the relatively small number of Chinese students in Haifa, in comparison with the number of Chinese students he might have encountered in Canada or Britain. He admitted that it was in fact one of the reasons he chose Israel, because the limited number of Chinese students would be beneficial for him to push the limit of his worldview, "I wanted to step outside of my own culture, and fit in a new environment, to learn about new ideology and values."

Not long after his arrival, he was aware that not every Chinese student in his program had the same purpose.

"Many of my Chinese schoolmates still stayed in their own cultural bubble. I felt…like for example, I still met some Chinese students in Haifa who seldom spent time with non-Chinese students. You know, Haifa is a small city, and our university is also quite small, each yeah there might be only about 10 Chinese students, but they still chose to form a closed bubble. I found it quite meaningless. "

Yanfeng chose a different path, trying to get out of his comfort zone. In fact, he was the only Chinese student I interviewed who danced at the orientation party.

“I just danced along with a few friends. I didn’t know how to dance, so I was just making random moves. Actually I still felt a bit shy, but everybody was dancing, so I just felt like it couldn’t be bad to participate. I mean, worst case scenario, if I didn’t enjoy it, I just wouldn’t do it again.”

It was Yanfeng’s first and last try dancing. After the orientation party, he never attended similar events in his department again. During his time in Haifa, however, he still got to meet people who were different from those he would meet in China. He met a classmate in her 60s, and was surprised that she chose to start a master’s program at this stage of her life. In an excavation field trip, he was impressed by a female classmate who was more capable of physically demanding tasks than some of his male classmates were, and later learned that she served in an Israeli combat unit.

“We have had good local connections.”

During Yanfeng’s free time, he’d go to the beach, and he made several friends through surfing. It was also around this time he realized that his Chinese identity could be useful. He, as some of my other Chinese participants did, started to teach Mandarin and Chinese calligraphy, through which he became friendly with some Israeli students in the faculty of Asia studies.

However, Haifa was still too small for his adventure. “Haifa is a very small city. And the university is on a mountain, it’s also hard to go to the city center. So most part of my life was quite tedious and repetitive.”

Things started to change when his supervisor, who was impressed by his great curiosity towards Israel, introduced him to a tour guide certificate program. This program was founded by the Israeli ministry of tourism. In the course of two years, he got to learn about the country from every aspect possible: geology, geography, history, botany, zoology, etc. Besides, he went on more than 80 field trips and visited almost every corner of the country.

In these two years, he formed more friendships with Israelis. In fact, not only Jewish Israelis, but also Christian and Muslim Israelis of Arab descent. He spent a good amount of time telling me about his encounters with Israeli Arab citizens, some of whom challenged his old impression that Israeli Arabs citizens did not feel strong about their Israeli citizenship. He also found that in general, these minorities in Israel were more curious about Asian people and their culture.

It was also this certificate program that finally brought him closer friendships with Chinese people. I asked him what made the Chinese classmates in the certificate program different from the ones in his master program:

“In the tour guide program, there were around 40 students, 5 of whom were Chinese. We didn’t form a closed circle, and we were all willing to hang out with non-Chinese classmates. I think it was because the Chinese students in this program…some of them married to Israelis and have lived here for years, and those who didn’t have Israeli

spouses…they at least…the fact that we knew about this program tells you that we have had good local connections, and even been able to speak decent Hebrew. They have integrated to a certain level in the society that they didn't find it necessary to form closed Chinese bubbles."

This was quite different from Yanfeng's understanding of his Chinese classmates in the master's program.

"I think they are just not curious about people who are different from them. When they think of the local Israelis, they might find it hard to get along with them because of language barriers or lack of common interest and hobbies. As a result, they choose to only hang out with other Chinese students. Another thing is…they might have a strong sense that they are passers-by here, that eventually they will finish their studies and go back to China, settle on a job there. So all these cultural-exploring, getting-out-of-comfort-zone sort of things are just even less important to them."

"I have a stronger eagerness to have this place leave some marks on me." Yanfeng is quite aware of the fact that his stay in Israel will not be permanent either. Yet this knowledge became his motive to know more about this place. "It might sound corny but…exactly because I know I will eventually leave, I have a stronger eagerness to see and learn more, and to have this place leave some marks on me, and my life." Yanfeng is my only Chinese participant who learned and feels confident speaking Hebrew in daily contexts. Apart from language, he also felt a sense of pride that "although I am not Jewish or Israeli, but I probably already know about this country a lot better than some Jewish people do."

Yanfeng has a great curiosity about different cultures. However, as he was interacting with people from different cultures, there have been situations where he was racially profiled. Many Israelis he met have asked him stereotypical questions about China and Chinese culture, from “do you people eat dog” to more political ones. Nevertheless, Yanfeng rarely felt offended. He also told me his experience in Israeli strengthened his belief that cultural and racial identities are subjective constructs. He used an example to explain:

“In my master program, there was a guy who once did the “Asian eye” gesture as a joke. I remember one of our Chinese classmates was really offended. But I felt that you actually learned to feel offended because other people told you it was offensive or insulting. When we were living in China we never thought too much about it. It was a construct. Even among Asians, my eyes are quite small, and I’ve had people who told me my small eyes are cute or something. But I didn’t feel offended by it. I think people who said it didn’t necessarily want to insult me or look down on me.”

“I think sense of belongings is …something you have to build yourself.”

Towards the end of the interview, Yanfeng told me that his stay in Israel was coming to an end. However, he felt confident that his “bonds” with Israel would not end. He has made many friends in Israel, and Israel has witnessed major changes in his life. Even setting those aside, he’d still have to come back at least once in several years to renew his tour guide certificate. He certainly hopes that his visits will be more frequent though, as he was already planning to work as a full-time tour guide leading Chinese tourist groups to Israel.

I asked him if his experience, and his strong emotional attachment to Israel, had given him any thoughts on the sense of belongings. I will end this chapter with his poetic answer.

“I think sense of belongings is not something you find, it’s something you have to build yourself. It’s a process of self-discovery. I think before I turn 30, I actually can’t tell what sense of belongings is, or what I’m building, but I know clearly that I need it, and I am building it…I don’t know if you have ever read Borges’ novels? I was very impressed with this one about a policeman and a robber. The policeman, as he was chasing the robber, seemed to suddenly see his fate, and started to help the robber to run away from his colleagues, other policemen…In fact, many of our established identity roles will suddenly change at certain point, and then our sense of belonging may also change.”

Chapter 5: Discussion

To write my findings, I watched the recordings and read the transcripts of the interviews multiple times. As I mentioned in the methodology section, I wrote the findings trying to avoid a theoretical and analytical gaze. After that, I used dramaturgy theory as an analytical tool to engage with the findings, attempting to find themes and patterns. During this process, I also constantly went back to the recordings and transcripts of the interviews, and made additions and editions to the findings. At the end, I found major themes that were largely aligned with my theorizing section: role taking, social integration as a performance, and the dynamic between individuals, roles and social structure. I first examine the two roles I hypothesized in the theorizing section with my findings, and then analyze where, how and with whom my participants presented their performance of social integration, as well as their role adjustments along the way. Finally, I explore the working of social structure in term of restraining my participants' performance, my participants' reactions to it, and their reflection on the roles they played. While providing detailed analysis under each theme, I also enter in dialogue with existing studies, reviewed in the literature review, and address the problems that I identified.

1. Role Taking

In the theoretical section, I proposed conceptualizing the performances of the Chinese students in my sample as being structured by the role of the house guest, namely strangers/ cosmopolitans. They travel to Israel mainly to attend university; they are very aware that their stay is temporary and they do not, cannot, and even might prefer not to even try to seek a sense of belonging. In the case of the American students, I suggested that their performances could be conceptualized as being structured by the role of the distant relative, a role in-between that of the stranger/cosmopolitan and the local. Given the importance of the relationship between American Jews and Israel, I suggested that

the desire to connect with Israelis or to be seen as “one of them” might be stronger. In this section, I discuss my findings in the context of my proposed explanatory framework.

(1) American students

In terms of their expectations prior to beginning their studies in Israel, similarities can be identified in Emma, Olivia and Peter’s experiences. They all came from strong Jewish backgrounds and spoke Hebrew; they had all visited or lived in Israel, and had acquired some knowledge about Israeli society. All three, decided to go to Israel hoping to strengthen their Jewish roots and to develop a sense of belonging; consequently, they were strongly motivated to integrate into Israeli society. Vincent’s experience is, however, at odds with the three other American students in the sample. Although his Jewish ancestry was what allowed him to go on a birthright trip to Israel and meet his fiancée, he did not have a desire to develop or strengthen a Jewish identity, nor did he have much knowledge about Israeli society before arriving. While the three other American students were very concerned about their Hebrew proficiency and/or with making local friends, Vincent was frustrated about moving from a suburban environment to live in a metropolitan city.

Hence, Emma, Olivia and Peter do fit into the role of “distant relatives”, as they want to be seen by the locals as “one of them”, or as Emma put it, to “be as Israeli as possible”. Vincent, on the other hand, despite his Jewish ancestry, clings closer to a more classic stranger/cosmopolitan role.

(2) Chinese students

In contrast to the “distant relatives”, none of the Chinese students had a strong knowledge base of Israel before they started living there. Finding a sense of belonging among Israeli locals was not what motivated them to choose Israel as their study-abroad

destination. On the contrary, at least in the cases of Diandian, Xiaohua and Yanfeng, it was a sense of curiosity that motivated them to choose Israel. All three mentioned that they were interested in Israeli society and culture, and that they had wanted to choose a study-abroad destination that was less mainstream. They always knew that they would leave upon completing their studies. Hence, it can be argued that they all fit into the role of "house guests". They are the strangers/cosmopolitans who know that their stay in Israel is temporary, whether or not they have built emotional bonds with the land and the locals.

My original purpose for introducing the two generalized roles of distant relatives and house guests was to explore to what extent these different roles would lead to different performances of integration. In short, I wanted to see if the distant relatives would strategically use their knowledge of Judaism, Israel and Hebrew to convince locals that they were "one of them", while house guests would take advantage of the cultural resources from their country of origin to charm and build relationships with the locals. The interviews revealed that although American students and Chinese students do have different experiences of integration, some of their strategies were similar. Besides, although patterns can be identified in the interviews and they do, to a certain extent, correspond to my theoretical expectations, both groups of students' experiences are also much more layered than these two roles can suggest. I will explore these aspects further in the following sections.

2. Social Integration as a Performance

(1) Forming teams of actors

In the contexts of social interaction, both American and Chinese students have made choices regarding the people they have cast to perform with in order to make their

performance more convincing. It is, however, noteworthy that the purposes of their performances vary. The comparison between Emma and Bailing's experiences illustrates this well. Emma believed that having an Israeli boyfriend made her Israeli colleagues see her more as "one of them". In other words, Emma ended up casting her Israeli partner as part of her performance and transforming her own performance as a result. This casting choice convinced an audience - in this case, her colleagues in her faculty - that she plans to stay in Israel for long term, that she is, as she put it, "not just like a traveling student who's kind of coming and going". Bailing, however, opted to cast a Chinese friend in her performance at dinner parties, in order to, as far as I understand, look more different, or performing the stereotype of "self-segregating Chinese students"—as she put it, "we could just talk to each other in Chinese, so people would not come and talk to us." In this way, she could enjoy free food and not have to devote energy to socializing.

Another interesting pattern is that both American students and Chinese students discussed the importance of casting the right people for their performances. In some cases, this meant an unwillingness, or at least a reluctance, to form teams with certain people. A related choice, in Emma's case, is her reluctance to talk to Americans in English at social events where both Israelis and Americans were present, worrying that she might be excluded by the Israelis. This is how she described her refusing to talk to an American colleague at social events:

"Every time we talked in English, that meant that Israelis wouldn't come and chat with us. And I remember actually feeling like very annoyed with her. I was sort of at the beginning of trying to fit in with this society, and I felt like she was constantly making me an American who's sort of not available to have a conversation in Hebrew."

She phrased it as her colleague was “making” her “an American”, thus, she worried that choosing this colleague for her team would damage her information control and cause the audience to stop trusting her performance.

Similarly, but for different reasons, Yanfeng distanced himself from the “Chinese bubble” in Haifa, which could be interpreted as a refusal to conform to the role that he perceived people in that bubble have taken on. An example of his refusal is that he was my only Chinese participant who danced at the orientation party. For a better understanding, a comparison can be made with Xiaohua’s experience, which tells what would have happened if one joined the team of Chinese students and performed together. This is Xiaohua’s reflection on her reluctance to dance:

“All the Chinese students were sitting there. And I guess, like, I imagine if at that moment there was one Chinese students who joined the dance, I would think that, maybe he or she, uh, is different from us.”

When discussing the functioning of teams, Goffman suggests that “each team-mate is forced to rely on the good conduct and behavior of his fellows, and they, in turn, are forced to rely on him” (1956,50). Hence, it could be suggested that by remaining seated, Xiaohua showed her solidarity with her team-mates, whereas Yanfeng, by joining the dance, showed his distance from the team of Chinese students that were present.

Another example is when Diandian was working as a translator, and found herself in the middle of the Chinese performance group and the Israeli theatre team. She was hired by the Chinese embassy to work for the Chinese performance group, yet during the process she found that she was treated better by the Israeli team, whose members she later

became close friends with. She took on the role of the mediator when conflicts occurred between the two teams, during which, surprisingly, she found herself clinging to the Israeli team's perspective.

Diandian concluded her reflection on this experience by saying "I felt I was closer to the Israeli team." I want to suggest that she fits into one of the "discrepant roles" that Goffman conceptualizes: the go-between/ mediator. He argues that "the go-between's activity is vacillating as it does from one set of appearances and loyalties to another" (1956, 93). Diandian's experience provides insight into what happens if the mediator finds that their loyalty to one side outweighs their loyalty to the the other.

I want to point out that a very tempting angle to look at and explain my three Chinese participants' experiences mentioned above, is cultural difference — after all, in the existing studies of international students' experience, terms like "cross-cultural adaptation" (e.g,, Rui and Hua, 2015) and "cross-cultural interaction" (e.g., Glass and Christina, 2014) are often used. However, when broken down to specific social occasions, it is hard to determine whether by refusing to dance, Xiaohua was showing solidarity to her group of Chinese friends at present, or to the big, abstract Chinese culture. Similarly, it seems unsatisfying to suggest that Diandian's emotional attachment to the Israeli theatre team is her distancing herself from Chinese culture. It is not my intention to argue that cultural difference does not have an impact, however, I hope that dramaturgy theory provides a different, micro-level angle to interpret these incidents. In other words, to look at a dance party or a theatre as social occasions with interactive dynamics, instead of a face-off between two cultures, and to not only see my participants as people from different cultures, but also as individuals with their own agencies, and then inquire contextually into their choices, behaviors, thoughts and reflections.

(2) Spaces

Front stages can be found both on and outside of campuses. A variety of front stages outside of campuses were mentioned by my participants: a theatre company, a Chinese calligraphy class, bars, a pottery classroom, etc. My respondents fully understand that certain front stages are better places to realize the goals of their performances. For example, the three distant relatives are all enrolled in Hebrew speaking programs with a mix of Israeli and international students. Besides, Olivia worked in a Hebrew-speaking pottery workshop; Emma attended social events with Israeli people; and Peter lived in an apartment with three Israeli roommates and sought out Israeli ceremonies and leisure activities to attend. These can all be understood as spatial strategies to find stages where they can perform their Hebrew proficiency and understanding of Israeli society for the purpose of being seen by the local audience as distant relatives that are essentially “one of them”.

Vincent, in contrast, went to bars, restaurants, and social events with his Israeli girlfriend, where he hung out with her Israeli friends, and unapologetically performed his Americanness in the room to show his charisma and win the audience’s affection. His friendships with many of his Israeli friends started from conversations about American politics at bars, and at restaurants when his Israeli friends made fun of him and said “Vincent, don't worry, there’s a good burger here”, and he sometimes would order the burger anyway. He did not seek out front stages where it was a necessity to have Hebrew proficiency and understanding of Israeli society, for the reason that his purpose was not to find a sense of belonging, but to “experience a new culture and have fun”.

In terms of Chinese students. Xiaohua, Diandian and Yanfeng all had the experience of teaching Chinese-related knowledge, and Diandian also worked as a translator. The places or spaces where they taught and translated could be interpreted as front stages where their performing the role of the stranger, with their unique knowledges, enabled them to engage in interactive performances with local audiences which would not have otherwise been possible. Bailing's experience, in contrast, reveals that the role of the stranger is dependent on a willingness or ability to meet locals on the front stage and to have something to trade. It could almost be suggested that she refused to perform for, or with, the locals on the front stages as she'd always turned down her Israeli colleagues' invitations to have lunches or go to bars.

Actors' performances are dependent on different stages, as is the sense of satisfaction they can feel. For example, on campus, Diandian is a shy student, a "newbie;" in archeology, however when she is teaching calligraphy, she presents herself as someone who is more confident. This, of course, changes the dynamics of her performance and her interactions with the audience, the locals. Another illustration is that Olivia was much happier with her performance of working in a Hebrew-speaking pottery class than with her performance of working as a teacher in an English-speaking summer camps.

Existing studies have argued that the longer international students stay in a host country, the "better" they integrate (e.g., Hamad, 2013). The concept of different front stages, however, suggests that at the same point in time, international students' integration vary according to the different spaces that they can access for their performances. It is also true, that some studies have concluded that integration does not only take place on campus. In retrospect this is obvious, however earlier studies focused their attention almost exclusively on the integration of international students on campus. My findings

strongly suggest the importance of further and more detailed research to see beyond the dichotomy of on and off campus integration. In other words, more research is required to understand the range of spaces, circumstances, and interactional dynamics available for the social integration of international students.

In terms of backstage, I want to suggest that the experiences of the three “distant relatives” do support my previous hypothesis that having a back stage, where international students spend time with their co-national friends, is an integral part of social integration. Despite their strongly expressed desires to integrate themselves in Israeli society, as well as their continuous efforts to do so, Peter, Emma and Olivia have all more or less found themselves forming parts of “American bubbles”. This challenges the binary narrative in the existing studies that international students are either self-segregators who have little interest or fail to integrate into the host society, or host-social-integrators who has strong interest in the host culture and integrate successfully (e.g., Rose-Redwood, 2013; Jones, 2013). In fact, even in the studies that analyze positive impacts of co-national enclaves, researchers still draw a picture where the international students who join an enclave will stay in the enclave (Chen and Heidi, 2015). In the case of the three “distant relatives”, however, sharing a backstage with students from their country of origin does not prevent them from their attempts to integrate amongst the locals. Just as actors would not stay forever at the backstage, for international students, having a comfort zone does not necessarily suggest that they will constantly stay in it.

In fact, as Peter put it, “I think it's easier to go out of your comfort zone if you know that there's a place you can go back to that is in your comfort zone. I have my friends who get me and I can speak to in a language that's comfortable for me, then it's much easier to then go out and be like, okay, like I'm willing to kind of experiment with other cultures and

people.” To translate into dramaturgic terms, it is easier to go out onto the front stage if you know that there’s a back stage you can go back to.

Olivia shared a similar, telling insight while talking about her experience in the American bubble:

“ I think it helps me integrate, it helps me feel more settled here that I have friendships that are like really deep friendships, which I wouldn't have with Israelis. So it definitely provides that support system for me”.

It is worth exploring the multiple layers of the “support system”. In the existing studies, it has been demonstrated that a co-national network provides international students with important information, practical support and social spaces, which facilitates their adaption to and success in the host institution (Chen and Heidi, 2015). However, my findings suggest that a group of co-national friends do significantly more than that. Olivia’s “deep friendships” with Americans, suggests this support system also provides important emotional supports. This emotional support could also be companionship during holidays, as Peter said, “We don't all have families here, and so much of Israeli culture is built around families… It makes sense that you're gonna want to be with other people who also want to be with you over holidays.”

The second layer of this support system is, as my findings suggest, the comfort of communicating in one’s first language. Peter, despite having a high proficiency of Hebrew, still finds it important to have an American Israeli roommate, who can allow him to switch to English when he requires to, just for the reason that English, being his mother tongue, is still the language that is most comfortable for him.

One other layer is that actors need a backstage to talk about what happened on the front stage. During her early months in Israel, Emma shared her frustration on making Israeli connections with her American friends. Peter would make fun with his American and other international friends of Israeli customs, such as “customer service isn't a value here”, so “if you're not yelling, then it means this isn't important and there's no reason for them to help you”. These experiences resonate with Goffman’s description of “treatment of the absent” and “staging talk”:

“When the members of a team go backstage where the audience cannot see or hear them, they very regularly derogate the audience in a way that is inconsistent with the face-to-face treatment that is given to the audience. In service trades, for example, customers who are treated respectfully during the performance are often ridiculed, gossiped about, caricatured, cursed, and criticized when the performers are backstage…” (Goffman,1956,108)

And,

“When team-mates are out of the presence of the audience, discussion often turns to problems of staging. Questions are raised about the condition of sign equipment; stands, lines, and positions are tentatively brought forth and 'cleared' by the assembled membership; the merits and demerits of available front regions are analyzed; the size and character of possible audiences for the performance are considered; past performance disruptions and likely disruptions are talked about…wounds are licked and morale is strengthened for the next performance”(Goffman,1956,112).

Backstages function as spaces where actors relax, get rejuvenated or healed, discuss performing techniques, after which they will go back to the front stages. From this perspective, I want to suggest that, dramaturgy theory provides a lens to see beyond the self-segregators/ host-social-integrators binary narrative mentioned above, suggesting that what used to be considered as self-segregating behaviors, can be understood as in fact being an integral part of social integration.

(3) Dramatic realization and impression management

An interesting pattern worth identifying in the experiences of three “distant relatives” is that they all observed differences between themselves and Israelis. When I first read the transcripts, I found that a lot of their observations were at odds with my own experience. According to Peter, Israelis wear T-shirts instead of button-down shirts, and Israeli men are hyper-masculine. According to Emma and Olivia, Israelis work less than Americans and value the importance of holidays. Also according to Emma, Israelis have less intellectual curiosity than Americans. It is not my intention to examine the objectivity of these differences. I do, however, want to make a comparison with what existing studies have quoted with respect to Chinese students’ observation in America: a good number of them are about Chinese students finding it difficult to make American friends because they don’t go to bars, clubs or they don’t watch sports. Here is an example:

“As Hua, a Chinese graduate student, commented, “If you observe what those American students do in their free time, they always go to the bar, drink beer, or have parties. We don’t think those things are very interesting.” Instead of going to the bar on the weekends, they preferred to have potluck dinners and play Chinese card games with fellow co-nationals”(Rose-Redwood, 2013,420).

Every time I read these quotes, I wanted to scream that there are many bars in China too, and they sell millions of bottles of beer every year. I would have screamed louder if these quotes contributed to the researchers concluding that cultural difference is the reason why Chinese students cannot integrate into the American society. In fact, Bailing also mentioned in our interview that she did not want to have alcohol or coffee with her Israeli colleagues. It would have made my task as a researcher so easy if I concluded that "Diandian has many Israelis friends while Baling has none, because Diandian drinks beer and coffee while Bailing doesn't, it is a sign that Diandian has great interest in Israeli culture while Bailing doesn't have any."

In fact, it is understandable that when one comes to a new environment, they tend to find differences between themselves and the locals to make sense of the real interactional distance they perceive from the locals. I hope dramaturgy theory can provide a new way to understand the working of this difference-finding process. I want to suggest that when actors perceive that the roles they wanted to play are denied by the audience, it is by finding these differences, that they make sense of the situation and persuade themselves to modify their roles and the expectations that come with them.

It is more telling if compared with Vincent's experience. He also observed differences between Americans and Israelis - Israelis are less afraid to talk about sensitive topics such as politics. However, this is what makes him cherish his friendships with Israelis. As his plan was to play the role of a stranger, he did not have this role denied by the audience, hence the difference he perceived between him and the audience helped him with his performance.

My findings not only challenge the existing fallacy of cultural difference, but also the existing fallacy of language proficiency. If language proficiency directly determines the success of social integration, the three “distant relatives” should have experienced no frustrations — they had all acquired a relatively high level of Hebrew proficiency prior to their studies in Israel, evidenced by the fact that they all enrolled in Hebrew-taught programs. Besides, Israelis in their social circles are presumably fluent in English, considering their level of education. However, they all report negative experiences with language. Peter’s reflection can be taken as a typical example:

“Regardless of how well I speak Hebrew, I still speak Hebrew with an accent. People… especially in Jerusalem, are very easy to identify Americans just based on how we speak. Like all these Israelis, when the second they hear my accent, they're like, Oh, I'm just going to speak to you in my broken English, which is always so annoying. Cause it's definitely gotten to the point where like, most of the time, my Hebrew is better than their English.”

Even when they are confident in their Hebrew proficiency, they still perceive their American accent as an obstacle, a reason why Israelis still process them as foreigners. Vincent’s experience, however, is quite different. He would introduce himself to Israelis with the only one or two Hebrew sentences he knew in a strong American accent, yet when Israelis told him “Ok, you’re American, let’s speak English”, he felt that “they made a conscious effort to speak English. And I thought that was very…it made me feel very welcomed and not as much as an outsider.”

The same reaction from the Israelis made the “distant relatives”, who are fluent in Hebrew, feel like foreigners; yet made Vincent, who barely speaks Hebrew, feel like he

was not being treated as an outsider. It raises questions about using language proficiency as an indicator of success in social integration. Hence, I want to suggest that language serves as an impression management technique, a piece of information that actors want to control. In other words, the three “distant relatives” see their American accent as a piece of information they cannot manage to keep from the audience, hence damaging their performance and have their roles denied by the audience. Vincent, in contrast, sees his lack of proficiency in Hebrew as a piece of information he deliberately presents to the audience, to make his role as a stranger more convincing.

Chinese students’ experience regarding English proficiency can also be interpreted in this way. Xiaohua and Diandian both reported feeling nervous when talking to classmates who were native English speakers, while feeling more relaxed when talking with Israelis in English. It can be interpreted that when facing audiences whose first language is English, their relative lack of English proficiency reduced their confidence, while facing Israelis as an audience, knowing that English is not the audience’s first language made them feel more relaxed to convey this piece of information in their performance.

(4) Role adjustments and role distancing.

Peter went to the North of Israel to attend a Hebrew language program. However, on his way back, as he tried to hitchhike, he found again that Israelis were less willing to pick him up. The reason for this, he assumed, was because the way he dressed revealed the “secret” that he was an American. In fact, this is a typical example that sums up the three distant relatives’ experience: although they continued trying to integrate, to be closer to the role of a “local” they thought was available in virtue of being “distant relatives”, their efforts are rejected by the audience of locals. All three of them mention that they have come to peace with it.

“I think at this point, I'm actually not so connected to too many Americans, but I also increasingly feel like I really don't care. I think it took me some five years of being here to realize that, just because you're not living in, in a completely immersive Hebrew Israeli environment, does not mean that you're like a lesser experienced of Israel.”(Emma)

“I think even when I have relationships with Israelis, I feel like they're still processing me as an American. And I know that part of it is definitely because even when I speak perfect Hebrew, I speak it with somewhat of an American accent…I think my best goal is that okay, when I speak fluent Hebrew, they realize I'm not a tourist, and I am here long term.” (Olivia)

“I'd love to feel, kind of culturally bilingual, in the sense of both like speaking the language perfectly and just to kind of like knowing how to operate as an Israeli, but like, I have no interest in becoming Israeli.”(Peter)

Despite still trying to integrate, they know clearly that they cannot, and to an extent, do not want to fully become Israelis. They have begun to embrace the complexity between their roles as strangers/Americans and locals/Jews.

Vincent, on the other hand, has had quite a different experience. As a true burger lover, he has not cared when he has been in a nice restaurant with his Israelis friends and they told him “don’t worry Vincent they have burgers here”. He would just order the burger anyway. It is noteworthy that he was my only American participant who did not join an “American bubble”, who did not experience frustrations making Israeli friends, and who was the

most comfortable about fitting the American stereotype. In other words, of the four he was the most comfortable performing the role of the stranger.

As for Chinese students, none of them seem to have had their roles denied by the audience. In fact, it could be suggested that they have taken advantage of the expectations their audiences have had for them - three of them have made Israeli friends through teaching Mandarin or Chinese calligraphy. However, some of them have retrained themselves from constantly playing the role of an exotic stranger. It is noteworthy that unlike the case of “distant relatives”, they did not adjust their roles because of audience’s denial, but their own sense of un-satisfaction, a willingness to not “have it easy” and a yearning to explore new possibilities — For example, Yanfeng was teaching Mandarin or Chinese calligraphy while he lived in Haifa, but he later stopped doing it and went to Tel Aviv for the tour guide program.

Diandian was a more complicated case. In fact, during our interview, I was so eager to use her Chinese identity to explain all the achievements in her journey of integration — her translating at the theatre between English and Chinese, her having an exhibition of her Chinese calligraphy work, her becoming good friends with her Israeli students in her Chinese calligraphy classes. After rounds of back and forth during the interview, she told me:

“I want them to like me for me, for who I am, for my personality. I don’t want to be a walking Chinese calligraphy brush.”

It might be the case that the role as a stranger with exotic knowledge had opened doors for her and brought her into contact with Israelis. However, she was not satisfied with only

having the Israelis as her theatre colleagues or calligraphy students. While trying to deepen the professional relationships into more meaningful friendships, she downplayed the role of a Chinese person, to be a more individualized role as Diandian.

In addition to role adjustments, what can also be identified in the findings is the process of role distancing. In the theoretical framework chapter, I noted my expectation that role distancing might occur when international students felt reluctant to play the role that had been picked for them by the local audience. However, the interviews suggest another pattern of role distancing: actors distance themselves from the roles that they perceive their co-national actors are playing. For Emma, this involved the choice of attending Hebrew-speaking programs at the seminary when she found that some American students attended English-speaking ones. For Vincent, this involved the realization, in the first weeks of his program, that he was so different from his American classmates who he called “real Jews”. Yanfeng found that many of his Chinese classmates had formed a closed clique from which he excluded himself. All of these can be seen as the roles they perceived and refused to play. This process, together with the processes mentioned above, helped the actors in my sample to find and reshape their roles, to identify the roles that they found more comfortable and were more confident playing.

3. The Dynamic of Individuals, Roles and Social Structure

(1) The dynamic between roles and social structure

I hypothesized in the theorizing section that when International students interact with the Israelis, they might find that the Israelis have an anticipation for them based on their nationality - thus, the actors might walk on the front stage finding that the audience have picked certain roles for them. When I made this hypothesis, what I had in mind was American students because I assumed an audience needs a certain amount of past

interactions to form a stereotyped imagination about certain groups of actors, and in comparison with Chinese students, there are many more American students in Israel. It could be suggested that my findings do support this hypothesis, especially this quote from Olivia:

“There's also so many Americans here that I think Israelis have come into contact with Americans a lot. So, there are certain biases where they're like, Oh, like you're one of the Americans. I don't think I'm going to ever shed that.”

All of my American participants have reported experiences of certain responses because of their American-ness: Israelis switch to English to talk to them when hearing their American accents, make fun of them ordering burgers, etc. When going on the front stages knowing the audience’s expectation, these actors have come up with strategies to handle them. For example, here is Olivia’s handling of the situation:

“When I'm having casual interactions, it's like, yeah, whatever. And then when it's the more serious relationships, then I think I definitely am trying, in some sense, not to come off as a classic American. But I also think I have those stronger things as part of my identity I can rely on, so those kind of helped me to not fit into that box.”

What my findings also suggest yet I didn’t expect was that my Chinese participants also reported experiences of treatments of their Chinese-ness: Xiaohua had a stranger come up to her and say “some of my friends said that I look like Chinese, because I have really small eyes”; Yanfeng had a classmate who made fun of his small eyes; Bailing’s professor refused to be under the same umbrella with her under the sun, after hearing a colleague say “It’s so smart of you to have found an Asian student who’d hold an umbrella for

you”…However, none of them felt offended by these interactions. After Xiaohua told me about her experience, she immediately added that she believed that stranger did not mean to be rude. Yanfeng jokingly said that even among Asians his eyes are relatively small, and Bailing only felt bad for her professor, not herself. One possible explanation is that these experiences for them were rare incidents, and they did not perceive themselves to be stereotyped by the Israelis as a whole.

Another possible explanation is that an essential part of their role as strangers is that they know clearly that their stay in Israel is temporary. I want to suggest that, knowing they will leave Israel right after their studies are finished, they have a softer, more forgiving, and aloof attitude while interacting within the constraints of the social structures in which they find themselves. Support for my argument is that, as it appears in my findings, the three “distant relatives” reported a lot more frustrations than the Chinese students did. However, structurally speaking, American students are in a better position than their Chinese counterparts because they are Jewish, which means that for them, staying permanently in Israel and becoming Israeli citizens are both relatively easy goals that some of them have already achieved.

In comparison, Diandian could not be hired by the Israeli theatre team she felt close to, because she is on a student visa that many Chinese students in Israel are on — with a sentence on the visa that says “EMPLOYMENT NOT ALLOWED”. For the same reason, when Yanfeng was working as a tour guide, he was navigating in a grey area. At the time I interviewed Xiaohua, she told me although she had received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, she was still waiting to obtain her green passport because the process took longer for international students than for Israeli citizens. However, none of them stressed these as difficulties or mistreatments they had in Israel. In fact, Xiaohua still told me “I feel

like the Israelis I know are pretty accepting, and the Israeli society, it's pretty open to outsiders". Another quote from Xiaohua can give an insight to this stranger mentality.

"I think I'm an outsider, it's the fact that I can't change. I can't become Jewish, or Israeli. And…I am OK with that. I think I'm OK with the way that I'm living now, because I know that someday I will go back to China."

When someone starts integrating into a new place knowing that it is a fact that they are different from the locals, and they will have to leave as soon as their student visa expires, integration will at the same time be a reminder that they do not and cannot belong there, while all the frustrations they encounter will also have less meaning because they will leave anyway.

(2) The dynamic between individuals and roles.

During each interview, my participants spent significant amount of time on reflections. These reflections cover various themes. For example, it seems that family and religious influence was a strong factor that led the three "distant relatives" to Israel, trying hard to integrate. However, in the process, they all had new realizations:

"I also increasingly feel like I really don't care. I think it took me some five years of being here to realize that, just because you're not living in a completely immersive Hebrew Israeli environment, does not mean that you're like a lesser experienced of Israel."(Emma)

"So a few months ago I was feeling a strong sense of belonging, you know? Cause I was imagining that I was going to end up being here for the next few years. Um, but then I got

an email that said that I was going to go to America for my PhD, and then that belonging disappeared."(Peter)

"Part of why I moved here was I realized early on that, If I live here, I don't have to fit into any specific cultural box, because I'm not from here in the first place. So nobody's expecting me to fit into any specific Israeli pocket of society…I feel like I'm kind of off people's radar, and I'm more able to live outside of different people's expectations." (Olivia)

The realization of "I really don't care", the fluid sense of belonging, and the living "off people's radar", are their ways to redefining their lives and purpose in Israel. I want to suggest that it could be seen as a negotiation they have had with their roles. In this way, although it might still seem like they are playing a role that was shaped by their family and religion - as they are still making effort to integrate, they have, in fact, found a way to make the performance work for them.

Another set of reflections are that several of my participants told me how their experiences in Israel had changed them. It has made Diandian, Olivia and Xiaohua more welcoming, and even eager for new challenges. It made Yanfeng feel confident that he "already know[s] about this country a lot better than some Jewish people do". It gave Bailing a cherished memory of walking on a street named Einstein every day. And for Vincent, if it had not been for Israel, "I would've never gone to the UK. I would've never gotten a grad degree. I would've never become interested in teaching and becoming a professor." It could be suggested that as actors, their performances in Israel have made them feel more confident with their acting skills, and have given them ambitions to find new challenges in the next plays in their lives.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Through the lens of dramaturgy theory, my study sees international students as actors, and their social integration as a play. My findings suggest that my respondents' motives for going to Israel shaped the roles they initially wanted to play. My three American participants from strong Jewish backgrounds went to Israel hoping to play the role of "distant relatives", as they hoped to build connections with the Jewish homeland, and immerse themselves into Israeli society. My fourth American participant who is half Jewish and not from a strong Jewish upbringing, in contrast, did not fit into this role that I conceptualized, as he did not feel strongly about his Jewish identity. Hence, I suggest that he, as well as my four Chinese participants, came to Israel wanting to play the role of "house guests", which clings to Simmel's structural conception of the stranger (2008). They came to Israel knowing that they could not, and to an extent, did not want to belong.

My participants found stages, both on and off campus to make their roles more convincing. The "distant relatives" found places where they could present their Hebrew fluency and understanding of Israeli society, whereas the "house guests" found occasions and opportunities to display the knowledge and charisma that are related to their out-worldly-ness of their role. My participants also formed teams, or refused to form teams, with certain people to conduct their performances.

Most of my participants have, however, adjusted their roles for the following reasons. First, the "distant relatives" found that the role they wanted to play was denied by the audience: as hard as they tried to integrate, they still perceived that the Israeli were processing them as Americans. They later managed to make sense of the situation and adjusted their strategies and expectations. Second, some of the "house guests" were not

satisfied with only playing the role of an exotic stranger; they went through a process of individualizing their roles, hoping to build deeper connections with the Israelis and Israel. Lastly, my participants from both groups perceived the roles that their co-nationals were playing, and distanced themselves from these roles.

By analyzing my participants' performances, I have also proposed dramaturgical perspectives to critique the fallacy of cultural differences and language proficiency in studies on the integration of international students. I suggest that when international students perceive that the role they initially wanted to play are denied by the local audience, by finding the differences between their home culture and the local culture, they make sense of the situation and persuade themselves to modify their roles and the expectations that come with them. I also suggest that language proficiency does not necessarily serve as a key indicator of international student's social integration; instead, it can serve as an impression management technique, a piece of information that actors want to control.

To challenge the binary narrative of "self-segregators/ integrators", I have suggested that the concept of backstage in dramaturgy theory can be used to interpret the occasions where international students interact only with their co-nationals. The backstage serves as space where actors relax and talk about their performances without the presence of audience, after which they will go back to the front stage to continue the performance. From this perspective, what used to be considered as self-segregating behaviors, can be understood as in fact being an integral part of social integration.

Lastly, I have explored the dynamics of individuals, roles and structure. Social structure sets limitation for both American and Chinese students, yet Chinese students have a

more forgiving, and aloof attitude about it, while the three “distant relatives” reported more frustration. I suggest that it is because the essence of the role of a stranger is that they know their stay is temporary, and they integrate knowing that they do not and cannot belong. In terms of the dynamic between roles and individuals, I identify that the three American students all negotiated with their role as “distant relatives”, that they redefined their lives and purposes in Israel, embracing the complexity of their identities. Although their role was initially shaped by the influence of their family and religion, they found a way to make the performance work for them. Besides, I have also identified that for many of my participants, both American and Chinese, their performances in Israel have made them feel more confident with their acting skills, and have given the ambition of finding new challenges in the next plays in their lives.

My study has its limitations. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic I could not conduct a ethnographic study as I had originally hoped. The fact that I only conducted interviews but no observations inevitably prevented me from getting more data regarding international students’ everyday life, which could have been significantly helpful to draw a more vivid picture of how, when and where they integrate. In the interviews I did, because the limit of time and my ability, I was limited in developing a good understanding of each of my participants’ lived experiences. The one I feel the least satisfied with is my interview with Bailing. I started the interview with my biases and strong expectations to prove certain points, which made me regret that I did not collect enough materials to really tell her stories with her own words. For the same reason, I failed to spend more time analyzing her experience in the discussion section.

It is also important to note that there are details I included in the findings that I find fascinating, but cannot analyze within a dramaturgical framework: many of my

participants told me their important memories in Israel that has little thing to do with human-to-human interactions. Emma's best memory in Israel was the trips she took with her boyfriend in the north of Israel; Bailing told me about her battle with frozen broccoli and her everyday walk in Einstein street; Yanfeng shared with me his understanding and strong emotional bond with Israel; Diandian confided in me her deep love of Tel Aviv… These details suggest that maybe social integration does not only entail building relationships with humans, but also relationships with a kind of food, a street, a city, or a land.

This would be the one suggestion I make for potential area of further studies. I hope that there could be studies on international students that, not only do not focus on their interactions with host nationals, but also not focus on human interactions at all. I hope that by pushing the boundary of what social integration means, more room will be given to international students to tell their stories in ways that really matter to them.

A Navel-Gazing End Note

I started this project, essentially because I felt unhappy in Canada. Over the one and half years since I started this project, I lived through the first lockdown alone and did not have in-person conversation with anybody for almost three months. I moved to a new city. I walked in the first snow of Montreal in 2020 and felt that life was getting better. I made Canadian friends, Chinese friends and even Israeli friends, some by making Chinese dinners and some not. I confessed my romantic feelings to someone and got rejected. That someone later put me in contact with my first American participant. I lived through a 5 months long curfew, during which I constantly asked myself should I stay in Canada or should I leave. I saw summer suddenly come to Montreal and felt that life was hopeful again. I really love Montreal. I failed to finish my thesis on time. I went on dates and answered these two questions again and again, “Why are you studying Israel?” “Why is it that your school is in Ottawa and that you live in Montreal?”

Because I am not satisfied. Because I yearn for something different, something new.

Some of my experiences fit into the pattern of a typical international Chinese international student in Canada, but some of them don’t. It’s the parts that do not fit into the patterns that are showing my agency to make sense of my situation, to make changes, and to seek new possibilities. Some of my attempts succeeded and some of them failed. However, because of these attempts, I can now look back and say, I have a life in Canada, and it’s been quite a life.

International students’ stories need to be told. If you read our stories, I hope you will understand why it is not enough to ask how many local friends we’ve made, or question whether we have integrated “well”.

Appendix: Interview Questions

Why did you choose to study in Israel?

For you, was Israel different from other study-abroad destinations?

What did you know about Israel before you arrived?

How did you imagine your life in Israel would be before you arrived? How come?

Could you describe what your first month in Israel was like? Are there any particular moments you remember really well?

What a typical day/week of yours would be like?

Can you describe how you have formed your friends circle in Israel?

In what kinds of occasions have you usually met and mingled with Israelis (for example, I met a lot of Israeli students who were learning Chinese at an on-campus East-Asian Study Event)?

Where have you been spending your time outside of the campus? Who do you usually go to these places with or meet at these places?

Do you think Israelis have a stereotype towards Chinese/American students? How do you feel about that?

Have there been any moments when you felt “I am so Chinese/American”?

Now that you have lived in Israel for a while, would you say this experience has changed you? Why?

What has been your best/worst memory in Israel? Why?

Are there anything else we haven’t covered that you want to talk about?

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