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International Students' Cultural Engagement through (De-)Constructing Distance

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Editors:

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Gaoheng Zhang**

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Abstract

International students' engagement with different cultures has received increased scholarly attention. The literature tends to either celebrate students' cosmopolitanism and transnationalism or highlight their difficulties "adapting" in their receiving countries. In the former case, cultural differences tend to be considered irrelevant, whereas in the latter case, cultural differences are taken for granted and foregrounded as central to students' experiences. In this paper, we examine students' own perceptions and engagement with their sending and receiving countries' cultures through the notion of distance, which is gleaned from mobilities studies. We draw from 20 online, in-depth interviews with Vietnamese international students based in Vancouver and Paris. Our analysis highlights how students construct or deconstruct notions of distance between Vietnam and their receiving countries, and also between themselves and each of these countries (i.e., their sending and receiving countries). First, we examine how students cultivate a sense of cultural proximity to their (geographically distant) countries of destination, through their pre-departure engagement with these countries' language or media. Second, we address students' rapport with French and Canadian societies while residing in those countries, highlighting how ethno-racial diversity in the receiving contexts shapes students' perceptions of distance at various levels as well as their strategies to address these perceived distances. Finally, we discuss students' sense of proximity to or distance from Vietnamese culture while studying in France and Canada and how these constructions can be related to a specific form of cosmopolitanism. We argue that the notion of distance helps foster a nuanced and critical understanding of international students' mobilities, transculturality, and cosmopolitanism.

KEYWORDS: International education, cosmopolitanism, mobilities, transculturality, transnationalism

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Introduction

Cultural dynamics associated with international students' mobilities have received increased scholarly attention in the past decades. On the one hand, students' "cultural adaptation" in their receiving countries and institutions has been studied to highlight the difficulties they face and to offer recommendations for more inclusive spaces in higher education.¹ On the other hand, scholars have examined students' engagement with different cultures, foregrounding the cosmopolitanism or the transnational identities and belongings that they acquire from such study abroad experiences.² In the former case, cultural differences are taken for granted and foregrounded as central to students' experiences, whereas in the latter case, cultural differences tend to be considered irrelevant. In this paper, we build on this literature and examine Vietnamese international students' engagement with their sending and receiving countries' cultures, with examples collected in Vancouver and Paris. We especially highlight the distance that students construct or deconstruct with regard to these cultures and societies.

1. Sophie Arkoudis et al., "Finding Common Ground: Enhancing Interaction between Domestic and International Students in Higher Education," *Teaching in Higher Education* 18, no. 3 (April 1, 2013): 222–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.719156>; Caroline Dailey-Strand, Helen Collins, and David Callaghan, "'Those First Few Months Were Horrible': Cross-Cultural Adaptation and the J-Curve in the International Student Experience in the UK and Norway," *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education* 13, no. 4 (December 22, 2021): 73–85; Chris R. Glass and Christina M. Westmont, "Comparative Effects of Belongingness on the Academic Success and Cross-Cultural Interactions of Domestic and International Students," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 38 (January 1, 2014): 106–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.04.004>; Theon O'Connor, "Increasing International Student Retention: Improving Organizational Structure and Culture to Support International Student Success," *The Organizational Improvement Plan at Western University*, June 1, 2021, <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/oip/233>; Lien Pham and Ly Tran, "Understanding the Symbolic Capital of Intercultural Interactions: A Case Study of International Students in Australia," *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 25, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 204–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2015.1069720>.

2. Sarah L Holloway, Sarah L O'Hara, and Helena Pimlott-Wilson, "Educational Mobility and the Gendered Geography of Cultural Capital: The Case of International Student Flows between Central Asia and the UK," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 44, no. 9 (September 1, 2012): 2278–94, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a44655>; Nancy Lesko and Susan Talburt, eds., *Keywords in Youth Studies: Tracing Affects, Movements, Knowledges* (New York: Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203805909>; Arati Maleku et al., "The Phenomenon of Spiritual Homelessness in Transnational Spaces among International Students in the United States," *Population, Space and Place* 28, no. 2 (2022): e2470, <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2470>; Ly Thi Tran and Catherine Gomes, "Student Mobility, Connectedness and Identity," in *International Student Connectedness and Identity*, ed. Ly Thi Tran and Catherine Gomes, (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017), 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2601-0_1; Tran and Gomes; Suyang Wang, "Self in Mobility: Exploring the Transnational in-between Identity of Chinese Student Returnees from the UK," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 0, no. 0 (November 5, 2020): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1840335>.

Some literature on international students' engagement with different cultures tends to focus on their "cultural adjustment," often from the perspective of their receiving institutions.³ It emphasizes international students' lack of "intercultural competence" or language skills, as well as their preference for interacting with other international students over domestic ones.⁴ In fact, researchers have taken a "deficit and Eurocentric perspective" on students, which tends to obscure the impact of their potentially hostile receiving environments.⁵ In this paper, we instead examine students' own perspectives on, and engagement with, their sending and receiving countries' cultures within and beyond their educational institutions.

Other existing literature tends to celebrate students' cosmopolitanism and the challenge they pose to fixed notions of culture as homogeneous and bounded in one nation-state. Indeed, studies have shown that international students do not move from one monolith to another (their receiving and sending countries' cultures) when completing their education abroad.⁶ Rather, they are embedded in a "fluid amalgam of different cultural flows"⁷ even before traveling out of their sending country, with global media "creating a 'sense' of distant places."⁸ Moreover, research often suggests that international education allows students to become "internationally orientated and interculturally aware,"⁹ priming them for adopting a cosmopolitan identity.¹⁰ Given students'

3. Arkoudis et al., "Finding Common Ground"; Yoko Baba and Megumi Hosoda, "Home Away Home: Better Understanding of the Role of Social Support in Predicting Cross-Cultural Adjustment among International Students," *College Student Journal* 48, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 1–15; Erin M. Lefdahl-Davis and Kristin M. Perrone-McGovern, "The Cultural Adjustment of Saudi Women International Students: A Qualitative Examination," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 46, no. 3 (April 1, 2015): 406–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022114566680>.

4. Bao Trang Thi Nguyen and Alastair Pennycook, "Dancing, Google and Fish Sauce: Vietnamese Students Coping with Australian Universities," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 38, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 457–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2018.1493981>; Pham and Tran, "Understanding the Symbolic Capital of Intercultural Interactions."

5. Pham and Tran, "Understanding the Symbolic Capital of Intercultural Interactions," 207.

6. Joshua Wong and Larissa Hjorth, "Media and Mobilities in Australia: A Case Study of Southeast Asian International Students' Media Use for Well-Being," in *The Asia-Pacific in the Age of Transnational Mobility: The Search for Community and Identity on and Through Social Media*, by Catherine Gomes (London, UK: Anthem Press, 2016), 41–62.

7. Wong and Hjorth, 43.

8. J Waters and Rachel Brooks, "'Vive La Différence?': The 'International' Experiences of UK Students Overseas," *Population, Space and Place* 17, no. 5 (2011): 570, <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.613>.

9. Allan Findlay et al., "Ever Reluctant Europeans: The Changing Geographies of UK Students Studying and Working Abroad," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 13, no. 4 (October 1, 2006): 314, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776406065429>.

10. Başak Bilecen, "International Students and Cosmopolitanisms: Educational Mobility in a Global Age," in *An Anthology of Migration and Social Transformation: European Perspectives*, ed. Anna Amelina, Kenneth Horvath, and Bruno Meeus (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 231–44, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-23666-7_15; Waters and Brooks, "'Vive La Différence?"; Wong and Hjorth, "Media and Mobilities in Australia: A Case Study of Southeast Asian International Students' Media Use for Well-Being."

cosmopolitanism as well as the multiple and blending cultures they engage with, some scholars observe that, in students' experiences, "the locational differences are not as significant as is often assumed"¹¹ and notions of "here" and "there" or "home" and "host" countries are no longer relevant.

Nevertheless, international education still rests on the distinction between the sending and receiving countries with various power dynamics involved, including post-colonial legacies. A perceived and narrated difference between two such countries' education systems justifies international students' need to study abroad. For example, flows of international students from Vietnam to countries like Canada and France are sustained and growing based on the commonly-held belief that Western education is of higher quality than education in Vietnam.¹² Worldwide university rankings posit Western institutions as standards of excellence and "proxies of cosmopolitan dispositions and competencies to excel in a global world."¹³ These constructions of "the West" as a place where more valuable capital can be acquired and where cosmopolitan elites ought to be trained are rooted in post-colonial dynamics, as well as East-West duality and orientalism.¹⁴

11. Catherine Gomes, "Footloose Transients: International Students in Australia and Their Aspirations for Transnational Mobility after Graduation," *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 6, no. 1 (April 1, 2015): 41–57, https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.6.1.41_1; Lesko and Talburt, *Keywords in Youth Studies*, 195; Peidong Yang, "Flexible Citizens or Disconnected Transmigrants? Chinese Student-Turned-Migrants in Singapore and Their Discourse on Mobility, Flexibility, and Identity," in *International Student Connectedness and Identity: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Ly Thi Tran and Catherine Gomes, (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 227–42, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2601-0_13.

12. Minh Hoang, Massoud Moslehpour, and Victoria Seitz, "Decision Making Model of Vietnamese Students Studying Higher Education in England," *IAFOR Journal of Education* 7, no. 2 (2019): 131–48; Chi Hong Nguyen, "Historical Trends of Vietnamese International Student Mobility," in *Internationalisation in Vietnamese Higher Education*, ed. Ly Thi Tran and Simon Marginson, Higher Education Dynamics (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 141–59, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78492-2_8; Lily Nguyen, "Becoming Professional Researchers: An Exploration of the Experiences of Vietnamese Doctoral Students in Australia" (PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2018), <http://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/219372>; Anh Pham, "Visualising Returnee Re-Engagement with Local Workplaces and Community: A Case Study of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam," in *International Student Connectedness and Identity*, ed. Ly Thi Tran and Catherine Gomes, (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017), 137–50, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2601-0_8.

13. Suzanne E. Beech, "International Student Mobility: The Role of Social Networks," *Social & Cultural Geography* 16, no. 3 (April 3, 2015): 332–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2014.983961>; Hiroki Igarashi and Hiro Saito, "Cosmopolitanism as Cultural Capital: Exploring the Intersection of Globalization, Education and Stratification," *Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2014): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975514523935>.

14. Nguyen, "Becoming Professional Researchers"; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003); Andrea Smith, "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy," in *Color of Violence*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Duke University Press, 2016), 66–73.

Thus, while international students indeed constitute an interesting case of cosmopolitanism and blending of cultures, we cannot disregard the fact that students are exposed to “cultural” differences in their sending and receiving countries; that is, differences in “the learned and shared knowledge that people use to generate behaviour and interpret experience.”¹⁵ We critically examine these cultural differences as constructed in post-colonial East-West duality and orientalism. International students’ engagement with diverse cultures and societies is situated in a transnational social field that can be “open and diverse, but also discriminatory and exclusionary.”¹⁶ On the one hand, students do not “function in discrete spaces”¹⁷ that are either their sending or receiving country. Their sense of belonging might not be exclusive to one of these places; rather, it may be transnational or “in-between.”¹⁸ On the other hand, students’ transnational experiences are not without hurdles; students do not evolve in a transnational social field where power dynamics do not exist, or where cultural differences are irrelevant.

In this paper, we highlight students’ engagement with their sending and receiving countries’ cultures through their own narrative constructions of distance. An analysis of students’ own perceptions allows us to avoid both taking cultural differences for granted and embracing monolithic notions of culture. Moreover, this focus avoids the simplistic assumption that transnationalism and cosmopolitanism make cultural differences negligible.

Context

This qualitative study considers a growing but understudied population: Vietnamese international students. With a booming economy and an education system considered inadequate to meet the demand for a highly skilled labor force, Vietnam has seen increasing outflows of

15. James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, eds., *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, 14th ed (Upper Saddle River, N.J: Pearson, 2012), 2.

16. Wong and Hjorth, “Media and Mobilities in Australia: A Case Study of Southeast Asian International Students’ Media Use for Well-Being,” 43.

17. Maleku et al., “The Phenomenon of Spiritual Homelessness in Transnational Spaces among International Students in the United States,” 2.

18. Maleku et al., “The Phenomenon of Spiritual Homelessness in Transnational Spaces among International Students in the United States”; Lilach Marom, “Outsiders-insiders-in between: Punjabi International Students in Canada Navigating Identity amid Intraethnic Tensions,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 20, no. 2 (March 15, 2022): 221–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1882291>; Wang, “Self in Mobility.”

international students in the past two decades.¹⁹ France and Canada are among the top ten destinations.²⁰ While France has been an important destination for Vietnamese international students since colonisation, the number of Vietnamese students in Canada has increased more recently (80% between 2013 and 2018).²¹

This study focuses specifically on students' experiences in Vancouver and Paris, which receive some of the highest proportions of immigrants in Canada and France respectively.²² In 2013, 40% of the overall immigrant population in France lived in Île-de-France (i.e., a region that includes Paris and its suburbs), and 18,5% of this region's population were immigrants. This proportion of immigrants was twice as high as other regions of the country.²³ In 2011, 13% of the overall immigrant population in Canada lived in Vancouver and 40% of Vancouver's population were immigrants.²⁴ Paris and Vancouver are also major international student-receiving cities in their respective countries. In 2018, more than a third of France's international students lived in the Île-de-France region.²⁵ In 2017, Vancouver received 22% of Canada's international students population, making it the second biggest student-receiving city in Canada (behind Toronto, which received 34% of this population).²⁶

19. Campus France, "Fiche Mobilité Vietnam," 2020, https://ressources.campusfrance.org/publications/mobilite_pays/fr/vietnam_fr.pdf; Cate Gribble and Ly Thi Tran, "Connecting and Reconnecting with Vietnam: Migration, Vietnamese Overseas Communities and Social Media," in *The Asia-Pacific in the Age of Transnational Mobility: The Search for Community and Identity on and through Social Media*, by Catherine Gomes (London, UK: Anthem Press, 2016), 63–86.

20. Campus France, "Fiche Mobilité Vietnam"; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students," 2020, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.

21. Campus France, "Fiche Mobilité Vietnam."

22. Nadia Boussad and Nathalie Couleaud, "Une Population Immigrée Aujourd'hui plus Répartie Sur Le Territoire Régional" (Paris: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2017), <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3136640>; Statistics Canada, "Data Tables 98-400-X2016352 Greater Vancouver, 2016 Census," March 28, 2018, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?TABID=2&LANG=E&A=R&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=5915&GL=-1&GID=1262036&GK=2&GRP=1&O=D&PID=112254&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2017&THEME=132&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=&D1=0&D2=0&D3=0&D4=0&D5=0&D6=0>.

23. Boussad and Couleaud, "Une Population Immigrée Aujourd'hui plus Répartie Sur Le Territoire Régional."

24. Statistics Canada, "Data Tables 98-400-X2016352 Greater Vancouver, 2016 Census."

25. Campus France, "Chiffres Clés 2020," 2020, https://ressources.campusfrance.org/publications/chiffres_cles/fr/chiffres_cles_2020_fr.pdf.

26. Canadian Bureau for International Education, "International Students in Canada," 2018, <https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/International-Students-in-Canada-ENG.pdf>; Joanne Heslop, "International Students in BC's Education Systems: Summary of Research from the Student Transitions Project," 2018. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/data-research/stp/stp-international-research-results.pdf>.

Paris and Vancouver also represent compelling cases for comparison because of their different demographics and immigration or integration policies. Both cities include important immigrant populations, but the Asian diaspora is proportionally bigger in Vancouver than in Paris. In 2016, 45% of the greater Vancouver population was of Asian descent.²⁷ A direct comparison with Paris is not possible since France only allows for data collection about place of birth but not ethnicity. We can nevertheless note that in 2016, only 3% of the Parisian population was born in Asia.²⁸ As we will show, the different sizes of immigrant and Asian communities in each receiving context shaped participants' experiences and interview narratives. Moreover, France and Canada have different models of integration and official discourses about immigrants' cultures. In the French assimilationist model, integration means the "reduction of immigrants' cultural and social specificities";²⁹ whereas in Canada's multiculturalism policies, immigrants are encouraged to maintain their cultures from their countries of origins. While these official discourses and policies ought not to be used indiscriminately to explain observed differences between the two contexts,³⁰ we will show how students draw from and/or challenge such discourses.

Theoretical Framework

We draw primarily from the mobilities paradigm³¹ but also transnational

27. Statistics Canada, "Census Profile, 2016 Census - Vancouver [Census Metropolitan Area], British Columbia and British Columbia [Province]," February 8, 2017, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CMACA&Code1=933&Geo2=PR&Code2=59&SearchText=vancouver&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=Language&TABID=1&type=1>.

28. INSEE, "Démographie de l'Île-de-France En 2016 - Insee Flash Ile-de-France - 30," 2018, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3307424>; INSEE, "IMG1B - Population Immigrée Par Sexe, Âge et Pays de Naissance En 2016 - Région d'Île-de-France (11) - Étrangers - Immigrés En 2016 | Insee," 2019, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4177162?sommaire=4177618&geo=REG-11#consulter-sommaire>.

29. Patrick Simon and Valérie Sala Pala, "'We're Not All Multiculturalists yet: France Swings between Hard Integration and Soft Anti-Discrimination,'" in *The Multiculturalism Backlash* (Routledge, 2010), 95.

30. Christophe Bertossi, "National Models of Integration in Europe: A Comparative and Critical Analysis," *American Behavioral Scientist* 55, no. 12 (December 1, 2011): 1561–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211409560>.

31. Peter Adey et al., "Introduction," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (Routledge, 2013); Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 38, no. 2 (February 1, 2006): 207–26, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>.

approaches³² and transculturality theories.³³ The mobilities paradigm especially informs our definition and examination of the notion of distance. Indeed, this paradigm examines different levels of proximity and distance as well as the movements implied in all social interactions.³⁴ Handel suggests that “mobilities as a field of research might be defined as the discipline of paying attention to the distance between points,”³⁵ although the notion of distance is still rarely centered but rather, taken for granted as a prerequisite for the mobilities being studied. In this article, we draw from work by Urry, Frello, and Handel, and we define mobility as the overcoming of a perceived “distance” between a constructed physical, social, or cultural “here” and “there.”³⁶

Scholars have discussed how physical distance is relative, especially in the context of globalization and the development of transportation leading to “time–space compression.”³⁷ As Bauman suggests “‘distance’ is a social product; its length varies depending on the speed with which it may be overcome.”³⁸ Nevertheless, scholars have noted that the phenomenon of “time–space compression” should not be naïvely celebrated since it produces and perpetuates inequalities while also being detrimental to the

32. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda G. Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, eds., *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, v. 645 (New York, N.Y.: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992); Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

33. Marwan Kraidy, “Hybridity without Guarantees: Toward Critical Transculturalism,” in *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Temple University Press, 2006), 148–61; Mary Louise Pratt, “Introduction: Criticism in the Contact Zone,” in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203932933-7>; Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1999), 195–213, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218723.n11>.

34. Jana Costas, “Problematizing Mobility: A Metaphor of Stickiness, Non-Places and the Kinetic Elite:,” *Organization Studies* 34, no. 10 (September 12, 2013): 1467–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840613495324>; Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, “Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings,” *Mobilities* 1, no. 1 (March 2006): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489189>; John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2007).

35. Ariel Handel, “Distance Matters: Mobilities and the Politics of Distance,” *Mobilities* 13, no. 4 (July 4, 2018): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2017.1394681>.

36. Urry, *Mobilities*; Birgitta Frello, “Towards a Discursive Analytics of Movement: On the Making and Unmaking of Movement as an Object of Knowledge,” *Mobilities* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 25–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100701797299>; Handel, “Distance Matters.”

37. Paolo Boccagni, “Rethinking Transnational Studies: Transnational Ties and the Transnationalism of Everyday Life,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 15, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 117–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431011423600>; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry, “Editorial”; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1989); Urry, *Mobilities*.

38. Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 12.

environment.³⁹

Additionally, encompassing both the physical and social aspects of distance, scholars have demonstrated how distances are constructed, often hand in hand with notions of “here” and “there.”⁴⁰ For example, Frello suggests that “the distinction between ‘near’ and ‘far away’ hinges on the character of the relationship between subject and place rather than on physical distance.”⁴¹ Furthermore, there is power involved in constructing “here” and “there” and what counts as movement between the two. The notion of distance also echoes concepts of “in-betweenness,” liminality, and third space originally developed in post-colonial studies.⁴² These concepts theorize power dynamics between groups, often constructed through a hegemonic binary; they highlight the transformative potential of anti-essentialist claims coming from the margins or those “kept at a distance,” to challenge these binaries. In this paper, we explore the distance between students and their sending and receiving countries’ cultures as constructed through students’ relationships and experiences.

Together with the mobilities paradigm, a transnational approach allows us to examine students’ multi-faceted engagement with their sending and receiving countries: through local and cross-border occupations (i.e., daily activities) or media flows.⁴³ Additionally, we draw from transculturality theories to remain cautious and critical about fixed notions of culture as homogeneous and bounded within one nation-state territory. Indeed, transculturality highlights the blending of cultures in a globalized world.⁴⁴ For example, this framework has been used in diaspora and transnationalism studies to examine the hybridity of cultural practices in such contexts.⁴⁵ While we examine students’

39. Handel, “Distance Matters.”

40. Handel, “Distance Matters.”

41. Frello, “Towards a Discursive Analytics of Movement,” 32.

42. Homi K. Bhabha and Jonathan Rutherford, “Third Space,” *Multitudes*, no. 3 (2006): 95–107; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551>; bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990).

43. Anne-Cécile Delaisse and Suzanne Huot, “Embracing Transnational Approaches for a More Thorough and Critical Understanding of Occupation in Research on Migration,” *Journal of Occupational Science*, no. 0 (October 20, 2021): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2021.1987972>; Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc, *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*; Vertovec, *Transnationalism*.

44. Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today

45. Luisa Veronis, Zac Tabler, and Ahmed Rukshana, “Syrian Refugee Youth Use Social Media: Building Transcultural Spaces and Connections for Resettlement in Ottawa, Canada,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 79–99.

perception of their sending and receiving countries as two potentially distinct and internally coherent entities, we consider these as constructions rather than fixed realities. Moreover, a critical transculturality framework is helpful for examining the exchanges and mix between cultures through the lens of power imbalance (i.e., typical in a colonial or post-colonial context).⁴⁶

Methods

This paper draws from twenty online, in-depth interviews conducted with Vietnamese international students in Vancouver and Paris (ten students in each city) between August and December 2021.⁴⁷ Through convenience and purposeful sampling, participants were recruited if they were Vietnamese citizens, were born in Vietnam, had come to Canada or France with a student permit in 2019 or earlier, and were studying in Metro Vancouver or the Île-de-France region at the time of the interview. Interviews were conducted in English or French by the first author who is bilingual. Interview questions addressed participants' experiences as international students with a specific emphasis on their daily life activities and sense of belonging to Canada or France and Vietnam. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. The transcripts were entered in the software NVivo and coded line by line. For the findings presented in the article, we focused on themes related to students' engagement with and perception of their sending and receiving countries' cultures. We include verbatim quotes from the interviews to foreground participants' perspectives in their own words. Our focus is not on the linguistic but rather, the substantive aspect of their discourses.

The sample of participants included more women than men (see table 1). The participants in France were on average older than participants in Canada (23.8 in France and 22.1 in Canada). The majority of Parisian participants were graduate students while the majority of Vancouverite participants were in undergraduate programs.

Table 1. Demographic data of the participants

46. Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Temple University Press, 2006), https://doi.org/10.26530/oapen_626979.

47. Robyn Longhurst, "Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups," in *Key Methods in Geography*, ed. N. J. Clifford, Shaun French, and Gill Valentine, 2nd ed (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2010), 103–15.

		Vancouver	Paris
Gender	Women	7	8
	Men	3	2
Age	19	1	0
	20	1	1
	21	1	2
	22	5	1
	23	0	2
	24	0	1
	25	1	2
	26	1	0
	34	0	1
Number of years in Canada/France	2 years (arrival in 2019)	2	2
	3 years (arrival in 2018)	3	2
	4 years (arrival in 2017)	3	3
	5 years (arrival in 2016)	2	2
	6 years (arrival in 2015)	0	1
Type of program	Undergraduate	9	2
	Graduate	1	8

Findings

We examined students' discourses about their sending and receiving countries' cultures and societies, as well as their rapport or sense of belonging to these countries. We found that students construct or deconstruct distance between their sending and receiving countries, as well as between themselves and both countries, to make sense of their experiences. In this section, we first examine students' pre-departure engagement with their receiving country's culture, language, or media and how it serves to build closeness between students and their (distant) destination. Second, we address students' rapport with French or Canadian society while in their destination countries, as well as how ethno-racial diversity in the receiving context shapes

perceptions of distance and ways to overcome it. Finally, we discuss students' closeness or distance to Vietnamese culture and how this can be related to a certain form of cosmopolitanism. As we examine these three themes, we take a comparative approach between students' experiences in Paris and Vancouver.

Closeness to a Distant Place: Pre-departure Engagement with Different Cultures

Participants' engagement with different cultures started prior to their relocation as international students. Indeed, the majority of students completed all or part of their primary and secondary education in English or French while in Vietnam. Moreover, some students mentioned their exposure to foreign media as an important factor in triggering their desire to study abroad. Through exposure to their receiving countries' media and languages, students constructed their destination as distant from Vietnam but familiar and accessible to them.

All participants had learnt English in secondary school in Vietnam. Six Vancouverite participants completed secondary programs partially or entirely in English. Five Parisian participants had received secondary education emphasizing French language. Some students received this education from a young age, based on their parents' choices. Those programs were often meant to prepare students to pursue post-secondary abroad in such a way that it became "natural:" "from day one, I'm already set to go abroad for post-secondary school" (Vancouver, participant 5). Pursuing education emphasizing foreign languages while in Vietnam contributed to a notion of closeness with the destination country.

Something that influences me a lot in my choice of coming to France is that I have been learning French since I was little. I was in a bilingual French Vietnamese class, so I learned French for about ten years. And then when I'm looking for the choice of a country to go to, France is the first - well, it's natural to talk about France. (Translated from French; Paris, participant 4)⁴⁸

One participant mentioned how her undergraduate education at the University of British Columbia (UBC) was the continuation of her secondary education in an international school in

48. « [Quelque choses qui] m'influence beaucoup pour le choix d'arriver en France c'est que j'apprends le français depuis que j'étais petit. Donc j'étais dans une classe bilingue français vietnamien, donc j'ai appris le français pendant une dizaine d'années. Et puis euh, surtout quand [...] je cherche pour le choix d'un pays à partir la France est le premier - enfin, c'est naturel de parler de la France » (Paris, participant 4)

Vietnam. To her, there was little distance or difference between the two educational environments.

I went to an international school in Vietnam, it was probably something that - kind of like the next step was to study abroad, I was not gonna study in Vietnam either way [...] honestly UBC is just like a bigger version of my high school because this high school was already very diverse and people were very motivated, and then UBC felt like my high school but in a bigger scale. (Vancouver, participant 2)

Thus, participants' pre-departure education seemed to diminish the cultural distance between students and their receiving countries. Participants mentioned that this education was only offered to "elites" in Vietnam. It was competitive: "we were in an elite high school [...] we always had to be in the top 3 [of the best French-language schools in Vietnam];" (Translated from French; Paris, participant 7);⁴⁹ and/or it was expensive: "my high school, it was like a very good school [...] the tuition was expensive because it's a private school" (Vancouver, participant 10).

Moreover, participants mentioned their exposure to popular media from their receiving countries or Europe and North America more broadly. This contributed to the construction of these places as at once different and distant from Vietnam, yet also close or familiar. Indeed, participants perceived their destination countries as desirable and known destinations, but distant from Vietnam, where education was considered to be of lesser quality.

Students like me in Vietnam around my age, most of us think that it is better first to go studying abroad, so we can have a better future or at least like if we even have to come back to Vietnam, for work, the quality of the certificate from a foreign country will be better than the certificate that they give us in Vietnam most of the time, not always but like 80% [...] Besides MIT in Vietnam [Vietnamese branch of the Australian university the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology], I think most of the school is not that great, when you compared to like studying here [in Canada], and I mean when we grow up like we watch a lot of movies, mostly Western movies. So we want to have the experience of going to class with like 100 people 200 peoples around that. And we want to try out the stuff that we saw on TV right? (Vancouver, participant 7)

The deconstruction of distance through exposure to the receiving country's media

49. « On était dans une lycée d'élite [...] il faut toujours à dans les top 3 [des meilleures écoles francophones vietnamiennes] » (Paris, participant 7)

was more prominent for Vancouverite participants than Parisian ones. As we will show, this potentially is because of the different power of English and French in Vietnam. Vancouverite participants had been exposed to current Anglophone media, allowing them to envision their lives and even develop a sense of belonging to “the West,” of which Vancouver was part.

Researcher: “Is there one place that feels more like home than the other between Vancouver and Vietnam?”

Participant: “Oh yeah, Canada [...] I got used to the Western culture, when I was young, when I watched Disney movie so I kind of adapt quickly to the Western environment.”

Researcher: “So you developed that sense of belonging, even before coming to Vancouver?”

Participant: “Yes, that's it.”
(Vancouver, participant 9)

However, few Parisian participants reported being exposed to French media prior to going to France. Participants compared the power of English and French : “in Vietnam frankly, well honestly, French was not the most spoken language; it's not the dominant language, it's really English” (Translated from French; Paris, participant 10).⁵⁰ A number of participants explained that they had chosen to study in French after failing to enter English-language programs or because it was an “original” choice: “I said to myself, everyone learns English, so I am going to learn French” (Translated from French; Paris, participant 4).⁵¹ While Vancouverite participants had been exposed to spoken English through media outside of their language classes, a number of Parisian participants mentioned difficulties with spoken language upon arrival in France.

The French I learned in Vietnam was standard French. [...] So when I arrived here, I met French people, who come from different regions and they used words that I didn't know [...] for the documents for example, I understand very well what it means, but in everyday language, so in everyday life, it was a little difficult, it was a little different because since we used expressions, words that I did not know before. And so, even I was told "oh I don't give a damn," I say "ah what does that mean 'I don't give a damn'" yeah because [...] when I learned French in Vietnam, we try not to say that, it's because also the culture in Vietnam is that we try to say

50. « au Vietnam franchement, bah honnêtement, euh le français n'était n'est pas la langue la plus parlée, c'est pas la langue dominante, c'est vraiment l'anglais » (Paris, participant 10)

51. « je me suis dit que tout le monde apprend l'anglais, donc j'apprends le français » (Paris, participant 4)

words that are polite. (Translated from French; Paris, participant 10)⁵²

Rather than spoken communication, it seemed that French courses taught in Vietnam emphasized grammar and formal language in order for students to pass tests.

Students' pre-departure education and exposure to media appeared to allow them to construct their destination country as distant from Vietnam and not immediately within reach, yet also as being close or accessible to them. This was especially the case for Canada, through the dominance of Anglophone and North American media. Participants' education in English or French appeared to constitute the basis of the reproduction of an elite, cosmopolitan social class in Vietnam.⁵³

An (Im)possible Distance to Overcome: Engagement with the Receiving Country's Environment

Participants discussed their integration or sense of belonging in their receiving countries. Students' constructions of distance from their receiving countries' cultures and societies, along with possibilities for overcoming this distance, varied for participants in France and Canada. This might be informed by different discourses about integration and belonging in French and Canadian societies. However, in this section, we highlight students' own perceptions of their receiving countries and their (de)constructions of distance.

A majority of participants mentioned that they were capable of adapting to their receiving context quickly upon arrival. However, despite "adapting" and potentially enjoying their environment, some participants seemed to feel a distance from their

52. « Le français que j'ai appris au Vietnam, c'était le français standard. [...] Du coup quand je suis arrivée ici, j'ai rencontré des français, qui viennent de différents régions et ils ont utilisé des mots que moi je connaissais pas [...] pour les documents par exemple, je comprends très bien ce qu'il me dit, mais dans le langage courant, donc dans la vie quotidienne, c'était un peu difficile, c'était un peu différent parce que vu que l'on a utilisé des expressions, des mots que je connaissais pas avant. Et du coup, même on m'a dit « oh j'en ai rien à foutre », je dis « ah qu'est-ce que ça veut dire, j'en ai rien à foutre ? » ouais parce que [...] quand j'ai appris le français au Vietnam, on essaie de ne pas dire ça, c'est parce que aussi la culture au Vietnam, c'est qu'on essaie de dire des mots qui sont polis. » (Paris, participant 10)

53. Igarashi and Saito, "Cosmopolitanism as Cultural Capital;" Ly Thi Tran, "Mobility as 'Becoming': A Bourdieuan Analysis of the Factors Shaping International Student Mobility," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37, no. 8 (November 16, 2016): 1268–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1044070>.

receiving countries' societies and cultures.

I really enjoy the life in Paris. But there's also the moment that I realized that we still have some difference in culture, also in the language. Like when I talk with my friends, we don't fully understand each other, I don't have the ability to express myself fully in French, so I think that is one of my difficulties also in culture and in the language.[...] I really love the city because I love culture and I love architecture and Paris is like the most wonderful place you can ever be, and I really love the place. And, like everything. just everything about it, like the environment and the way I feel is very amazing to me. (Paris, participant 2)

In both cities, students reported ambivalent rapport with those perceived as “locals.” Some students reported they had a hard time making friends with French or Canadian people, whom they found to be distant, while others said they found “locals” friendly and welcoming. Several participants in both places also mentioned lacking “cultural references” to be included in conversation. These “cultural references” could be related to the receiving country's politics, sports, or movies.

There was also a racial distinction in participants' discourse, potentially based on participants' experiences of racism and discrimination. Students in both cities tended to associate “Frenchness” or “Canadianness” with “whiteness.” For example, two Parisian participants distinguished (white) “French-French” people from (racialized) second-generation immigrants, to whom participants felt closer.

Physically, I'm not white, so I feel different from other people [...] I feel different from people who are French-French but not from people who are of foreign origin and who live in France (Translated from French; Paris, participant 3)⁵⁴

Parisian students often reported being the only international student or the only Asian student in their cohort, whereas Vancouverite participants appeared to be involved in environments with larger proportions of immigrant and racialized populations. In fact, a number of these participants were surprised by Vancouver's diverse population upon arrival.

The thing that struck me most about Vancouver is that there are a lot of Asians so I

54. « Physiquement, je suis pas blanc, du coup je me sens différent des autres personnes [...] je me sens différent aux gens qui sont français-français mais pas aux gens qui sont d'origine étrangère et qui vivent en France » (Paris, participant 3)

feel like it is just like going to Hong Kong or Taipei [...] sometimes having more Asians help me, it makes it easier to engage in this new society [...] At that time I want to be with more whites because I wanted to discover Western culture [...] so I think seeing more Asians helped me to ease out my worries but, deep down, I still wanted to study more with the whites I mean some kind of Canadians. (Vancouver, participant 4)

The diversity of students' receiving environments played an important role in how they perceived distance from the receiving society and possibilities to overcome it. For example, in France, language barriers and the lack of "cultural references" were mentioned as the reason why "since we are foreigners, we will never never be able to integrate to French society 100%" (Translated from French; Paris, participant 1).⁵⁵ Yet this appeared less significant to some Vancouverite participants.

They would talk about a topic that I don't really know about and then I don't feel included in that space anymore [...] in those times I feel like I'm excluded – but not necessarily unwelcome [...] it also depends on who I'm with, like for example if I'm around a lot of like Canadian-born Caucasians, I definitely feel that. If I'm around purely like mainland Chinese people, I feel that because of just the language barrier that I have with both groups. Even though I speak English and I'm fluent, there's just, it's just a lot of subtext that I can't quite understand with like really native speakers. And with Chinese friends, it's the same thing, because I don't speak Mandarin. (Vancouver, participant 5)

Given Vancouver's multicultural environment, Vancouverite participants not only discussed inclusion and exclusion experiences with "white Canadians," but also with other dominant communities in the area, especially Chinese or other Asian communities.

Chinese from the mainland, they can approach me and they keep talking in Mandarin, I don't understand anything but many of them assume that I'm Chinese [...] we have Japanese, Korean and Chinese and Vietnamese and Filipino it's like the economy there in Asia, so the people from Japan, Korea and China tend to be more superior to those from Vietnam or Philippines so I feel like when I communicate with those who are from Japan, I feel a little bit discriminated. (Vancouver, participant 4)

Thus, participants' construction of distance with their receiving countries was also based on experiences of "being kept at a distance" through discrimination and

55. « vu qu'on est des étrangers, on pourra jamais jamais intégrer 100% à la société française » (Paris, participant 1)

racialization. In Paris, participants were racialized in broad categories such as “Asian” (Paris, participant 9) or “Chinese” (Paris, participant 3); as one participant explained, “they think all Asians are Chinese” (Translated from French; Paris, participant 10),⁵⁶ in the context of a white majority and small Asian diasporas. In contrast, in Vancouver, where there are multiple dominant groups (i.e., white Canadians, the Chinese community, etc.) and the Asian diasporas are more complex and numerically larger, participants were racialized based on their country of origin.

Parisian and Vancouverite participants also had different approaches to their receiving countries’ cultures. This was illustrated by the vocabulary used in the two contexts. Parisian participants would often talk about their “integration” in France. They sometimes seemed to imply that the more integrated they were in France, the more they would lose their Vietnamese identities and vice versa. In comparison, Vancouverite participants discussed their sense of belonging, which seemed to be related to building a network and being able to function in daily life in the city.

Three participants in Paris mentioned that they wanted to be “respectful” of French culture (Paris, student 1, 3, 6). To a certain extent, participants seemed to consider French culture as static or unchangeable; potentially desirable or interesting; but impossible to be a part of. By contrast, two participants in Vancouver discussed how they wanted to be “selective” about adopting Canadian culture, depending on what would fit their personalities. In feeling like they had a choice about being part of Canadian culture, they seemed to maintain a distance and to position themselves as “observers.”

I think I’m more of a selective kind of person, when I approach something like a point of view [...] I just like to evaluate “OK is it a new good and positive way of doing and how does it fit with my identity as a Vietnamese person?” And so I just evaluate and then decide whether I should adopt it or just stop it at a point where, “OK, I know that that’s the Canadian way of doing, but I have my own Vietnamese way of doing as well” (Vancouver, participant 1)

If I live here I wouldn’t want to be the odd person who refuses the culture like I would not do that. But I would not pick up things so that other people would see me more as a Canadian, like I would not want that. I would want them to see me as a Vietnamese person. And I feel like even if I ever become a permanent resident or

56. « on prend toutes les asiatiques pour les chinois » (Paris, participant 10)

a citizen then I'm still a Vietnamese person before anything else (Vancouver, participant 2)

Participants constructed distance differently with French and Canadian societies, partly based on the ethno-racial diversity in each country, as well as discourses about integration and belonging in those places. These different contexts shaped the way students envisioned possibilities for overcoming a sense of distance. Parisian participants tended to construct distance from French society based on idealization of and exclusion from a culture perceived as unchangeable. Vancouverite participants perceived Canadian society as plural; therefore, distance varied based on the space, and integration could be “selective.”

Distance and Cosmopolitanism: Engagement with the Sending Country's Culture

Participants talked about their rapport with Vietnamese culture prior to and throughout their migration experience. Sometimes, participants seemed to construct distance from Vietnamese culture based on their experience of transition into adulthood while living abroad. Some participants seemed to intertwine the independence they experienced as young adults with notions of individualism supposedly encouraged in “the West.” Their experiences of international education appeared to position them in a cosmopolitan social class in Vietnam, along with those who had a similar distance or closeness to Vietnam and abroad.

A number of participants reported that being abroad (at a distance from their sending country) could reinforce their sense of connection (closeness) to their Vietnamese culture. Participants used social media to keep in touch with their families and stay updated about the news in Vietnam. Their engagement with Vietnamese communities or in activities such as cooking Vietnamese food also helped maintain their connection with Vietnamese language and culture. Some participants reported that they missed Vietnamese food when living abroad, although they had no particular interest in these dishes while in Vietnam. Another student described a similar phenomenon with music.

When I was in Vietnam, I would never listen to Vietnamese music, we were amazed with the Western, the US, UK the pop stuff from Western country, so I would never listen to Vietnamese songs when I was in Vietnam. But when I come to Canada, well I talk, I use English mostly every day, and then I don't have much chance to speak Vietnamese or

have anyone to share it with, so I feel like I kind of miss it, so I start listening to Vietnamese music more and more. (Vancouver, participant 7)

One participant (who completed the interview from Ho Chi Minh City because he was taking a gap year there) explained that his sense of belonging to Vietnam felt stronger when abroad rather than in Vietnam.

When I'm in Canada I have like both, I am aware of that I have two sense of belongings, that are, belonging to Canada and I also have a sense of belonging to Vietnam. But having spent much more time here [in Vietnam] [...] that sense of belonging in Vietnam just simply becomes too oblivious. It kind of fades away, but not disappear. And my belonging to Canada actually becomes more common in my way of thinking. (Vancouver, student 1)

Several participants described themselves as “more suitable” (Vancouver, participant 4) or “more comfortable” (Paris, participant 6) living in their receiving countries than in Vietnam. This was often based on a hegemonic binary between Vietnamese culture being more collectivist and “Western” cultures being more individualistic and private. When asked about her sense of belonging in Canada, one participant actually discussed her “non-belonging” in Vietnam.

I think uhm, so the Vietnamese community is a very collectivist society, right? So people like to do things together, eat together like hang out together. Myself like, even if I think back to my time in Vietnam, I've always been a very individualistic person. So I commute alone. I have no problem like going around here commuting using the sky train, even like eating alone or like exercising on my own or something like that. All of that, those are things that you wouldn't normally associate with like- I don't know - not something that I would see people do a lot in Vietnam. So I think like those are the things that I would associate myself with this country [Canada], more things that I picked up here, things that were me but I just have a chance to enjoy it here. (Vancouver, participant 2)

Those participants constructed distance from Vietnamese culture based on their personality traits. Additionally, participants also explained how their experiences abroad had created distance between them and Vietnamese students in Vietnam, especially as they had transitioned to adulthood abroad:

I know some of my friends who live alone like, independently, but in Vietnam. But they don't have, like, I don't know, but living abroad, it gives you something more than if you only live in Vietnam, but you have a lot of things to worry about you have to be more responsible to yourself, I think. (Paris, participant 2)

Some participants reported that they had experienced “reverse culture shock” (Paris, participant 5 and 7; Vancouver, participant 1) and disconnection from Vietnam when going back. This could also be related to participants’ experiences of adulthood or “independence” abroad, where they perceived external pressures differently.

The first week for me [...] I felt that I don't belong to society anymore [...] actually one thing in France, which I really like, it's that we can do what we want, we can wear what we want and we are never judged by others in fact. But in Vietnam, they judge all the time, all the time, all the time as soon as I came back when I met, when I saw my friends or cousins or neighbors again, everyone told me "my god, why are you so fat, what did you eat in France?" this and that. There were only judgments in fact and I felt very uncomfortable and even my parents and they didn't say that but they still judged a little, you see? It made me - I don't know, but at the time, I didn't feel comfortable at all with it and afterwards, I spoke with my friends who also went abroad to study, they said they felt the same thing and they felt they no longer belong in Vietnam (Translated from French; Paris, participant 1)⁵⁷

A number of participants seemed most comfortable with people with similar international education experiences. Indeed, these people had similar degrees of distance or closeness to Vietnam and other countries. This materialized through language skills and “ease” in international contexts or cosmopolitanism.

With the friends I have in Vietnam, I can speak Vietnamese with a bit of English and French and they still understand [...] most of them also go study abroad and the others I went to high school with [them] so they learnt a lot of languages (Paris, participant 5)

[talking about an internship in Vietnam] It is an international company, so I think it's easier to get along with people, and I know a lot of my colleagues were once international students in different countries that's why they understand the struggle and they understand everything and then we do have a lot of like internal partners from Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, so we do speak English a lot. (Vancouver, participant 6)

While living abroad could reveal participants’ closeness to Vietnamese culture, some participants constructed distance from the culture instead, especially during occasional visits.

57. « La première semaine pour moi [...] je me sentais que j'appartiens plus à la société ici [...] en fait un côté en France, que j'aime beaucoup, beaucoup, c'est que on peut faire ce qu'on veut, on peut porter ce qu'on veut et on n'est jamais jugé par les autres en fait. Mais au Vietnam, ils jugent tout le temps, tout le temps, tout le temps dès que je suis rentré, quand j'ai revu mes amis ou des cousins ou des voisins et tout là tout le monde m'a dit « mon dieu, pourquoi t'es si grosse, t'as mangé quoi en France ? » machin machin. Il y a que des jugements en fait et là, [...] je me sentais très mal à l'aise et voilà même mes parents et ils ont pas dit ça mais ils ont quand même un peu jugé tu vois ? Ça m'a fait - je sais pas, mais en ce moment, je m'en sentais pas du tout à l'aise et après, j'ai parlé avec mes amis qui sont aussi partis à l'étranger pour faire leurs études, ils ont dit que ils se sentaient la même chose et ils se sentaient qu'ils appartiennent plus au Vietnam » (Paris, participant 1)

They seemed to associate this distancing from Vietnamese culture with their transition to adulthood and access to cosmopolitanism.

Discussion

In this paper, we examined Vietnamese students' engagement with their sending and receiving countries' cultures and societies through the notion of distance. We highlighted how participants construct distance or proximity between their sending and receiving countries (i.e., between Vietnam and France or Canada), as well as between themselves and each of these countries (i.e., between the students and Vietnam and between the students and France or Canada). We noted that this construction of distance relates in part to students' experiences in their receiving countries and to their exposure to foreign media while still living in Vietnam. In other words, participants' engagement with different cultures occurred through their physical movements as international students and through intersecting mobilities of diverse media images, ideologies, and discourses.⁵⁸

In this section, we argue that the notion of distance allows for a deeper and more critical understanding of students' mobilities, "in-betweenness" and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, we found that students construct and maintain different levels of proximity and distance toward their sending and receiving countries in order to present themselves as "in-between," capable of navigating both cultures. They also do so in order to access and reproduce a cosmopolitan social class.

Distance remains an unexplored critical concept within the mobilities literature. Mobilities scholars have analysed long-distance practices and examined how distance is negotiated, for example as a "friction" or an "obstacle" to navigate.⁵⁹ But distance is rarely

58. Waters and Brooks, "'Vive La Différence?"; Wong and Hjorth, "Media and Mobilities in Australia: A Case Study of Southeast Asian International Students' Media Use for Well-Being."

59. Sian Bayne, Michael Sean Gallagher, and James Lamb, "Being 'at' University: The Social Topologies of Distance Students," *Higher Education* 67, no. 5 (May 1, 2014): 569–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9662-4>; Jonas Larsen, "Distance and Proximity," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, ed. Peter Adey et al. (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ubc/detail.action?docID=1596850>; Markus Roos Breines, Parvati Raghuram, and Ashley Gunter, "Infrastructures of Immobility: Enabling International Distance Education Students in Africa to Not Move," *Mobilities* 14, no. 4 (July 4, 2019): 484–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2019.1618565>.

centered in mobility analysis, especially as a constructed or perceived notion.⁶⁰ In alignment with Handel's work, we consider distance as co-constitutive with students' occupations (i.e., daily activities), mobilities, and discourses. Rather than examine how students overcome a pre-conceived "objective" distance, we analyze how they perceive, construct, or deconstruct distance through narratives of their own experiences, especially those pertaining to their exposure to and engagement with different cultures in different places. As we have shown, the notion of constructed distance allows us to shed new light on students' experiences.

We found that the construct of distance is implied in the notion of students' "in-betweenness," and allows to move beyond binaries of home-host or here-there. Indeed, scholars have argued that these binaries have become increasingly "simplistic and obsolete" when examining international students' experiences.⁶¹ Our findings are congruent with studies showing that these notions of "here" and "there" or "home" and "host" might indeed be reconfigured through intersecting mobilities of students' bodies and the media they consume.⁶² While "here" is usually associated with closeness and familiarity and "there" is usually associated with distance and strangeness, in this study, students could feel distance in a place that was familiar (e.g., "reverse culture shock" when going back to Vietnam). However, while notions of "here" and "there" became blurry or potentially interchangeable, the construct of distance remains relevant, especially to examine students' "in-between" identities and senses of belonging.⁶³

The idea that students are "in-betweeners"⁶⁴ rests on two presuppositions or two types of pre-conceived distances. The first presupposition is that students' sending and receiving

60. Adey et al., "Introduction"; Handel, "Distance Matters."

61. Gomes, "Footloose Transients"; Yang, "Flexible Citizens or Disconnected Transmigrants?," 240.

62. Francis Leo Collins, "Connecting 'Home' With 'Here': Personal Homepages in Everyday Transnational Lives," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35, no. 6 (July 1, 2009): 839–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830902957668>; Gomes, "Footloose Transients"; Lesko and Talburt, *Keywords in Youth Studies*; Cary Wu and Rima Wilkes, "International Students' Post-Graduation Migration Plans and the Search for Home," *Geoforum* 80 (March 1, 2017): 123–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.01.015>; Yang, "Flexible Citizens or Disconnected Transmigrants?"

63. Holloway, O'Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson, "Educational Mobility and the Gendered Geography of Cultural Capital"; Lesko and Talburt, *Keywords in Youth Studies*; Maleku et al., "The Phenomenon of Spiritual Homelessness in Transnational Spaces among International Students in the United States"; Tran and Gomes, "Student Mobility, Connectedness and Identity"; Tran and Gomes; Wang, "Self in Mobility"; Yang, "Flexible Citizens or Disconnected Transmigrants?"

64. Yang, "Flexible Citizens or Disconnected Transmigrants?," 240.

countries constitute two “poles” at a distance from one another (i.e., they are two distinct cultures and societies). The second presupposition is that students are at a distance from each of the two poles, and therefore “in-between” their sending and receiving countries (i.e., they cannot be fully affiliated with one or the other). In this study, we highlight these two types of distance, which form the basis of students’ “in-betweenness” and cosmopolitanism. In the next paragraphs, we discuss how the construction of distance firstly between Vietnam and France or Canada, and secondly between students and Vietnam, justifies and gives value to students’ international education. Thirdly, we examine how the construction of distance between students and France or Canada is situated in post-colonial dynamics. Finally, we highlight how the construction of distance is a way for students to perform “in-betweenness,” transnational belongings, and cosmopolitanism.

Firstly, students perceived and discursively reinforced a distance between Vietnam and their receiving countries in order to justify their mobility as international students. They constructed their receiving countries as desirable and distant destinations where valued education and experiences could be acquired. Since such education and experiences could not be acquired in Vietnam, the students have good reasons to move to their receiving countries. Nevertheless, their movements to receiving countries or “de-distanciation” with these countries “does not seek to make the distant identical to the proximate; rather, it is a de-distanciation that reserves the distance, as distance is a precondition for desire itself.”⁶⁵ In other words, students do not aim at deconstructing the distance between their sending and receiving countries as this distance justifies their movement from one to the other for their education.

Secondly, students constructed a distance between themselves and Vietnam. They perceived that their experience abroad (in their distant Western receiving countries) had made them different from people studying in Vietnam. For example, some participants would build on the idea of East-West duality and present themselves as more “independent” than students in Vietnam. They tended to interweave their experiences of “independence” as young adults living by themselves with hegemonic notions of “Western individualism.” Our findings about students’ distancing themselves from Vietnam and presenting themselves as different from people who

65. Handel, “Distance Matters,” 11.

study in Vietnam are congruent with other research showing how international education can serve to reproduce “social differences” with “those who have remained behind.”⁶⁶ Arguably, students are compelled to construct their receiving countries as different from Vietnam and to present themselves as different from those who studied locally in order for their experience abroad to be meaningful and valued. In other words, the construction of distance between Vietnam and France or Canada, as well as that between themselves and Vietnam, is key to the perceived value of their experiences as international students.

Thirdly, students’ perceptions of distance from receiving countries were situated in post-colonial dynamics and based on experiences of racialization and racism. “Canadianness” or “Frenchness” were associated with “whiteness,” while racialized people (including the participants) were othered. Since “whiteness” was perceived to be at the core of receiving countries’ identities, racialized students could only be at the periphery or “at a distance” from their receiving countries’ societies. Nevertheless, participants could envision transculturality or the blending of their sending and receiving countries’ cultures as an individual strategy to negotiate the distance between the two. This was especially the case in the multicultural context of Metro Vancouver, where participants navigated spaces without one dominant ethno-racial group or where the dominant group was not necessarily perceived to be white. Participants seemed to believe they could blend “Canadian” and “Vietnamese” cultures and “selectively” adopt aspects of the “Canadian” culture that best suited them.

Here it is important to note that drawing from the notion of distance does not necessarily lead to a “zero-sum understanding of belonging”⁶⁷ in which the more distant students are from one culture, the closer they get to the other. Indeed, some participants who thought that they “fit” better in their receiving countries than in Vietnam also explained how living abroad (at a physical distance from Vietnam) could enhance closeness to Vietnamese culture in new ways. They constructed proximity with their receiving country, yet this was not incompatible with building proximity with Vietnam at the same time. In fact, this finding echoes an insight from diaspora studies, which demonstrates that “dwelling here [in the receiving country] assumes a

67. Beech, “International Student Mobility,” 337; J Waters, “In Pursuit of Scarcity: Transnational Students, ‘Employability’, and the MBA,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 41, no. 8 (August 1, 2009): 1865–83, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a40319>.

68. Frello, “Towards a Discursive Analytics of Movement,” 27.

solidarity and connection there [in the sending country].”⁶⁸ Students could develop double belongings – transnational or cosmopolitan belongings. In fact, it was precisely through the construction of distance that these forms of belonging were performed.

The construction and maintenance of different degrees of distance and proximity were a way for students to perform in-between, transnational, or cosmopolitan belongings. For example, students often constructed proximity with Canada or France when they were in Vietnam, and proximity with Vietnam when they were in Canada or France, therefore positioning themselves as genuinely in-between. While studies on cosmopolitanism usually emphasize the ability to engage with and/or feel connected to multiple places and cultures,⁶⁹ our findings instead indicate that cosmopolitanism is found within the right amount of distance and proximity to different places. Constructing a certain degree of distance from one’s immediate environment could allow students to perform “readiness to disconnect with places and to be on the move” and a “rejection” of local or static belonging.⁷⁰ Then, students’ construction of distance towards Vietnam or Vietnamese culture appeared to let them position themselves in a social class of cosmopolitan individuals who can “distance [themselves] from [their] cultural background and engage in other cultures.”⁷¹

Conclusion

In this study, the notion of distance served to highlight Vietnamese international students’ engagement with different cultures. We found that the construction of distance forms the basis of students’ transnational belongings “in-between” Vietnam and their receiving countries, as well as their cosmopolitanism. Indeed, students ought to remain “in-between” and manage different degrees of distance and proximity with their sending and receiving countries for their experience abroad to be valued and for them to access cosmopolitanism.

69. James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1994.9.3.02a00040>.

70. Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc, *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*; Vertovec, *Transnationalism*.

71. Vertovec, *Transnationalism*; Yang, “Flexible Citizens or Disconnected Transmigrants?,” 227.

72. Beech, “International Student Mobility”; Frello, “Towards a Discursive Analytics of Movement,” 34; Holloway, O’Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson, “Educational Mobility and the Gendered Geography of Cultural Capital;” Igarashi and Saito, “Cosmopolitanism as Cultural Capital;” Tran, “Mobility as ‘Becoming.’”

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