

# **EUTOPIA 2024**

## **Certificate of Internationalisation**

### **Reflective Portfolio**

**Taylor Tao (Warwick University)**

#### **Cover Letter**

I am honoured to be able to participate in this intercultural experience exchange event held by EUTOPIA through the recommendation of my university instructor and to be able to share my personal experience and my thoughts and reflections on it.

The era I was born in is an era in which internationalisation and interculturalism have led to the rapid development of countries, and the relationship between countries has become closer. Everyone spreads their own culture in different ways, exchanges their own feelings, and listens to and understands other people's cultures and feelings. Some subtle intercultural experiences in daily life, such as just learning about each country's language, and costume tradition from social media platforms, and learning about each country's history and development from textbooks, have taught me how to avoid offending other people's culture and beliefs. In addition, my personal experience has also made me a person who is more respectful, more diverse, inclusive, and thoughtful.

As a bilingual individual with a rich tapestry of intercultural experiences, I am excited to present my internationalisation and intercultural journey through the following portfolio. Looking back on my 23 years of life, I was born in Shanghai, China and lived there for 16 years. In 2018, I came to the UK alone to study. I was admitted to a British international private school. This pivotal experience marked the beginning of a transformative journey that would shape my worldview and professional aspirations. Initially, I was a little overwhelmed by my shy personality, unfamiliar environment, and the impact of different cultures. However, through getting along with local students and immersive boarding life experience, I quickly learned to adapt, forging friendships that transcended cultural boundaries and while learning local culture, I also enthusiastically shared my own

culture with them, igniting a passion for bridging cultural divides. After that, I successfully passed the UK public examination and entered Durham University to start my undergraduate journey in education. Because of the nature of my education major, I discovered more different perspectives on internationalism and interculturalism and a deeper understanding of it. My fascination with intercultural dynamics led me to enrol in a module on "Interculturality and Intercultural Education." This academic pursuit not only broadened my global perspective by introducing me to Latin American cultures but also provided a platform for me to share insights about the evolving educational landscape in Inner Mongolia, China. This exchange of knowledge reinforced my belief in the power of intercultural dialogue and its potential to foster mutual understanding. Now, I am doing my master's degree in education at the University of Warwick to continue exploring the mysteries of education and to communicate and share with more students from all over the world. In addition, in the six years since I came to the UK, I have had the opportunity to travel to many European countries. During those trips, I have also learned more about culture by communicating with local people, tasting local food, and visiting local historical landscapes. To the most extent, I think the pinnacle of my intercultural journey was my internship in the UK. During my undergraduate studies, I participated in a summer internship related to my major where I was responsible for helping Chinese students experience the British culture and education system for the first time. This role allowed me to synthesize my personal experiences, academic knowledge, and cultural insights into practical guidance. More importantly, at the same time, I was able to convey the Chinese culture that students wanted to share with local teachers in English because of my bilingual advantage. I am proud to be a bridge between two different cultures.

In participating in several online seminars held by EUTOPIA, I was very happy to share my personal experiences and ideas with students and teachers from all over the world. I also learned more interesting cultures from the sharing of my classmates and lamented that everyone's experience is so colourful. The intercultural influence on us is also very profound. Meanwhile, I learned more knowledge from the teachers' teaching and comments.

I've learned that being international isn't just about travelling or speaking multiple languages; it's about being open-minded, respectful, and able to work collaboratively with people from all walks of life.

As we navigate an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to bridge cultures and foster global understanding becomes ever more crucial. I am excited about the prospect of contributing my unique perspective and skills to future intercultural initiatives, helping to drive innovation and collaboration across cultural boundaries.

I look forward to sharing more details about my journey and the competencies I've developed along the way in the attached portfolio.

## Reflective Portfolio

Intercultural experiences are transformative moments that shape our understanding of the world and our role within it. I am very grateful to my mother, who supported me to start my unforgettable intercultural journey. My journey through these encounters began when I came to the UK for my education and has continued to evolve, enriching my perspective, and broadening my horizons. With the knowledge learnt from the EUTOPIA, this portfolio reflects on three significant intercultural experiences that have profoundly impacted my personal and academic growth: my initial culture shock and adaptation upon coming to the UK, my undergraduate studies in interculturality, and my internship facilitating cultural exchanges between Chinese and British students.

### 1. First Chapter: First arrival in the UK

My first significant intercultural experience began when I came to the UK to attend a girl's independent school as an international student. This transition was marked by an overwhelming culture shock that tested my adaptability and resilience.

Arriving in the UK, I was immediately confronted with the stark differences between British and Chinese culture. The initial shock was multifaceted, affecting various aspects of my daily life:

**Language Barriers:** Despite having studied English in China, I found myself struggling with the rapid pace of native speakers and the prevalence of local accents and idioms. In my first week, I remember sitting in the dining hall, overwhelmed by the cacophony of unfamiliar expressions and inside jokes that left me feeling isolated.

**Educational System:** The British educational approach was markedly different from what I was accustomed to in China. The emphasis on critical thinking and independent research was initially daunting. In China, I was used to a more structured, teacher-led

approach. Here, I found myself expected to form and articulate my own opinions, a skill I had to develop quickly.

**Social Norms:** British social etiquette was a minefield of subtle cues I had to learn to navigate.

However, the supportive environment of the school played a crucial role in easing my transition. My peers and teachers were welcoming, and their genuine interest in my background helped me feel valued and included. The school's international student support program was instrumental in my adaptation:

**Language Support:** The school provided additional English language classes tailored for international students, which helped me improve my academic and conversational English rapidly.

**Cultural Integration Activities:** Regular cultural exchange events allowed me to share aspects of Chinese culture with my peers while learning about British traditions. These events fostered mutual understanding and respect.

I quickly realized that communication was key to overcoming cultural barriers. By engaging in conversations, participating in school activities, and making friends, I started to navigate and appreciate the nuances of British culture. For instance, joining the school's creative writing club not only improved my language skills but also helped me adapt the British culture and school life through communicating with teachers and club members.

As I adapted, I began to embrace British cultural customs. Celebrating traditional British holidays, enjoying the local cuisine, and participating in extracurricular activities such as drama and sports allowed me to immerse myself fully. These experiences not only helped me adapt but also enriched my understanding of British society.

The most impressive experience through these two years of study was when I participated in the school's 125<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration, all of us Year 13 girls spent our free time choreographing and practising a dance together. During these periods, I felt we were the same. Regardless of age, identity, race, or faith... at this moment, we were all confidently showing the power of girls.



(Figure 1: This photo was taken at the school's 125th anniversary celebration, we are from Britain, China, and Hongkong, China)

Meanwhile, while I was gradually getting used to the local British culture, I also introduced Chinese culture to my classmates and teachers. One particular experience gave me the opportunity to share Chinese customs and traditions. Because the school respects the culture of every country or ethnicity, the school decorates the school cafeteria according to the culture of the festival and prepares corresponding traditional food on special holidays. When I was in Year 12, on the first day of the Chinese New Year, the school staff hung red lanterns and posted Spring Festival couplets in the cafeteria, prepared a lot of Chinese food, and also provided chopsticks for everyone to use. During the meal, several of our Chinese classmates taught other students and teachers how to use chopsticks, I could feel that they took Chinese traditional culture seriously and respected it. We also introduced various delicious traditional dishes we might have during the Spring Festival. When I was in the math lesson, one of my math teachers asked me about some Chinese customs of celebrating the Spring Festival, such as blessings, receiving pocket money, etc. The most touching moment was when he projected the Chinese words "Happy New Year" on the big screen during the break, and wrote them on the whiteboard very carefully according to the words on the screen. This intercultural experience was not just an opportunity for them to learn about my culture but also for me to see my heritage from a new perspective. It was a transformative experience that underscored the importance of cultural exchange and mutual respect.

I think this two-year experience taught me the importance of open-mindedness and adaptability. I learned that active engagement and communication are crucial for overcoming cultural barriers. The process of adapting to a new culture enhanced my emotional intelligence and problem-solving skills. Meanwhile, it also reinforced the value of cultural exchange and mutual respect. I learned that sharing my culture can build bridges and foster understanding.

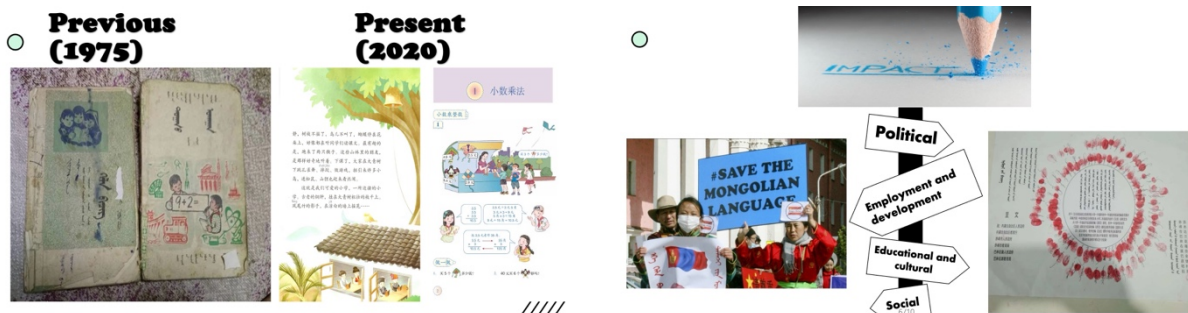
## 2. Second Chapter: Undergraduate Exploration of Interculturalism

My second significant intercultural experience occurred during my undergraduate studies when I enrolled in a module called "Interculturality and Intercultural Education." This course profoundly influenced my understanding of intercultural dynamics and the importance of intercultural education.

The course began by introducing us to key theories and concepts in intercultural communication. We explored Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which outlines the progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages in intercultural understanding. This model resonated with my personal journey, helping me recognize my own growth from the initial "denial" and "defence" stages I experienced upon arriving in the UK to the "adaptation" and "integration" stages I was now approaching. Moreover, the module introduced me to a variety of cultures, with a particular focus on Latin American culture. The instructors, who had extensive experience in Latin America, shared their insights and experiences, providing a rich tapestry of cultural practices, social norms, and historical contexts. We explored the concept of "mestizaje" in Latin American culture, which refers to the blending of indigenous, African, and European cultures. This idea of cultural hybridity fascinated me, as it presented a different model of cultural interaction compared to the more segregated approach I had observed in some other multicultural societies. This module broadened my cultural horizon and highlighted the interconnectedness of global cultures. I learned the importance of understanding diverse cultural contexts and how historical factors shape contemporary intercultural dynamics.

As part of the course assignment, our group presented findings on the changes in education policy in Inner Mongolia to classmates and instructors. The policies aimed to integrate Mongolian cultural elements into the curriculum while promoting Mandarin Chinese as the primary language of instruction. This initiative was designed to preserve Mongolian cultural heritage while ensuring students were equipped with the language skills necessary for broader national integration. In preparing for this presentation, I conducted extensive research, including finding and analysing policy documents from 1987 to 2020 and interviewing one Inner Mongolian student who had experience with the change of policy. I presented statistical data on the implementation of these policies and their impact on student academic performance, self-identity, social status and culture.

Finally, our instructor praised the presentation for its thorough research and application of theoretical concepts. She encouraged us to consider how similar challenges might be addressed in other multicultural educational contexts.



(Figures 2 and 3: Slides of my presentation)

This experience underscored the complexities of balancing cultural preservation with integration. I learned that intercultural education requires sensitivity and a nuanced approach. The process of researching and presenting this topic deepened my understanding of educational policy as a tool for managing cultural diversity.

### 3. Third Chapter: Bridging Cultures Between China and the UK

The most impactful intercultural experience of my journey was my internship in the UK, where I played a role in helping and supporting Chinese students who first time came to



the UK to learn British culture and experience the British education system. Many of them faced the same challenges I had encountered: culture shock, language barriers, and a sense of displacement. Drawing from my own experiences, I was able to empathize with their struggles and provide practical advice and emotional support.

One of my primary responsibilities was to organize orientation sessions and cultural workshops. These sessions covered various aspects of British culture, including:

**Academic Culture:** When they attend English classes taught by professional British teachers, I help the teacher encourage everyone to participate in class discussions and actively speak and share their ideas, which is a concept often unfamiliar to Chinese students.

**Daily Life:** Sessions on practical aspects of UK life, such as using public transportation.

**Cultural Activities:** My company organized trips to British cultural sites and events, such as visits to museums, and attendance at local festivals. These activities provided immersive learning experiences about British culture and history.

By providing this guidance, I aimed to ease their transition and help them feel more confident and comfortable in their new environment.

This experience taught me the importance of empathy and practical support in facilitating cultural understanding. I learned that drawing from personal experiences can significantly help others in similar situations. The process of explaining British culture to others deepened my own understanding and appreciation of it.

Since it was my first internship, my professional experience was not rich enough. In helping students adapt to the daily life in British schools, I could help them with my own experience. When I took them to various cities to visit the cultural landscape and learn about the local history and culture, I clearly realised that there were still many things I didn't understand. I also learned a lot of new things and realised that interculturalism is an ongoing thing that requires me to constantly explore, understand, absorb and then spread. This summer, after I submit this portfolio, I will continue to lead a new group of Chinese students to experience British school life and take them to various cities to

appreciate the local culture and humanistic scenery of the UK. I will introduce British culture to them more skillfully and professionally, and try to let them also know the concept of intercultural and its power.

On the other hand, as a bilingual individual with experience in both Chinese and British cultures, I found that I was uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge between these two cultures. I facilitated communication between students and faculty, helping to clarify misunderstandings and foster mutual respect. This role was incredibly rewarding, as I witnessed firsthand the positive impact of effective intercultural communication.

Key aspects of my role included:

**Language Support:** I provided interpretation during complex administrative processes and academic meetings, ensuring that language barriers didn't impede important communications.

**Cultural Context Explanation:** I often found myself explaining the cultural context behind certain behaviours or expectations to both Chinese students and British staff, fostering mutual understanding.

One memorable instance was when we held a workshop on how to identify different banknotes and coins of the British pound. The British teacher specifically introduced the information of different historical figures printed on each banknote. The students listened very carefully and were interested in it. While learning about coins, we also staged a small math competition to make it easier for everyone to distinguish the amounts of coins. Unexpectedly, after this, some students took the initiative to ask the Chinese teacher to introduce Chinese banknotes to the British teacher. When the students introduced them to the teacher, they were not shy at all. They were very confident and proud to introduce the amount represented by each banknote and the information about different historical sites printed on the back. The British teacher was also very surprised. At this moment, the students dared to try to introduce Chinese culture in English, and I helped translate and explain some difficult words. I found language can be the medium to improve interculturalism. As a bilingual person, I

thought I become a bridge that connected the British and Chinese cultures. This workshop can be said to be very successful and I will never forget it.



(Figure 4: Group photo of the entire teaching team)

(To protect students' privacy, I cannot display photos of students)

To conclude, reflecting on these three intercultural experiences, I can see a clear progression in my journey towards internationalization. Each experience built upon the previous one, enhancing my cultural competence. My initial culture shock and adaptation in the UK taught me the importance of resilience, open-mindedness, and effective communication. These lessons were reinforced and expanded upon during my undergraduate studies, where I gained a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics and the significance of intercultural education. Finally, my internship allowed me to apply these insights in a practical context, helping others navigate the challenges of intercultural exchange and fostering mutual understanding. Participation in EUTOPIA activities further broadened my perspective and strengthened my collaborative skills.

Through these experiences, I have come to appreciate the value of intercultural competence in our increasingly interconnected world. Being able to navigate and bridge different cultural contexts is not only a valuable skill but also a powerful tool for promoting empathy, respect, and collaboration. As I continue my journey, I am committed to leveraging these experiences to contribute to a more inclusive and understanding global community.