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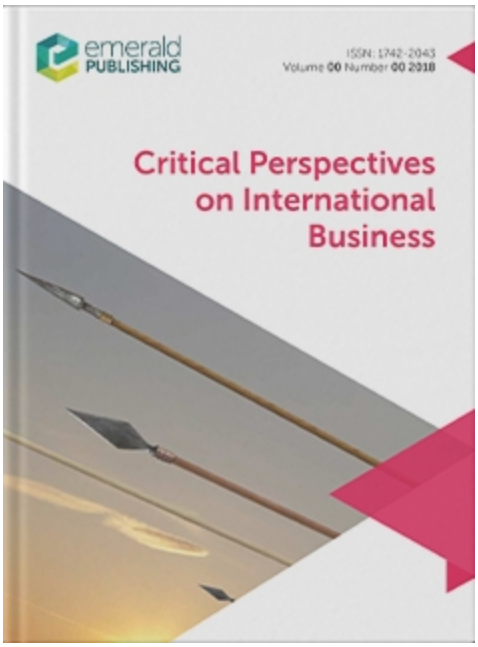

A social identity perspective on language and researchers' cultural identities in qualitative interviews in multinational corporations

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to advance knowledge in international management research about how researchers' cultural identity in fieldwork encounters may be grounded in the choice of language in multicultural and multilingual projects.

Design/ Methodology: The article is based on critical reflections on the experience of two co-authors as Chinese nationals conducting research in overseas Chinese multinational corporations in developing economies.

Findings: Drawing on social identity theory, we demonstrate that the cultural identity and cultural insider/outsider positionality of both the researcher and research participants can be shaped by language, translation and other artefacts in cross-cultural interviews, constantly being shifted, managed and renegotiated during qualitative interviewing. We highlight the politics of language which, when combined with other forms of power relations, such as the researcher's perceived status, economic development of the MNCs' home country, and the participants' organisational hierarchy, affect power distribution between the researcher and participants. Researchers often need to move from being an 'insider' to an 'outsider' and often to an 'in-betweener' at different stages in an interview interaction to balance power.

Originality: We contribute to international debates about the complex interplay of languages, politics, and identity in multilingual and multicultural qualitative research. In contributing to these literatures, we focus on the relatively under-researched Chinese MNCs in other developing countries including Mongolia and Tanzania. Recommendations for researcher training and reflexivity are proposed.

Key words

Cross-cultural research, Cultural in-betweener, Cultural identity, Insider researcher, Interviews, Language, Research method, Social identities

Introduction

IM Scholarship considers the meaning and identity-making of researchers as a key element in the construction of international management (IM) knowledge (Thomas et al., 2009), and methodological decisions at the field have a direct impact on the rigor of research (Halme et al., 2022). The complexities and challenges scholars face when researching in intercultural and multilingual contexts have received some attention in the IM field (Cohen and Ravishankar, 2012, Wegener, 2014, Halme et al., 2022). However, relatively little is known about researchers' cultural identity in such cross-cultural encounters, especially during fieldwork. Frequently, indigenous researchers/students who conduct investigations in their own cultural contexts are automatically assumed to be cultural 'insiders', who can speak the local language and have insights into local knowledge (Banks, 1998, Gheorghiu and Stephens, 2016). In contrast, those who research 'other' cultural contexts are assumed to be cultural 'outsiders', who mostly rely on English during data collection and to whom local customs and knowledge are alien (Sherif, 2001, Banks, 1998). However, this simple binary view that sees a researcher as either a cultural insider or an outsider increasingly faces criticisms (Karhunen et al., 2023). The "edge, or margin, between multiple worlds and perspectives" that researchers occupy and negotiate in the research process (Beals et al., 2020: 593) remains a significant omission in the context of research globalisation and internationalisation. Moreover, while several studies have explored the researcher's positionality, few have looked at positionality of the participants; the assumption is that the position of the participants is 'fixed' from the beginning as an insider who has local insights that qualify them to participate in the research. Here, we address the lack of understanding of cultural positionality in IM research by examining how both the researcher and participant's cultural identity may be negotiated and switched at different stages of fieldwork encounters.

Scholars have established the roles of language both in qualitative cross-cultural research (Chidlow et al., 2014, Outila et al., 2019) and in constructing individuals' cultural identity (Iwashita, 2022, Bordia and Bordia, 2015). Bordia and Bordia (2015: 416) propose a notion of 'linguistic identity' where

"individuals define themselves and others… through language use". Moreover, language is often political (Wilmot and Tietze, 2023). In MNCs, proficiency can induce power distortion between native and non-native speakers (Śliwa and Johansson, 2014). In response to recent calls for better understandings of how language shapes interaction between the researcher and participants during cross-cultural fieldwork (Lee, 2020) and a methodological focus on authentic interaction among different languages in the everyday life in IM (Karhunen et al., 2023), our purpose with this article is to advance knowledge about how the choices of language help to shape the cultural identity of both researcher and researched in fieldwork encounters in qualitative research in MNCs (Sharp, 2018). We propose that qualitative interviewing is an important empirical setting that allows researchers to reflect on the dynamics, complexity and sometimes tensions in cross-cultural encounters and researcher identity because of its ability to explore both local knowledge and the complex interplay of languages, politics, and cultural identity. In this article, we examine the experience of two co-authors in the team as Chinese nationals conducting research in overseas Chinese multinational corporations (MNCs) which employ both Chinese and non-Chinese employees. In so doing, we move away from MNCs from Western industrial countries, which have dominated IM research for decades, and offer insights into doing qualitative research in emerging market MNCs, which increasingly contribute more to international business (Budhwar et al., 2017, Outila et al., 2019). We see cross-cultural interviewing as "the collection of interview data across cultural and national borders" (Ryen, 2002: 336).

Drawing on social identity theory (SIT) (Brown, 2000, Tajfel and Turner, 1986), we reflect on how both the researchers' and participants' cultural identity may be grounded in the choice of language, translation and artefacts that the researchers made before and during the interviews. In making these choices, the cultural identities of both the researcher and the participant are shifted and renegotiated. SIT is chosen due to its strong tradition in both IM research and socio-linguistic literature (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, Bordia and Bordia, 2015, Iwashita, 2022, Karhunen et al., 2023). It enables us to

explore the complexities of language, identity and politics based on a solid theoretical framework related to IM. We demonstrate how the choice of language and sometimes translation, coupled with the use of artefacts (e.g. university email and logo), can contribute to constructing cultural identities which build power-balanced relationships to manage access and the interviews themselves. It is therefore important for multilingual researchers to constantly reflect on what works best in fieldwork to facilitate interactions with participants in multilingual and cross-cultural settings. In so doing, we develop new understandings of language and cultural identities during multilingual and cross-cultural fieldwork in emerging market MNCs. In this article, we see social identity and cultural identity as interrelated concepts: social identity here includes the researcher's identity as a doctoral researcher and the cultural identity of both researcher and participants.

We provide three contributions to IM research. First, using SIT, we show the choice of language can help researchers negotiate and reposition their cultural identity, and both the researcher and the participant can move from being 'insider' to 'outsider' and mostly to 'in-betweener' position. Second, we highlight the politics of language which, when combined with other forms of power relations, can lead to dominance and marginalisation in cross-cultural interviews. Third, we focus on Chinese MNCs and the mix of Chinese, English and local languages in a multilingual context, enhancing understanding of qualitative research methods in emerging market MNCs.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. First, we provide a brief outline of the cultural, language and research backgrounds of the two co-authors' whose research provides the context for the present study. Then we review literature about how language helps to construct social identities through an SIT approach, and show how this theoretical framework can help address researchers' cultural positionality and balance power in qualitative research in emerging market MNCs. Next, based on the experience of the above two co-authors in the team, we examine researcher positionality before and during qualitative interviews, with a specific focus on important issues of negotiating organisational

access, addressing cross-cultural conflicts, and managing politics and expectations in Chinese MNCs. We conclude by arguing for a more critical view on language and an open and flexible view on cultural identities. We propose recommendations for researcher training and reflexivity.

Background of researchers and their projects

Born and raised in China, both co-authors are female doctoral students studying in the UK. Both are native Mandarin speakers, and each can understand a couple of Chinese dialects. Author A completed her master's degree in a UK university before she commenced her doctoral study, which examined the effect of national culture on conflict management/handling approaches in Chinese MNCs operating in the UK. Her sampling strategy included convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online and audio-recorded. The process of data collection lasted nine months. Her final sample included four Chinese managers, ten Chinese employees, three British managers and eight British employees. Interviews with Chinese participants were conducted mostly in Chinese, while interviews with British participants were conducted in English. As workplace conflict is a sensitive topic, confidentiality and anonymity were key to ensure that participants felt safe to reflect on workplace communication and interactions and share examples of conflict experience.

Author B completed her master's degree in the Netherlands and then moved to the UK to pursue her PhD. Her doctoral project aimed to understand how performance management is transferred, conducted, and perceived in Chinese MNCs' overseas subsidiaries located in other developing countries. Through a theoretical lens of neo-institutionalism, her research explored the mutual influences between national institutions, organizational performance management processes, and relevant individual perceptions. Her research method included multiple case-studies with two overseas subsidiaries of two Chinese MNCs: a mining company in Mongolia and a construction project in Tanzania. The Mongolia case-study phase spanned a 7-month period with access negotiated

through a Chinese gatekeeper. Data collection involved reviewing documents related to performance management, as well as interviews with 31 staff members (Chinese senior managers, line managers and both Chinese and Mongolian employees) across different levels of these organisations. A brief interview guide was used to prompt reflection on performance management practices and individual perceptions of good performance. Aided by this experience, the length of data collection in the Tanzania subsidiary was significantly shortened to three months. Within both organisations, most documentary data were written in Chinese, and some were translated into the official language of the respective country (Mongolian or English). Most interviews were conducted in Chinese (including those with Mongolian employees who could speak Chinese to a good level). Interviews with Tanzania employees were accomplished in English.

Social identity theory and language

Social identity theory is associated with the symbolic interactionist view that the self is a product of social interaction, i.e. individuals come to know who they are through social engagement with others (Blumer, 1986). Specifically, SIT posits that individuals' social identities derive mainly from the group(s) they feel they belong to (Brown, 2000, Tajfel and Turner, 1986). There is an emphasis on self-concept, which describes how one defines, perceives and identifies oneself based on social category (e.g. nationality, gender, political affiliation) (Hogg et al., 1995). SIT has been used as a conceptual tool to analyse individual and group level behaviours in social interactions (Brewer and Yuki, 2007). Three processes have been proposed: self-categorisation, social comparisons, and social identification (Hogg and Abrams, 1999). Briefly, individuals categorise themselves into various social groups in which they feel they belong, and each one forms a social identity in their mind. This categorisation determines how individuals evaluate and behave towards others in a social structure, within which the relations among the self, group processes, and intergroup relations are located (Hogg et al., 1995). Through comparison with others, similar persons are labelled as 'ingroup' members, while those perceived to be different are considered 'outgroup' members (Hogg et al., 1995). Finally, when individuals accept

a social group as a part of the self, they derive a social identification from the group and they are psychologically linked to its fate (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

SIT suggests that social comparison and social identification often guide people's perceptions and behaviours, and that individuals who consider themselves part of a social group or community are likely to be open to and trust other 'ingroup' members who have shared experience (Hogg and Abrams, 1999). Ingroup favouritism (or bias) is prevalent among members, who are more tolerant to mistakes made by other ingroup members. Furthermore, SIT recognises that while self-concept is relatively stable, both self-categorisation and the content of social identity are dynamically responsive to immediate contextual factors (Hogg et al., 1995). Thus, one may identify a new social identity through interaction with others, and different contexts may trigger different contextually relevant behaviours contingent on the same social identity. During a qualitative interview, for instance, both the researcher and the participant can categorise themselves into new social identities through their interaction. In addition, the meaning and behaviour associated with a researcher's identity can be influenced by immediate contextual factors, such as the interview itself and the interviewee. Conversely the interviewee's social identity and insider and outsider position may also be shaped by this interview interaction.

In relation to national culture, Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015) argue that ingroup bias due to national identity and cultural identity is almost expected, as most people have a positive feeling of affiliation with their own nation and culture. Identity-based differentiations stemming from cultural backgrounds are becoming increasingly prevalent in modern organisations. In MNCs, individuals from various cultural backgrounds work together within the same workplace and form cultural groups in which people share a common history, language and other cultural aspects (Gheorghiu and Stephens, 2016). Research has demonstrated that in culturally diverse workplaces, ethnicity or cultural background is often used by employees to distinguish themselves from others and construct identities

(Yuki, 2003, Hofhuis et al., 2012, Kamau et al., 2023). Echoing Cohen and Ravishankar (2012), we argue that this organisational context is an important site to explore researchers' cultural identity not only in relation to people in various employment roles (e.g. managers and employees), but also to groups from more or less economically developed countries with different historical legacies.

Scholars have long recognised the relation between language, an important marker of identification, and the formation of a cultural identity (Lauring, 2008, Reiche et al., 2015). Early research indicates that individuals use language as a positive or negative differentiator to express ethnic identity and a language group is also an ethnic group (Giles et al., 1977). For example, in anthropology, language is seen as a symbolic guide to one's cultural identity and choice of words are considered not just tools for communication but a template for thought itself (Evans, 2015). Accordingly, one's use and response to language can be viewed as an important indicator of whether an individual is a member of a cultural group. As language is embedded in ethnicity and culture, it can also lead to inter-cultural conflicts (Bordia and Bordia, 2015, Iwashita, 2022). Following this, proponents of SIT suggest that individuals manage their social and cultural identities by continuous inclusion and exclusion through socialisation and categorisation of differences, rather than relying on the objective cultural difference in itself (Jenkins, 2004). Shared symbolic expressions used in a conversation are means of socialisation and can create social bonds between individuals and groups.

Recent scholarship from a sociolinguistic perspective, however, postulate that in multicultural and multilingual settings, such as MNCs, the relationship between language and culture should not be seen as one-to-one or static (Karhunen et al., 2023, Lauring, 2008, Lauring et al., 2022). For a multilingual speaker, language is often used as a means of self-representation, where the choice of language or linguistic terms serves as the main agent of an individual's integration into a cultural group (Lauring, 2008). Language facilitates interactions and social identifications, but is also shaped in such social processes (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992). For example, Reiche et al. (2015) found that adopting a

common language such as English in a MNC helps employees construct a shared cultural identity, which in turn encourages the sharing of tacit knowledge through employees' linguistic resources. Linguistic identity can sometimes play a more important role in defining one's self-concept than demographic attributes such as age, gender or race due to the functional and psychological barriers language creates for communication (Bordia and Bordia, 2015).

In IM research, language has been linked to the establishment of relations in multilingual settings, as sharing a common language creates emotional bonds and security between in-group members (Tenzer and Pudelko, 2020). Tenzer et al. (2014) found that in a multinational team linguistic misunderstandings can make co-workers seem less reliable and subsequently damage trust relationships in the workplace. A vicious cycle can occur when language-based barriers reduce trust formation; consequently this lack of trust between members leads to further frustration and miscommunication (Tenzer et al., 2014).

Critical researchers have also noted language's potential abilities to create dominance, social hierarchies and power imbalance between speakers (Piekkari et al., 2022, Ristolainen et al., 2023). The use of languages in MNCs may reflect historical colonial ties. Scholars warn that asymmetrical language skills can reproduce imperialist identities that impact on organisations, groups and individuals (Vaara et al., 2005, Śliwa and Johansson, 2014). For example, in a Swedish-Finnish bank, those who spoke Swedish were considered to be 'superior', while those who spoke Finnish often felt 'inferior' (Vaara et al., 2005). Boussebaa et al. (2014) make similar observations when analysing how contemporary language use can (re)produce international power relations in wider society. When coupled with other types of organisational hierarchy (such as the manager-employee relationship), language use can lead to inequality and marginalisation (Śliwa and Johansson, 2014). A junior non-native speaking employee may find it almost impossible to challenge a senior manager who is a native speaker and uses sophisticated language (Śliwa and Johansson, 2014). The dominance of English as

both a corporate language and research practice in the MNC context is seen as particularly problematic (Wilmot and Tietze, 2023). It has been argued that 'Englishisation' may reflect the dominance of Anglo-American values and knowledge in IM research (Vaara et al., 2005), where sameness rather than difference has been pursued due to "the dominance of imposed ethics, the pursuit of equivalence, and the 'hegemonic' rise of English" (Chidlow et al., 2014: 575). Yet language difference between the researcher and participants can provide both challenges and opportunities to explore new concepts and knowledge (Outila et al., 2019). Thus, researchers should be seen as part of the power relations in the construction of IM knowledge, and researcher reflexivity is key to challenge underlying assumptions about language, researcher positionality and the production of IM knowledge (Piekkari et al., 2022).

Researcher positionality and power in qualitative interviews

Rather than seeing the researcher as a neutral and detached observer or a complete outsider to the research phenomenon, extant literature has recognised that a researcher's prior knowledge, understandings, and connections to the research context or shared experience with participants can be an advantage in the research process (Xian, 2008, Wegener, 2014). In cross-cultural research, there have been very little discussion about researchers' identity as cultural insiders or outsiders. Existing literature often suggests a binary view: an indigenous researcher who can speak a local language and has local knowledge is frequently perceived to be an insider, whereas a foreign researcher who mainly uses English and has limited contextual knowledge is considered an outsider (Blix, 2015, Gheorghiu and Stephens, 2016, Rubin, 2012). A deeply ingrained understanding of a context due to one's cultural insider identity can bring benefits throughout the research process (Gümüsay and Amis, 2021). Being a cultural outsider often indicates that the researcher might struggle to access and understand the interviewee's social world from the latter's perspective (Ryen, 2002). However, there has been a recognition that the role of the researcher is not fixed in interviews (Cassell et al., 2009, Song and

Parker, 1995); in cross-cultural fieldwork in particular, the researcher cannot be seen as either an insider or outsider in every social aspect (Panini, 1991).

For example, in Song and Parker's study (1995), as their mixed-race identity revealed in the process of interactions, their cultural insider/outsider role kept changing. Interviewer and interviewee most typically perceive each other's race by physical appearance, but cultural identity sometimes plays a more important role than race/ethnicity (Song and Parker, 1995). Song and Parker's (1995) research suggests that participants have assumptions concerning the interviewer's cultural identity. Such assumptions can be made based on physical appearance, language fluency, and personal relationships, and determine perceived commonalities and differences between the researcher and the participant. Such commonalities can bring benefits, especially in helping people gain trust before interviews and establishing rapport during them. However, they also bring challenges in the interview context. As cultural identity unfolds in the interviewing process, perceived commonalities and differences might evolve, which shapes what participants choose to disclose and in what manner (Song and Parker, 1995). The result is that rapport also keeps changing during such conversations (Ryen, 2002).

Moreover, researcher positionality can also be affected by the researcher's perceived power and status. In interviews with non-elite interviewees (such as workers or junior managers), researchers are perceived to have greater power, as they often control the interview process by deciding how the interviews are conducted and which questions will be asked (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). Interviewees with a perceived lower status are unlikely to challenge the knowledge and assumptions of the researcher who is believed to be a subject expert (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). In IM research, we argue this power difference can be acerbated due to linguistic ability and cultural dominance. Gao et al. (2014) suggest that when being interviewed by English-speaking outsider researchers, Chinese middle-managers are likely to produce socially desired responses rather than revealing their own feelings. To reduce such power difference, Gao et al. (2014) recommend using semi-insider

researchers who are bilingual and have intercultural backgrounds. Indeed, in many cross-language qualitative studies, researchers tend to balance power with the participants by conducting interviews in the participants' native language (Outila et al., 2019, Xian, 2008, Zhao, 2017).

To summarise, language should not be viewed as a precondition to the formation of cultural identity differences, but, instead, can be used strategically as a symbolic tool in the negotiation of one's cultural identity (Lauring, 2008, Tenzer and Pudelko, 2020). Lauring (2008) conceptualises the relationship between language and cultural identity as being mutually constructive: whereas language provides the linguistic tools with which a cultural identity can be constructed and negotiated, a cultural identity steers individuals' use of linguistic resources to (re)position themselves in diverse identities and to evaluate the linguistic resources and identity of others. However, researchers, who traditionally guide the interview process, should be reflexive about how their linguistic practice and identity may lead to dominance and power imbalance in the interview process. In this article, we argue that in cross-cultural interviews the choice of language, translation and artefacts can help researchers negotiate and reposition their cultural and researcher identity, which helps to generate insightful data. Moreover, we demonstrate that it is often more fruitful to take a hybrid position, such as a cultural in-betweener, in which linguistic power, expectations, and conflicts between the researcher and the participant can be better balanced. We also show that participants too may renegotiate their cultural identity during this process.

Choice of language, cultural identity and power in qualitative interviewing

In this section, we explore the shifting of two co-authors' cultural identity before and during the interviews in their respective research. We specifically focus on key issues of negotiating access, building rapport, managing expectations and managing cross-cultural conflicts. In so doing, we illustrate how their cultural identity can be grounded in their choice of language and translation and how the negotiation of cultural identity and politics of language may affect the data collected.

Negotiating access

Securing access is a key issue in most qualitative research (Cassell et al., 2009). According to Reinharz and Chase (2002), perceived cultural differences can create barriers, and generally the greater the difference, the more likely interviewees feel uncertainty and discomfort. To reduce these perceived differences, the two co-authors adopted different approaches for self-categorisation and social identification while negotiating access with Chinese and non-Chinese respondents. Author A recruited respondents mainly from social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook. When approaching Chinese respondents, she emphasised her Chinese identity and positioned herself as a Chinese doctoral student keen to develop indigenous management knowledge within Chinese MNCs. All correspondence and documents were communicated in Chinese. Specifically, at the end of her invitation letter, she wrote in Chinese: "I am a Chinese person working/living in the UK just like you. I wish to hear your story." Song and Parker (1995) suggest sharing some personal information with potential participants can encourage participation and openness, as it provides a yardstick to gauge what is 'safe' to disclose. When translating the information sheet and consent form, she ensured that she had not used terminologies or concepts alien to ordinary Chinese citizens. This strategy worked well to establish herself as a culturally ingroup member among Chinese research participants who live in the UK and balance power both linguistically and for the researcher-researched relationship. Some even agreed to be interviewed before they read the detailed information sheet. For example, one respondent explained "as we are both Chinese living in a foreign country, I think we should help each other out. That is why I took part in this research". Later this respondent referred author A to another participant.

On the other hand, initially author A expected to be seen as a cultural outsider by British respondents, as she felt she had limited cultural commonalities with British people. However, author A soon realised that British people responded well when she introduced herself as a 3rd year doctoral researcher in a well-known UK university. To convince the British respondents who were busy professionals that her

project was worth the time they invested in participating, she placed emphasis on her institutional affiliation and her status as a credible researcher. Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020) suggest that perceived cultural membership must be authenticated ahead of data collection. Author A's identity as an ingroup member in the British education system was established partially using her institutional email address and university logo on relevant documents which were written in English, and partially through her researcher professionalism in responding to participants' concerns about ethics and confidentiality. British respondents tended to confirm their participation after carefully reading all relevant documents and being reassured about confidentiality.

In the case of author B, she had to negotiate her insider/outsider identity with both managers and employees, yet her relationships with these group sometimes created dilemma as a researcher. To obtain formal access to each of her case-study MNCs, she got in touch with personal contacts who referred her to senior Chinese managers in those organisations. She introduced herself as a Chinese student pursuing her doctoral degree in a UK institution and explained that her research project aimed to examine performance management in overseas branches of Chinese MNCs. Thus, from the onset, she emphasised her Chinese identity and interests in improving human resource management (HRM) practices in Chinese organisations. However, after a while she realised her shared cultural identity with gatekeepers and closeness with senior management worked as a doubled-edge sword with different groups within the same organisation. On the one hand, positioning herself as a Chinese cultural insider, she successfully obtained access to the organisations after several meetings and discussions with senior managers. For example, a senior Chinese manager who had worked overseas for many years said: "We are both Chinese and it is not easy for us to work overseas. I am willing to help and hope we can cooperate well together". To convince the gatekeepers that her project had practical value, author B established herself as a subject expert by agreeing to provide each company with a specific report based on her research findings at the end of her research. She was referred to HR managers who provided her with various documents concerning performance management

policies, including some confidential materials that were only circulated within senior management of the organisations. Author B's good relationship with top management teams of these two organisations also helped her secure interview opportunities with busy executives who provided very helpful insights into HRM strategies and practices.

Conversely, this Chinese insider position and close ties with top management teams somewhat undermined her relationship with line managers and employees, who were sceptical about the purpose of the research. As interview invitations to staff were initially written in Chinese and sent out by the respective HR department, author B was perceived to be a 'spy' sent from the top management teams. Thus, her cultural insider position did not seem to support her position as a researcher. Responses from both Chinese and local staff were sporadic despite a clear statement on confidentiality in the information sheet. A few even asked directly whether she was sent by 'the company'. To encourage participation, author B had to step away from a Chinese cultural insider position and navigate the role of an outsider using her status as an independent researcher and her association with a prestigious UK university. This strategy is similar to what Banks (1998) called an 'indigenous outsider' when an indigenous researcher has experienced high levels of cultural assimilation into an outsider culture. One approach was to resend the invitation letter and information sheet in English and using the university letterhead from author B's university email account. Another approach was to individually address concerns of confidentiality and data management and point the respondents to relevant university ethics procedures.

Building rapport

The actual interview process intensified the two co-authors' feelings of switching between cultural insider/outsider identities, and often somewhere in-between, when they tried to build rapport in the interview process. Rapport is considered to be especially important in qualitative interviewing, as traditionally respondents see researchers as outsiders to the social phenomena being studied

(Johnson, 2002). This was reflected in their choice of languages, the need to manage respondents' expectations, and the approaches used to manage cross-cultural conflicts.

First, to encourage her participants to be more forthcoming, author A started the interviews by emphasising her cultural identity as an 'in-betweener' – a Chinese doctoral student in a British university. However, when interviewing British participants, frequently she felt her cultural identity quickly turned into that of an outsider to British culture. All her British participants introduced themselves as either British or English. A significant challenge was to conduct interviews with British participants using English. As a non-native speaker, she often felt she struggled to grasp the full meaning and nuance of the conversations. This language deficit threatened author A's identity as a researcher, as she often felt she was losing control of her interviews. While she was aware of the importance of keeping the interviews flowing 'naturally', there were occasions where she had to ask her British participants to speak slowly or to provide clarification. This was particularly the case when her participants used complex sentences, slang, proverbs, or referred to concepts and terminologies that were unique to the British culture and have no equivalent in another language (Xian, 2008). Her feeling of 'outsider-ness' was particularly strong when British participants occasionally stopped and checked if she understood by asking: "Do you know what I mean?" Sometimes even after author A confirmed she did, her participants would still go on to explain the words which they thought might be difficult for a cultural outsider. For example, a British employee mentioned the word 'mediator' and asked if author A knew its meaning, and this participant still explained what 'mediator' means even after author A said she understood. At the end of her interviews, author A felt she had been re-categorised as an outsider to British culture. On the other hand, her feeling as a cultural in-betweener was often reinforced during her interviews with Chinese participants who, like author A, also lived in the UK. As her data collection progressed, author A realised many Chinese participants used the phrase 'we, the Chinese people' when they referred to Chinese living in the UK rather than Chinese people in general.

Author B also faced a number of language-related challenges regarding her cultural identity. The specifics varied depending on who was being interviewed. To combat the perception that she was too close to top management in Chinese MNCs, she also positioned herself as a Chinese researcher from a well-known UK university – an in-betweener position that is associated with her Chinese identity but independent from the Chinese MNCs and the host countries (Tanzania and Mongolia). Her local interviewees, either identified themselves as Tanzanian or Mongolian, were junior managers or workers who were at the lower end of the organisational hierarchy. Author B was aware that her association with the MNC's home country and another Western developed country (UK) might further enhance her status and create power imbalance between her and her participants. To address this issue, in the Tanzania case, interviews with local managers and employees were conducted in English, a language widely spoken by the locals due to the country's colonial legacy. As such, confusion and miscommunication often occurred as both parties were using their second language. Author B and her Tanzanian interviewees sometimes had different understandings of the same English phrase because they are both outsiders to British culture. For instance, in one interview, author B spent some time with an interviewee discussing what was meant by having a 'personal relationship' and finally came to a shared understanding. Surprisingly the type of discussion, to some extent, seemed to have helped the interviewee construct his own 'in-betweener' identity (between Tanzanian and British) and created perceived similarities between author B and her interviewee. 'Conceding linguistic power' seemed to be an effective strategy for author B to balance the perceived difference in status and reduce the participants' anxiety.

In the Mongolian case, as author B cannot speak Mongolian and local managers and employees cannot speak English, interviews with Mongolian staff were only conducted with those who could speak a moderate level of Chinese. This practice created double advantages for author B as a researcher and a native speaker. Tenzer et al. (2014) suggest those who lack language confidence often remain 'silent'

in MNCs. This was evident during the interviews. As these Mongolian respondents were not very confident in their Chinese language, they only provided short answers during the interviews. From a SIT point of view, Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015) suggest that people strive to achieve a positive social identity, which helps boost their self-esteem. It was thus necessary to reduce the power imbalance caused by the native-non-native speaker gap (Śliwa and Johansson, 2014) and enhance the Mongolian respondents' confidence. Author B often 'downplayed' her Chinese insider identity, constantly encouraging and affirming their Chinese skills, and sometimes mixed Chinese and English expressions to show that any form of language can be used to convey meanings. This strategy worked well for rapport-building by encouraging her Mongolian participants to self-categorise as 'in-betweeners' (between Mongolian and Chinese cultures), thus establishing a sense of shared experience with author B's in-betweener identity. Nevertheless, in IM research, speaking a second language may affect accuracy, authenticity and the power relations between researcher and researched (Welch and Piekkari, 2006). Author B was aware that these few interviews were conducted on the interviewer's terms not the interviewees' and could not help but speculate how speaking Chinese may have affected the Mongolian interviewees' cultural identity and what might have been disclosed if they could speak Mongolian during the interviews.

Surprisingly, both author A and author B encountered quite a few language challenges while interviewing Chinese staff, who should have shared a strong national and cultural identity with them. Confidence in the use of their mother tongue made both co-authors overlook some potential pitfalls that led to miscommunication. One problem was associated with Chinese dialects and accents. Author B, as a native Chinese speaker and a cultural insider, assumed that she would not have any difficulties understanding her Chinese participants. Yet she sometimes felt like a complete 'outsider' to her own language and culture as she struggled to understand her interviewees. For instance, one senior manager from a Southern area of China spoke Mandarin with a strong accent and sometimes mixed Mandarin with a local dialect. As a researcher, author B found it very hard to manage the conversation

as she constantly felt embarrassed and did not know how to respond. She even felt it might have been better if she presented herself as a Chinese cultural outsider and conducted the interview in English. While she felt she got some useful data during this interview, later when she transcribed the interview, she realised that she had misunderstood some details. She had to ask a friend to 'translate' some phrases for her and schedule a follow-up interview with the participant.

Another problem is related to the presumed common knowledge among members in the same cultural group. Both author A and author B had Chinese respondents telling them "You know. Things are like this in China". Then the respondents moved on to other questions without elaborating on details. Price (1987) observes that when speaking to others from the same culture, people assume that their listeners share with them similar experiences and assumptions about how the world works, and so leave out information that is believed to be 'common knowledge'. In this case, a cultural insider position did not seem to support a researcher position well. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) suggest that a reflexive researcher should have a critical assessment of what has been said as well as what has not been said in interviews, as interview contexts are often relational, cultural, and political. Both author A and author B had to carefully balance their cultural insider and outsider position by identifying this (supposedly) implicit knowledge and request the respondents to make it more explicit. Thus, a big task for the two co-authors during the interviews was to explore what has been left out because "everyone knows" by asking "What things?" or "Like what?"

Managing cross-cultural conflicts

While both author A and author B positioned themselves as cultural in-betweeners at the start of their interviews, they both felt their Chinese insider identity hindered the openness of some non-Chinese participants, especially when discussing culturally and politically sensitive topics. Author A's project was to investigate how Chinese and British staff managed conflicts in Chinese MNCs. Paradoxically she felt her British respondents tried to avoid culturally related conflicts with her. It was obvious that the

British participants were particularly mindful of their words when commenting on Chinese MNCs' policies and regulations that they disagreed with. They also tried to avoid giving overtly negative comments on Chinese cultural practices or their Chinese colleagues. For example, one British employee said "So, I think that their project management is a bit different from ours. I don't know if this is organisational or cultural. But their finance management seemed a bit…". He paused for a few seconds (as though carefully constructing his sentence) before saying: "… peculiar. They don't seem to manage the costs very thoroughly between them, the customers, and suppliers. So, contract management is very poor from my perception".

Indeed, on a few occasions, author A felt her respondents were about to say a Chinese policy/practice was "ridiculous" but then they stopped for a second and used words like "peculiar" or "interesting" instead. While author A appreciated the British respondents' effort to make their comments sound less offensive to her Chinese culture, she also worried that this politeness might hamper the quality of her data. As an in-betweener, she had to constantly guess what her respondents really meant and respond appropriately. This caused some degree of anxiety for her as a researcher. Yet sometimes she could overcome the problem by shifting her respondents to a similar in-betweener position, thus creating perceived similarities. For example, during an interview one participant mentioned he had visited Shanghai before. Author A also lived in Shanghai for a period of time. Thus, she and the participant talked about some tourist places and famous restaurants that they both like in order to remind him of his connection with Chinese culture. This short discussion thus identified aspects of the participant's experience that was subjectively meaningful and relevant to a cultural in-betweener identity in a cross-cultural interview context.

Similarly, author B noticed that many of her Mongolian and Tanzanian interviewees were careful not to talk about issues related to the Chinese government or the Chinese Communist Party even though confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the interviews. When they were prompted

for details, they were reluctant to elaborate and often said they were "not sure", and focused, instead, on more positive aspects of the Chinese culture and organisational practices and the cooperation between China and their home country. For example, a Tanzanian HR manager repeated his appreciation toward author B's research project and the hope that "this research will help finding solutions for [a] better relationship between Chinese and Tanzanians' cooperation." We speculate that China's political and economic power might be at work here. Chinese investment has been increasingly important in low-income countries (Budhwar et al., 2017). The Tanzanian and Mongolian interviewees might not have had the confidence to challenge, in their second language, assumptions from a more economically developed country to a researcher who is an insider of this country.

Managing expectations

Constantly navigating the insider and outsider position meant that both authors had to carefully manage participants' expectations, as a combined cultural insider and researcher role might inflate both authors' status and importance. This was particularly the case for author B, who adopted a case-study methodology. Many interviewees participated in the research as they were unhappy about some organisational practices. Author B's status as a doctoral student in a Western university projected her as an independent and outsider expert who could potentially influence HR policies or improve organisational practices. For example, when talking about how the Covid-19 pandemic had affected staff performance, one Chinese line manager in the Mongolian subsidiary suggested he was prepared to waive his anonymity if author B could help him to raise the issue with senior management:

> "*Regarding this issue [the impact of the pandemic on performance], I'll talk about it even if you don't ask me. There have been too few incentives available. So, if you get the chance, please convey our thoughts to senior management… I am willing to cooperate fully with you.*"

Even those who were just 'curious' about author B's project at the beginning, as the interviews progressed, became convinced that this research could help them to identify practical problems and enhance the MNC's future management practice. For example, a Chinese senior manager in the Tanzanian company said:

> "*We may have a lot of practical experience, but we need a researcher like you to study this [practice], to theorize or raise it to something conceptual, something intellectual, which is really lacking in our business but highly-valued for our future development… I admire your work so much.*"

Although author B appreciated the confidence developed through the interviews, she had to draw some boundaries about what her project could achieve. Thus, she had to carefully present her role as an independent researcher who would make recommendations to the two Chinese MNCs at the end of her project. At the same time, she emphasised her role as a student and ensured she did not come across as an insider who had strong guanxi (interpersonal relationships and favour exchange) with senior management and was able to influence decision-making within the organisations she studied.

Discussion and Conclusion

International business and management research often entails researchers working across cultural and language boundaries (Lee, 2020, Wilmot and Tietze, 2023). This article addressed researchers' cultural identity in cross-cultural qualitative interviewing through reflecting on the experience of two co-authors' fieldwork encounters in Chinese MNCs. Table 1 summarises the main themes.

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Contributions to international management knowledge

Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), we contributed to methodological debates in IM research by showing that the cultural identity of both the researcher and research participants

can be shaped and renegotiated through choices of language before and during interviews. We highlight the need for researchers to be reflexive to linguistic resources of both the researcher and participants, which may be useful in identifying, categorising and shifting each other's cultural identity through interaction.

First, we advanced knowledge about the researcher's cultural identity (Lauring, 2008, Karhunen et al., 2023) in IM research methodology by showing that in cross-cultural interviews the choice of language can help researchers negotiate and reposition their cultural identity. We demonstrated that a strategic use of language (and sometimes translation) helps construct a researcher's cultural identity, which can facilitate open relationships with research participants and thus generate insightful data. Qualitative scholars have acknowledged that management knowledge is created through collaborations and that the interview is an interaction between a participant and a researcher (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, Yeo et al., 2014). Previous research acknowledges that the insider and outsider positionality is not a fixed status but one that researchers have to constantly (re)negotiate during each interview (Adu-Ampong and Adams, 2020). As Beals et al. (2020: 600) put it, "researchers are not necessarily insiders or outsiders but edge and margin negotiators who locate the gaps and trace the moving and movable margins". Being a cultural insider or outsider creates different benefits and tensions. Through the lens of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Ashforth & Mael, 1989), we extended this knowledge by showing that there was a need to move from being an 'insider' to an 'outsider' and mostly to an 'in-betweener'. Rather than rigidly defining themselves as an ingroup or outgroup member of a culture or experiencing identity conflicts (Gheorghiu & Stephens, 2016) due to diverse cultures, researchers and participants often prefer a hybrid position of identity, such as a cultural in-betweener, which put them in a better place to balance power, expectations, and conflicts. It is therefore important for the researcher to assess how best to resonate with a respondent's cultural identity across different stages of fieldwork. Furthermore, currently there is a lack of understanding towards positionality of research participants. We showed that participants too can identify, construct,

and move between cultural identities during the interview interaction, in response to the researcher's cultural background, interview language and perceived cross-cultural conflicts. The resultant ingroup 'bias' can determine what information is disclosed and in which language. This self-categorisation and renegotiation of cultural identity has real consequences for the quality and richness of qualitative data. We added to the knowledge of positionality (Beals et al., 2020, Cohen and Ravishankar, 2012, Banks, 1998, Sharp, 2018) in IM research.

Second, this article contributed to a growing body of language-sensitive literature in IM research (Chidlow et al., 2014, Outila et al., 2019, Piekkari et al., 2022). The choices of language and translation when researching in MNCs reflect a diversity of cultural identities in which a researcher can see herself and be perceived by the participants. However, we highlight the politics of language which, when combined with other forms of power relations, such as the researcher's perceived status, economic development of the MNCs' home country, and the participants' organisational hierarchy, affect power distribution between the researcher and the participants. In line with recent research (Outila et al., 2019, Halme et al., 2022), we argue the need to balance power is particularly important when interacting with communities in low-income countries and vulnerable participants occupying lower positions in organisational hierarchies. Power dynamics in fieldwork affects the production of knowledge, and cultural norms and language issues may affect what is said and not said. We argued that the use of language as part of 'responsive interviewing' (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 36) leads to more power-balanced interviews, where choices of both parties will impact on questioning and answering. Language, as we demonstrated, can be used strategically by the researcher to form psychological connections, negotiate cultural identities, and balance power with various stakeholders during fieldwork. In multicultural and multilingual interviews, cultural and linguistic identities are fluid and emerging. Often an in-betweener identity facilitated by a shared language (either Chinese or English in our examples) works better for both parties to establish a shared in-betweener position to reduce power difference.

Third, we focused on Chinese MNCs, which are very different from MNCs from industrialised countries, in terms of history, organisational culture, dominant language, and management practice (Budhwar, et al., 2017). We went beyond understanding the use of English language in MNCs and demonstrated the politics and tension in a multilingual context (mix of Chinese, English and local languages) in terms of power relations and constructing cultural identities. Our experiences show that researchers should carefully consider the institutional and linguistic context before and during qualitative interviewing. We enhanced understanding of doing qualitative research in emerging market MNCs (Outila et al., 2019), which are increasingly playing important roles in the global economic landscape.

Implications for research practice and researcher training

This article highlighted the importance of languages in shaping cultural identities of both the researcher and the participants, which in turn impacted on power relations and the data collection process. In the context of research globalisation and internationalisation, an increasing number of projects have been directed to addressing global challenges, e.g. those identified as crucial for achieving the UN's sustainable development goals. Frequently these projects required both scholars from Western developed countries and indigenous researchers who have personal insights to work with respondents to produce knowledge that are situated across cultural and linguistic boundaries. We make the following recommendations. First, we proposed that to be successful in such culturally and linguistically diverse research projects, researchers (and especially those in the early stages of their careers), need to develop cultural sensitivity and linguistic reflexivity (Tietze, 2018). This can include an understanding of the spectrum of languages available to both the researcher and research participants and the implications of using each language on power dynamics. Second, researchers should be acquainted with reflexivity skills during fieldwork, critically exploring how their own cultural 'baggage', personal background, and language can intersect with the researcher-participant relationship and hierarchies in organisations; power relations which in turn may lead to dominance

and marginalisation in the research process. Third, researchers should not avoid asking participants to challenge dominant assumptions in their organisations. It is, however, important to wait until rapport has been established after power distribution and cultural identities of both parties have been carefully managed.

Moreover, the last few decades have seen a growing number of doctoral students and researchers from 'other' cultures who study or work in Western institutions in developed English-speaking countries (e.g. US, UK, Australia and Canada), but conduct research within their own countries or cultures. For Western universities that offer doctoral training programmes, we argued that merely celebrating cultural diversity and improving international students' English deficits may not be enough. Pedagogy design should recognise the intellectual merit of multilingualism in theorising and making original contributions to knowledge in social science subjects (Singh, 2017). Research methodology training can include reflexive sessions that encourage students to use their full linguistic resources for data collection and theory-building. Although a researcher's cross-cultural and linguistic competencies can be developed throughout the course of one's career, professional development workshops offered within research communities that aim to share experience and pedagogic toolkits that provide helpful advice can facilitate capacity building.

Limitations and directions for future research

The mutual relationship between language and cultural identities we discussed here is based on the experience of two indigenous researchers who are Chinese nationals studying in a UK university. Both of their doctoral projects involved qualitative interviewing with Chinese and non-Chinese staff in overseas Chinese MNCs. Their personal backgrounds probably place them in a unique position to explore and deploy a cultural in-betweener identity to facilitate fieldwork in a multi-cultural and multilingual environment. Other researchers (e.g. indigenous researchers in China or Western researchers conducting fieldwork in a developing country) may have very different experiences. We

encouraged future scholarship to explore cultural positionality in other cross-cultural contexts and using other methodologies such as organisational ethnography or action research. Future work can also examine how other social categories (e.g. gender, age, religion, disability) may intersect with language and cultural identity of both the researcher and the participant in an interview context and how both parties navigate the complex layers of assumptions to manage power dynamics.

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Table 1: Choice of language, cultural identity and power in qualitative interviewing

	Researcher identity	Interviewee identity
Negotiating access	• The researcher has strong power when they are both a native speaker and cultural insider, and control the interview. But the researcher can be perceived as a 'management spy'. • The researcher can use English and university artefacts and culturally moves to an in-betweener position to balance power.	• Interviewees are perceived as cultural insiders in their own culture and language. • Interviewees who are at the lower levels of the organisational hierarchy may feel they have little power in the research and thus be reluctant to participate.
Building rapport	• The researcher moves to a cultural in-betweener position by emphasizing her international experience. • The researcher may feel like an outsider and not in control of the interview if conceding too much linguistic power to interviewees who are native speakers or use a dialect. • The researcher deliberately concedes linguistic power to interviewees who are non-native speakers to encourage authentic responses. • The researcher may deliberately move to an outsider position so that her interviewee would not omit 'common knowledge' that might otherwise be taken for granted.	• Interviewees who are native speakers gain linguistic power as cultural insiders. • Interviewees who are both at the lower levels of the organisational hierarchy and use their second language may be marginalised as they may see themselves as cultural outsiders and not in control of the research. • Interviewees can move to an in-between position when they are reminded of their cross-cultural experience, and when language proficiency is downplayed.
Managing cross-cultural conflicts	• The researcher may manage cross-cultural conflicts by moving to an in-betweener position.	• Interviewees may try to avoid cross-cultural conflicts with the researcher who is seen as a cultural insider. • Interviewees who feel they are cultural outsiders to the MNC may feel reluctant to challenge cultural assumptions.
Managing expectations	• The researcher may emphasize their role as an outsider to the MNC in order to manage expectations about what the research can achieve.	• Interviewees from low positions in the organisational hierarchy may expect the researcher who is seen as a cultural insider and subject expert to achieve outcomes beyond the research itself.

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We would like to thank Professor Sinkovics for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our paper. Further, we thank you, the reviewers for your thoughtful and insightful comments which we believe have helped us to strengthen this revised submission considerably. In addition to the responses to your comments as outlined below, we have highlighted the changes we made to the original manuscript in red.

Thanks for your support of our work.

Reviewer 1	**Response**
Recommendation: Accept	Thank you for your support
Reviewer 2	**Response**
1. The terms social identity and cultural identity: The title of the paper talks about social identity, the abstract about cultural identity. You seem to talk about these two terms as synonyms, however, they are different, even though overlapping. I find you writing about both of them: social identity of the researcher, and cultural identity of both the researcher and the research participants. I suggest that you articulate more clearly, what you focus on in your paper and how those two terms are related to each other.	Thank you for pointing out this. We have clarified on p4 how the two concepts are related to each other.
2. When talking about the research participants, you sometimes use the term 'researched', 'participants', 'interviewees' and 'respondents'. I suggest using 'research participants' rather than 'researched', since this term has been commonly used in most IB research papers. Using the term 'interviewees' in relation to interviews makes sense.	We have removed the term 'the researched'. Now we use the term 'participants' throughout the paper.
3. I found the table helpful in following your research findings. Perhaps you could place the table in the findings chapter and structure your findings based on the table. I found the current findings chapter a bit hard to follow, so perhaps subtitles could provide clarity. Instead of having the titles 'before interviews' and 'during interviews', the titles could focus on the findings based on the table.	The subheadings in the Findings section align with the themes on the Table. We use the following themes - 'negotiating access', 'building rapport', 'managing cross-cultural conflicts and 'managing expectations'.
4. I encourage you to carefully think about your contributions. The first and the third contribution seem to talk about the same topic. Perhaps it would make sense to combine them. Three contributions in general are a good number of contributions.	We have combined the first and third contributions on p23.
5. You also could more clearly state your contributions in the introduction. "We provide	We now outline briefly our contributions in the Introduction on p4.

x contributions to x research. First, second, third.	