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# The role of L2 WTC and accommodative encounters with locals in Mainland Chinese students' sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

It remains unclear what role language use and communication with locals play in Mainland Chinese students' (MCSs') sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong. To address this gap, the present study took a language and social psychology approach by invoking Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Willingness to Communicate in a Second Language (L2 WTC). Survey data were collected from 372 MCSs. A path analysis model delineated the relationships between MCSs' Cantonese confidence, Cantonese WTC, accommodative encounters and contact with locals, and their sociocultural adaptation. The follow-up multiple regression analysis examined the paths between accommodative encounters and the variables they directly predicted (i.e. Cantonese confidence and quality of contact). The results revealed that among the CAT strategies of interpretability, discourse management, interpersonal control, and emotional expression, emotional expression carries the most weight in predicting Cantonese confidence and quality of contact. The findings offer fresh theoretical insights and valuable practical implications.


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Willingness to Communicate  
in a Second Language

Mainland Chinese students (MCSs) are the predominant non-local student population in Hong Kong and their numbers have been increasing steadily. For example, they increased from 12,322 in 2018/19 to 16,231 in 2022/23, accounting for about 68.2% and 74.8% of non-local students and more than 12.2% and 15.8% of the cohorts, respectively (University Grants Committee [UGC] 2023). Despite Hong Kong being a special administrative region of China, it is still challenging for MCSs to communicate with locals and adapt to Hong Kong (Jia and Yeung 2023; Wu, Watson, and Baker 2024; Yu, Mak, and Bodycott 2021). Linguistic and cultural boundaries between MCSs and Hong Kong locals separate them into distinct groups. For example, while Mainland China uses Mandarin as the only official language, Hong Kong features a multilingual environment with Cantonese, English, and Mandarin as its principal languages, and Cantonese is what locals prefer to use for day-to-day interactions (HKSAR Government 2019). Communication between MCSs and Hong Kong locals is often intergroup in nature because these encounters often render the contextual salience of their social group membership (i.e. MCS vs Hong Kong local; Tajfel and Turner

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1986). Intergroup communication difficulties present challenges for MCSs to integrate into the Hong Kong local community (Ladegaard 2017; Wu, Watson, and Baker 2024) and investigations of MCSs' adaptation from an intergroup communication lens are needed.

Research has shown that sojourning students' host language confidence, which is often an L2 to them, and their willingness to communicate in this language (L2 WTC) are crucial for their adaptation to host destinations (Aoyama and Takahashi 2020; Clément, Noels, and Deneault 2001; Gallagher 2013; Noels, Pon, and Clément 1996; Wu, Occhipinti, and Watson 2023). The construct of L2 WTC emphasises intergroup communication and recognises that more often than not, an individual's social group identities, such as ethnic membership, are more salient in a communicative encounter than the personal aspects of their identities such as their particular likes and dislikes. The literature on L2 WTC has primarily focused on Western countries (e.g. Dewaele and Dewaele 2018; Gallagher 2013) or English language classroom settings in Eastern contexts (e.g. Wen and Clément 2003). It has remained largely unknown to what extent L2 WTC lends itself to L2s other than English and what insights L2 WTC can provide in relation to non-local students' everyday interactions with locals and their adaptation to Eastern cultural contexts. The current paper addresses this gap by examining the role of MCSs' L2 confidence (i.e. Cantonese confidence) and L2 WTC in their adaptation to Hong Kong.

L2 WTC's focus on the dynamics of intergroup communication draws connections with Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991). CAT seeks to describe, explain, and predict how people negotiate their identities when speaking to an *ingroup* (i.e. a member of their own social group) or *outgroup* member (i.e. a member of another social group). L2 WTC and CAT attend to different aspects of intergroup encounters and, together, can better account for such communication (Wu, Occhipinti, and Watson 2023). Preliminary connections between these two theories have been drawn (Wu, Occhipinti, and Watson 2023; Wu, Watson, and Baker 2024), but how locals' communicative behaviours influence non-local students' L2 WTC and cross-cultural adaptation remains unclear. The present paper fills this gap.

This paper draws on L2 WTC and CAT to explore MCSs' sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong. Sociocultural adaptation refers to an individual's abilities and skills 'required to manage everyday situations (e.g. shopping) and aspects of living in a new culture' (Searle and Ward 1990, 454) and is concerned with the sense of 'fitting in' (Ward and Searle 1991). Specifically, we answer two research questions: (a) What are the relationships between MCSs' confidence in Cantonese (Cantonese confidence), willingness to communicate in Cantonese (Cantonese WTC), perceived accommodative encounters and contact with Hong Kong locals, and their sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong; and (b) to what extent do CAT accommodative strategies contribute to MCSs' sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong? The findings of the current study provide unique insights into MCSs' sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong from the lens of intergroup communication and bring novel theoretical contributions to the intergroup communication literature.

## Literature review

### *L2 WTC, L2 confidence, contact, and adaptation*

L2 WTC refers to 'a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2' and represents the most immediate antecedent of a speaker's L2 use (MacIntyre et al. 1998, 547). It brings together linguistic, communicative, and psychological approaches to L2 research and takes into consideration individual, situational, linguistic factors to explain L2 use (MacIntyre 2007). An individual's decision to converse in an L2 is 'an act of volition' and the moment when they decide to engage using the L2 or simply remain silent must be better understood (MacIntyre 2007, 569). In the same vein, what improves or inhibits their intention to use the L2 should also be better understood. Wen and Clément (2003) suggested that L2 WTC would be more complex in the Chinese setting because of the deep-rooted influences from Chinese

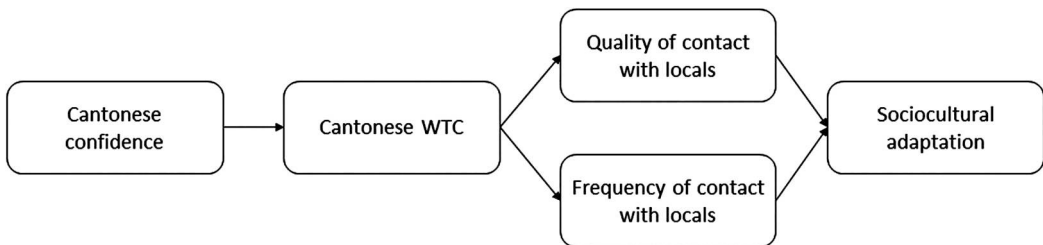
philosophy and culture such as Confucianism. L2 WTC receives direct effects from L2 confidence, which refers to an individual’s confidence in using an L2 (MacIntyre et al. 1998). An individual’s overall L2 confidence is often measured through perceived L2 competence and the concomitant level of anxiety when using the L2 (e.g. Aoyama and Takahashi 2020; Clément 1986; Noels and Clément 1996).

Sojourning students’ contact with host nationals, both frequency and quality, connects their L2 confidence and L2 WTC with their cross-cultural adaptation. Students with relatively higher host language competence tend to demonstrate a higher level of confidence and L2 WTC (Aoyama and Takahashi 2020; Ward and Kennedy 1993; Wu, Occhipinti, and Watson 2023; Yeh and Inose 2003). High L2 WTC can increase contact with host nationals and enhance adaptation (Aoyama and Takahashi 2020; Du and Wei 2015; Gallagher 2013). This contact is a significant source of information on the host culture and is essential for sojourning students’ development of cultural knowledge and competence (Tsang 2001; Wilson, Ward, and Fischer 2013). As such, it is positively related to socio-cultural adaptation, which is rooted in the social learning model and underscores the acquisition of skills and behaviours that are culturally appropriate (Searle and Ward 1990; Ward 2022). The literature informs a conceptual model. As depicted in Figure 1, Cantonese confidence predicted Cantonese WTC, which then predicted quality and frequency of contact with locals, and, ultimately, these two contact aspects predicted MCSs’ sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong.

**CAT and L2 WTC**

CAT (Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991) describes and explains how people construct and negotiate their social identities through the use of language. It aims to explain individuals’ interactional adjustments with others as well as recipients’ responses to them (Giles, Edwards, and Walther 2023). Accommodative encounters are often regarded as pleasant and feature a climate of politeness, friendliness, or respect. Non-accommodative interactions, on the other hand, are often associated with a sense of rudeness, tension, or even hostility. The five primary accommodative strategies that sit at the core of CAT are approximation, interpretability, discourse management, interpersonal control, and emotional expression. These strategies have been contextualised in communication between MCSs and Hong Kong locals and explained their pertinence to the current research context (see Wu, Watson, and Baker 2024 for a detailed explanation). Hong Kong locals’ accommodative behaviours as perceived by MCSs are imperative for MCSs’ intention to speak to them and evaluations of the local community (Wu, Watson, and Baker 2024).

Both L2 WTC and CAT recognise the interpersonal aspect of an interaction but highlight intergroup features. CAT considers how an individual’s cognitions and emotions influence their communicative behaviours as conversations unfold, whereas L2 WTC concerns their intentions to enter interactions using the target L2. Hence, L2 WTC can be seen as the precursor for intergroup communication to occur. Despite these connections, only a few studies invoked both theories simultaneously to study intergroup communication. For example, Baker and Watson (2015) invoked WTC and CAT to study patients’ willingness to communicate with their doctors, but they focused



**Figure 1.** The conceptual model informed by the literature.

on L1 WTC rather than L2. Wu, Watson, and Baker (2024) researched communication between MCSs in Hong Kong and Hong Kong locals and found that locals' communicative behaviours were crucial for MCSs' intention to speak Cantonese. This put forward potential links between CAT and L2 WTC, but no relevant variables were measured because of the qualitative nature of their study. Later, using a survey design, Wu, Occhipinti, and Watson (2023) identified the mechanism by which these two theories were connected and provided empirical foundations for using both theories to understand intergroup communication. Built on their findings, the current study examines specific accommodative strategies and addresses Giles et al.'s (2023) calls for examining communication accommodation alongside other social phenomena (i.e. sojourning students' sociocultural adaptation) and invoking other theoretical models together with CAT to yield fruitful results (i.e. L2 WTC).

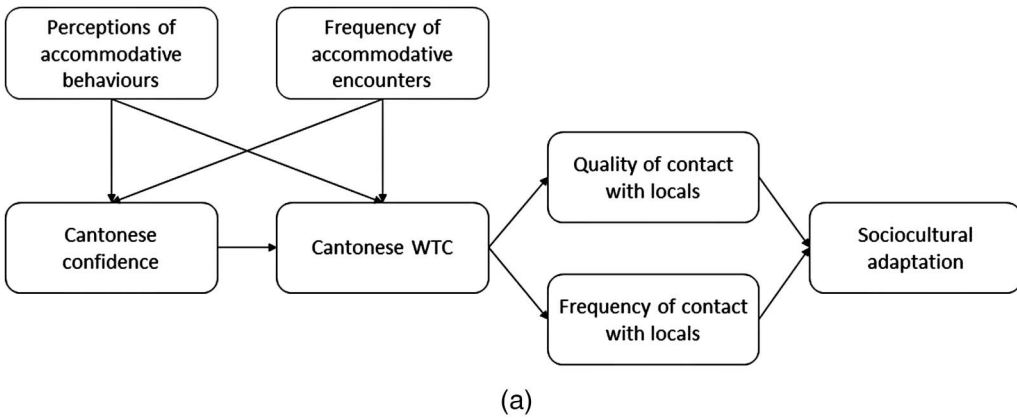
Accommodative communication is a determinant of positive interactions between sojourners and host nationals (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001). Knowing what makes sojourners willing to speak to host nationals in the host language is fundamental to active intergroup contact and sojourners' L2 learning. Using MacIntyre's (2007, 571) terms, accommodative behaviours of an L1 speaker can be considered as a 'driving force' for sojourners' L2 WTC, while non-accommodative behaviours can function as a 'restraining force'. Drawing on CAT, we investigate MCSs' perceptions of Hong Kong locals' accommodative behaviours and frequency of experiencing these behaviours from locals. As shown in Figure 2a, the proposed model incorporated these two CAT variables into the conceptual model informed by the literature. Specifically, MCSs' perceptions of locals' accommodative behaviours and frequency of accommodative encounters with locals predicted both their Cantonese confidence and WTC.

### ***Language, intergroup communication, and MCSs' adaptation to Hong Kong***

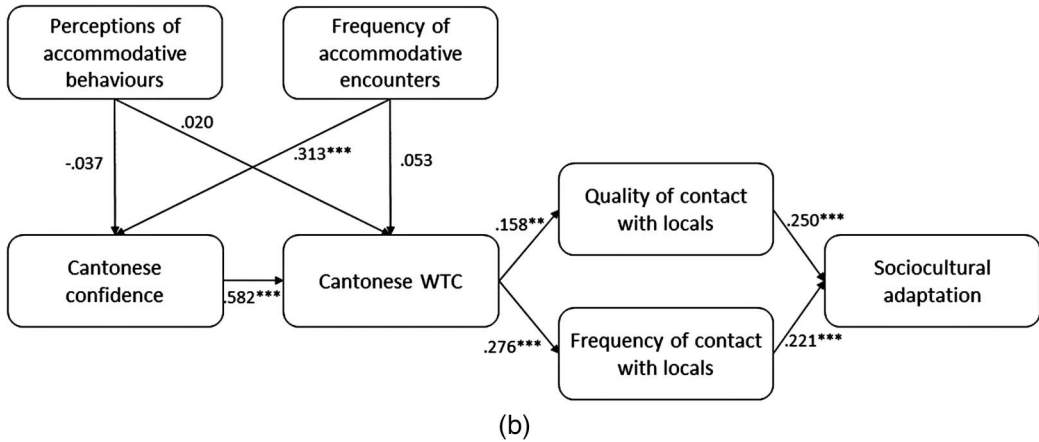
Hong Kong's multilingual environment imposes challenges for MCSs' adaptation (Cheung 2013; Jia and Yeung 2023; Sung 2022). Language barriers make it difficult for them to participate in social events with locals (Bhowmik, Cheung, and Hue 2018) and lead to limited contact and superficial relationships (Cheung 2013; Jia and Yeung 2023; Yu, Mak, and Bodycott 2021). MCSs regard Cantonese as the 'language for integration' (Sung 2022, 720) and a key facilitator for their adaptation (Wu, Watson, and Baker 2024). Wu, Watson, and Baker (2024) suggested that MCSs' behaviour of using Cantonese when speaking to locals signals their attempts to converge towards locals linguistically and decrease the social distance between them. MCSs tend to construct Cantonese as a key marker of the local identity and Mandarin as that of the Mainlander identity, accentuating intergroup differences (Sung 2022). They seem to associate accented Cantonese with 'a non-local identity', which results in a sense of 'otherness' and social exclusion (Sung 2022, 721).

Although Cantonese competence and interactions with locals are pivotal for MCSs' well-being and adaptation, most studies on this topic were not driven by theories addressing the intergroup aspect of language use. Wu, Watson, and Baker (2024) invoked CAT to understand communication between MCSs and Hong Kong locals, which features the first study on this topic driven by intergroup communication theory. Their findings suggested that Cantonese ability facilitated MCSs' adaptation by reducing confusion and frustration and enhancing effective communication. Accommodative encounters with locals can promote MCSs' sense of fitting in and enhance life satisfaction. They proposed the potential for L2 WTC to complement CAT in accounting for intergroup communication by explaining MCSs' behavioural intentions. Wu, Occhipinti, and Watson (2023) conducted a quantitative study to examine how these two theories were connected. Their findings indicated that MCSs' frequency of accommodative encounters with locals enhanced perceived Cantonese confidence and WTC, which promoted their psychological adaptation. Yet, it remains unclear how CAT and L2 WTC contribute to MCSs' sociocultural adaptation and how locals' specific accommodative strategies influence their adaptation outcomes. The present study addresses this gap.

**The Proposed Model**



**The Proposed Model with Path Coefficients**



**Figure 2.** (a) The proposed model; (b) The proposed model with path coefficients. Note. Asterisks (\*) indicate significant path coefficients \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**The present study**

The present study aims to provide a fuller understanding of the role of intergroup communication in MCSs’ sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong by addressing two research questions:

1. What are the relations between MCSs’ Cantonese confidence, Cantonese WTC, perceptions of locals’ accommodative behaviours, frequency of accommodative encounters, quality and frequency of contact with locals, and their sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong?
2. To what extent do CAT strategies contribute to MCSs’ sociocultural adaptation?

The variables under investigation feature psychological and conceptual constructs that do not allow direct observation. A survey design was employed because survey instruments allow for the operationalisation of abstract variables (Wagner 2015). Quantitative data were collected and used to address these research questions. This study is part of a larger mixed-method research project.

## Method

### Data collection

We obtained ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Reference Number: HSEARS20221108002-01). Convenience and purposive sampling (Meltzer, Naab, and Daschmann 2012) was used. Eligible respondents were MCSs who originated in Mainland China, were enrolled in Hong Kong higher education institutions on a non-permanent visa at the time of data collection, spoke Mandarin as their L1, and were aged over 18. Those who fulfilled these criteria but also spoke Cantonese as their L1 were excluded because Cantonese is the target L2 in this study.

Qualtrics was used for survey administration (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>). An advertisement that contained the objectives, respondent eligibility, and a QR code for the online survey was posted at six major universities in Hong Kong. Respondents were first presented with an information sheet that introduced the background and objectives of the study, which highlighted that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Respondents were required to provide consent before being directed to the survey. An incentive of HK\$25 (equivalent to US\$3) cash reward was offered to respondents who provided a valid response.

### Respondents

A total of 372 eligible Mainland Chinese students were included in this study. They all originated in Mainland China and spoke Mandarin or local dialect(s) as their first language(s). They were aged between 18 and 40 ( $M = 23.80$ ,  $SD = 3.33$ ). The length of residence in Hong Kong ranged from 2 to 60 months ( $M = 14.80$ ,  $SD = 13.90$ ). Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 372).

Demographic characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	139	37.4
Female	231	62.1
Others	2	0.5
Age		
18–25	282	75.8
26–30	76	20.4
Over 30	14	3.8
Study Programme		
Undergraduate	81	21.8
Master's	195	52.4
Doctoral	91	24.5
Others	5	1.3
First language		
Mandarin	237	63.7
Dialect(s)	19	5.1
Mandarin and dialect(s)	116	31.2
Place of Origin		
East China	120	32.3
South Central China	119	32.0
North China	59	15.9
Southwest China	30	8.1
Northeast China	26	7.0
Northwest China	19	5.1

Note. One respondent entered both Henan Province (Central China) and Guangdong Province (South China) as her place of origin. There were 22 provinces, five autonomous regions, and four municipalities in Mainland China, and the respondents in the present study covered 21 provinces (no respondents from Qinghai Province), four autonomous regions (no respondents from Tibet), and all four municipalities.

## Instruments

The questionnaire contained five instruments. Four were adapted from widely used scales in the field, and the fifth scale was tailored for the current study to assess MCSs' perceived accommodative encounters with Hong Kong locals. The questionnaire was administered in Simplified Chinese, which was the respondents' L1. The first author (XW) translated the scales from English into Chinese, and then another researcher who speaks Mandarin as the L1 and English as an L2 back-translated them into English. This back-translated version was compared with the original English scales. Any meaningful discrepancies were discussed among the research team and reconciled. Twelve eligible MCSs were recruited to pilot the questionnaire. Any items that they found unclear were discussed among the research team and revised accordingly. These 12 MCSs were excluded from the present study. The questionnaire included three attention-checking items to improve data quality.

## Sociocultural adaptation

The Revised Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (Wilson et al. 2017) was adapted to measure respondents' sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong. This scale consisted of seven items and responses ranged from 1 (*not at all competent*) to 5 (*extremely competent*). The mean scores were calculated. Higher scores indicate higher levels of competence and positive sociocultural adaptation. A sample item is, 'obtaining community services I require in Hong Kong.' Cronbach's alpha reliability was .79.

## Cantonese confidence

Cantonese confidence was a composite variable measured by Cantonese use anxiety (reversed) and perceived Cantonese competence. Cantonese use anxiety was adapted from the English Use Anxiety Scale (Clément and Kruidenier 1985). It consisted of nine items that measured respondents' level of anxiety when using Cantonese. Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Negative items were reverse-coded. The mean scores were calculated. Lower scores indicate lower levels of anxiety. A sample negative item is, 'I feel uneasy whenever I speak Cantonese'. Cronbach's alpha reliability was .90. Perceived Cantonese competence was measured by a scale adapted from Clément et al.'s (1994) study. It assessed respondents' self-perceived Cantonese competence in reading, speaking, writing, and comprehension. Responses ranged from 1 (*no competence at all*) to 5 (*extremely high competence*). The mean scores were calculated. Higher scores indicate perceptions of higher Cantonese competence. Cronbach's alpha reliability was .89. The Cantonese confidence scores were the mean scores of Cantonese use anxiety (reversed) and perceived Cantonese competence. Higher scores indicate higher levels of Cantonese confidence.

## Cantonese WTC

In line with MacIntyre et al. (2003), the Willingness to Communicate Scale devised by McCroskey and Baer (1985) was adapted to assess respondents' willingness to communicate in Cantonese. Respondents rated the percentage of time they would decide to speak in Cantonese across three contexts (i.e. group discussion, meetings, and interpersonal conversations) and three receiver types (i.e. stranger, acquaintance, and friend). Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). This scale included eight filler items, which were excluded from the analysis. The mean scores of the remaining nine items were calculated. Higher scores indicate higher Cantonese WTC. A sample item is, 'talk with a friend in Cantonese while standing in line'. The Cronbach's alpha reliability index was .96.

## Contact with locals

This scale was adapted from the measure of frequency and quality of contact between the dominant and non-dominant groups used by Clément and Noels (1992). Respondents rated their frequency and quality of contact with Hong Kong locals in five different domains. These domains were 'in my

neighbourhood', 'among my friends who are Hong Kong locals', 'among the local students with whom I have regular social contact', 'among the local salesclerks in the stores where I shop', and 'among the local waitpersons in the restaurants I visit'. Responses ranged from 1 (*extremely infrequent; extremely unpleasant*) to 5 (*extremely frequent; extremely pleasant*). The mean scores were calculated for frequency and quality. Higher scores indicate higher frequency and higher quality of contact. The Cronbach's alpha indices for reliability were .70 for frequency and .68 for quality.

### **Accommodative encounters with locals**

To our knowledge, there was no available scale assessing sojourning students' accommodative encounters with host nationals. Therefore, this measure was specifically designed for this project (for a full account of the development of this measure, see Wu, Occhipinti, and Watson 2023). This measure included 22 items evaluating four CAT accommodative strategies (i.e. *interpretability, discourse management, interpersonal control, and emotional expression*). A sample item is, 'The locals show patience if I have difficulties understanding what they are saying in Cantonese'.

Respondents rated each item on two separate scales. The first scale focused on their perceptions of locals' accommodative behaviours and required them to rate the extent to which they would be encouraged to communicate in Cantonese by these behaviours. Responses ranged from 1 (*not encouraged at all*) to 5 (*strongly encouraged*). The second scale measured the frequency they experienced these particular accommodative behaviours from locals. Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Negative items were reverse-coded. The mean scores were calculated. Higher scores indicate that they perceived these behaviours as more encouraging and higher frequency of accommodative encounters. The Cronbach's alpha indices for reliability were .93 for the first scale and .90 for the second.

### **Data preparation and analytic plan**

A total of 613 survey responses were collected in 2023. Data cleaning was conducted. Incomplete responses (156, 25.4%) and responses provided by ineligible respondents (28, 4.6%) or of poor quality (46, 7.5%) were removed. Eleven (1.8%) outliers who had resided in Hong Kong for over 60 months were identified and excluded. The remaining 372 (60.7%) responses were used for statistical analysis.

These 372 responses were first explored with descriptive statistics. These were all complete survey responses so there were no missing data. The skewness and kurtosis values suggested that the data were normally distributed. To address the first research question, a path analysis was performed to test the proposed model via structural equation modelling (SEM) using Mplus 8.0 (Muthén and Muthén 2017) with maximum likelihood estimation. Model chi-square is subject to the influence of sample size and may end up significant even with only minor misspecification (Marsh, Hau, and Wen 2004). Therefore, other criteria (Hu and Bentler 1999) were also used to determine model fit: (a) the Comparative Fit Index (CFI,  $\geq .95$ ); (b) the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI,  $\geq .95$ ); (c) the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA,  $\leq .06$ ); and (d) the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR,  $\leq .08$ ). If needed, the model would be respecified based on the results of chi-square, the global and local fit indices, and modification indices. After an empirical model was yielded, to address the second research question, multiple regression analysis was conducted to further examine the path(s) between accommodative encounters and the variable(s) that they directly predicted. Specifically, in the analysis, the four accommodative strategies were the independent variables (i.e. the predictors), and the variable(s) that they directly predicted were dependent variables (i.e. the outcome variables).

## **Results**

Inspection of the correlations (see Table 2) revealed that the outcome variable, sociocultural adaptation, was significantly associated with all the other variables except MCSs' perceptions of locals'

**Table 2.** Correlations and descriptive statistics (N = 372).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Cantonese confidence	–						
2. Cantonese WTC	.60***	–					
3. Perceptions of accommodative behaviours	.04	.05	–				
4. Frequency of accommodative encounters	.30***	.24***	.23***	–			
5. Quality of contact	.16**	.16**	.14**	.44***	–		
6. Frequency of contact	.21***	.28***	.06	.15**	.29***	–	
7. Sociocultural adaptation	.45***	.25***	.02	.25***	.29***	.31***	–
<i>M</i>	2.25	2.78	3.90	3.40	3.56	2.96	3.16
<i>SD</i>	0.77	1.04	0.57	0.53	0.48	0.73	0.50
Range	1–5	1–5	2.5–5	1.27–4.77	1–5	1–5	1.56–4.67

Note. \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

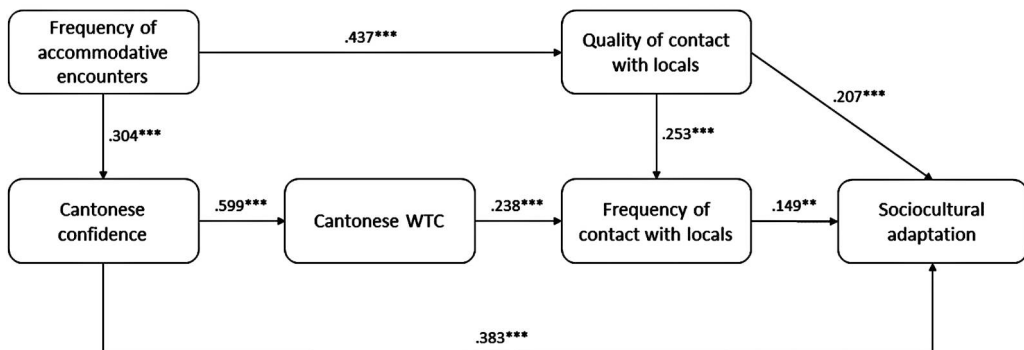
accommodative behaviours. Perceptions of accommodative behaviours were only significantly correlated with frequency of accommodative encounters and quality of contact, while all the other variables were significantly correlated with one another. This suggested that perceptions of accommodative behaviours might not be a significant predictor in the model.

**Path analyses**

The proposed model was first examined (see Figure 2b). The fit indices suggested a poor fit ( $\chi^2 = 166.527$ ,  $df = 11$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $CFI = .651$ ;  $TLI = .365$ ;  $RMSEA = .195$ ;  $SRMR = .128$ ). To improve model fit, modification was carried out based on global and local fit testing, consulting the modification indices, and a consideration of the theoretically and conceptually appropriate paths between variables. The modifications revealed that MCSs’ perceptions of locals’ accommodative behaviours accounted little for the data and releasing it improved the fit. This was not surprising because, as noted, the correlations suggested that it was not significantly associated with most variables, including sociocultural adaptation.

The modified model is shown in Figure 3. The fit indices indicated that it represented an excellent fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 6.962$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p = .4328$ ;  $CFI = 1.000$ ;  $TLI = 1.000$ ;  $RMSEA = .000$ ;  $SRMR = .024$ ). Consistent with the proposed model, MCSs’ perceived frequency of accommodative encounters positively predicted Cantonese confidence, which then predicted Cantonese WTC ( $\beta = .599$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Cantonese WTC predicted frequency of contact with locals, as proposed, but

The Modified Model



**Figure 3.** The modified model. Note. Asterisks (\*) indicate significant path coefficients \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

did not predict quality of contact. In fact, quality of contact seemed to play a more significant role than frequency of contact because it predicted sociocultural adaptation directly ( $\beta = .207, p < .001$ ) and indirectly through frequency ( $\beta = .253, p < .001$ ). The modified model indicated three additional paths. Accommodative encounters directly predicted quality of contact ( $\beta = .437, p < .001$ ), which then predicted frequency of contact ( $\beta = .253, p < .001$ ). Cantonese confidence was also found to predict sociocultural adaptation directly ( $\beta = .383, p < .001$ ).

MCSs' frequency of accommodative encounters predicted their sociocultural adaptation through four indirect paths (see Figure 3). These indirect paths were tested by bootstrapping with 2,000 iterations and a 95% confidence interval (CI; Preacher and Hayes 2008), all of which were significant at the  $p < .05$  level. First, frequency of accommodative encounters was associated with improved sociocultural adaptation by enhancing Cantonese confidence ( $\beta = .12, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.071, .161]$ ). The second path was through improving Cantonese confidence, Cantonese WTC, and frequency of contact ( $\beta = .01, p = .016, 95\% \text{ CI } [.001, .012]$ ). The third path was via increasing quality of contact with locals ( $\beta = .09, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.045, .137]$ ). The last path was through enhancing quality and frequency of contact ( $\beta = .02, p = .018, 95\% \text{ CI } [.003, .030]$ ). These significant indirect paths highlighted the focal role of accommodative encounters.

### Multiple regression analyses

Two separate multiple regression analyses examined the predictive nature of the CAT accommodative strategies on Cantonese confidence and quality of contact. For Cantonese confidence, the regression equation was significant ( $F(4, 367) = 22.004, p < .001$ ). Together, the scores of CAT strategies accounted for 19.3% of the variance in the Cantonese confidence scores. As shown in Table 3, *discourse management* ( $b = .230, p = .001$ ), *interpersonal control* ( $b = -.190, p = .001$ ), and *emotional expression* ( $b = .376, p < .001$ ) were all significant predictors of Cantonese confidence. Interpretability ( $b = -.055, p = .373$ ) was not a significant predictor of Cantonese confidence. However, closer inspection of the correlations between the predictors and the outcome showed that, in contrast to the relevant regression weight, the bivariate correlation of interpersonal control and Cantonese confidence was positive and significant, although small in magnitude ( $r = .11, p = .033$ ). This suggested potential suppression effects. Accordingly, a series of regression models were run with interpersonal control entered alone (n.b., the  $b$  weight in this model was necessarily significant and positive), and then with other predictors included. First, the inclusion of interpretability simply resulted in the effect for interpersonal control becoming very small and nonsignificant ( $b = .01, p = .74$ ). By contrast, when including either emotional expression or discourse management, the regression weight for interpersonal control became negative (i.e.  $-.11$  and  $-.13$ , respectively) and significant at the  $p < .05$  level. Finally, when including all the other predictors in the model, it was evident that the effect of discourse management was strengthened by the inclusion of interpersonal control (i.e.  $b = .31$  vs  $.19$ ), while those for emotional expression and interpretability (i.e. ns) remained largely similar (i.e.  $b = .42$  vs  $.45$  and  $-.09$  and  $-.08$ , respectively). This suggested that interpersonal control strengthened the effect of discourse management by suppressing irrelevant variance.

**Table 3.** Results of the regression analysis on Cantonese confidence.

Accommodative strategy	Estimate	SE	95% CI		$p$
			LL	UL	
Intercept	.915				
Interpretability	-.055	.062	-.177	.067	.373
Discourse management	.230	.072	.089	.371	.001
Interpersonal control	-.190	.059	-.306	-.074	.001
Emotional expression	.376	.062	.254	.498	.000

**Table 4.** Results of the regression analysis on quality of contact.

Accommodative strategy	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Intercept	4.702				
Interpretability	.099	.060	-.019	.217	.101
Discourse management	-.084	.071	-.223	.055	.238
Interpersonal control	.164	.058	.050	.278	.005
Emotional expression	.372	.061	.252	.492	.000

The results of the regression on quality of contact show that the regression equation was significant ( $F(4, 367) = 27.387, p < .001$ ). Together, the scores of CAT strategies accounted for 23.0% of the variance in the quality of contact scores. As shown in Table 4, *interpersonal control* ( $b = .164, p = .005$ ) and *emotional expression* ( $b = .372, p < .001$ ) were both significant predictors of quality of contact, that is, locals' *interpersonal control* and *emotional expression* strategies increased MCSs' perceptions of quality of contact. *Interpretability* ( $b = .099, p = .101$ ) and *discourse management* ( $b = -.084, p = .238$ ) were not significant predictors of quality of contact.

To sum up, the results have addressed the research questions by: (a) delineating the relationships between MCSs' perceived Cantonese confidence, Cantonese WTC, frequency of accommodative encounters with locals, quality and frequency of contact with locals, and their sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong; and (b) examining the extent to which CAT accommodative strategies contribute to their sociocultural adaptation.

## Discussion

This study has brought together L2 WTC and CAT to explore MCSs' intergroup communication with Hong Kong locals and their sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong and has investigated how the strategies of interpretability, discourse management, interpersonal control, and emotional expression promote MCSs' adaptation outcomes. It goes beyond the mechanism by which L2 WTC and CAT are connected by pinpointing the role of each accommodative strategy in influencing the adaptation outcomes.

Consistent with the literature (e.g. MacIntyre et al. 1998), Cantonese confidence predicted Cantonese WTC. This suggests that the relationship between L2 confidence and L2 WTC was transferable to a target L2 that is not English, to an Eastern cultural context, and to out-of-classroom, real-life settings, respectively. The literature on L2 WTC over the past 25 years has primarily focused on classroom settings and explored English as the target L2, but this construct of behavioural intention has more to offer. Our results suggest that researchers ought to expand their focus to real-life L2 interactions that non-local students or sojourners need to deal with daily on and off campus (e.g. chatting with local students, dining, and shopping). These interactions are often more complex than the classroom settings with more factors at play simultaneously (Wu, Occhipinti, and Watson 2023).

It is noteworthy that Cantonese WTC predicted MCSs' frequency of contact with locals but not the quality. MCSs with stronger Cantonese WTC are more likely to seek opportunities to interact with locals, but the quality of the interactions is not determined by MCSs' WTC. It can be associated with a range of factors, such as the local interactant's attitudes and communicative behaviours, the purpose of the interaction, and the surroundings where the conversation takes place. High-quality contact with locals directly promotes MCSs' sociocultural adaptation and indirectly through frequency of contact, whereas low-quality or unpleasant encounters reduce the frequency and jeopardise adaptation outcomes. It is imperative to improve both perceived quality and frequency of contact with locals in order to facilitate adaptation. To that end, research is needed to unpick the difficult relationships between quality and frequency of contact and sociocultural adaptation.

The results highlighted the prominence of MCSs' perceived frequency of encounters with accommodative locals, which promoted MCSs' sociocultural adaptation through four significant indirect paths. Our findings show accommodative encounters directly predict perceived Cantonese confidence and quality of contact. Therefore, locals' accommodative behaviours can improve MCSs' confidence in their ability to use Cantonese and shorten their psychological distance from the language. Accommodative encounters are often considered pleasant because of the amiable conversational atmosphere (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001) and the positive attributions one interactant ascribes to another. The four accommodative strategies (i.e. emotional expression, interpretability, discourse management, and interpersonal control) show distinct patterns in their contributions to enhancing Cantonese confidence and the quality of contact, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Emotional expression is a strong predictor of both Cantonese confidence and quality of contact and accounts for more variances of these two outcome variables than the other three strategies. This strategy underscores interactants' emotional needs (Watson and Gallois 1998). This focus on emotion connects this strategy with Cantonese use anxiety, which is the affective component of Cantonese confidence (MacIntyre and Gardner 1991) and has been studied in foreign language classroom settings (e.g. Dewaele and Dewaele 2018). When Hong Kong locals (e.g. local students, university staff, and random strangers) recognise and fulfil MCSs' emotional needs while speaking in Cantonese, they often become less concerned about making mistakes and more willing to try to converse in Cantonese (Wu, Watson, and Baker 2024). For example, when an MCS is trying to converse with a local student in Cantonese but appears nervous, the local student can reassure the MCS by showing patience or conveying encouragement. When having their emotional needs fulfilled, MCSs' desire or motivation to speak to locals may increase, leading to improved perceived quality of contact. Emotion is a powerful driving (or inhibiting) force in intergroup communication, and for effective interactions to occur, interactants' emotional goals need to be met (Baker et al. 2021). However, it is not always easy to recognise a conversational partner's emotional needs. How an interactant decides to accommodate the other interactant's emotional needs and how these decisions impact the ongoing conversation are extremely complex and reflect each interactant's subjective perceptions. This area requires focused investigation.

Interpretability is not a significant predictor of Cantonese confidence or quality of contact in our data. Interpretability is mainly associated with an interactant's assessment of the other interactant's interpretive competence and focuses on comprehension (Coupland et al. 1988; Gallois et al. 1995). Accommodative interpretability (e.g. using appropriate vocabulary and speech rate) can improve comprehension but does not necessarily improve the quality of contact as perceived by the interactants. The poor predictive power of interpretability has been noted previously in patient satisfaction (Watson, Jones, and Hewett 2016). Qualitative studies are needed to explain its poor predictive power and understand the mechanisms by which interpretability might operate in this context.

Discourse management significantly predicts Cantonese confidence but not the quality of contact. This strategy concerns the interaction process rather than the content (Coupland et al. 1988; Gallois et al. 1995). Locals who adopt accommodative discourse management by necessity actively engage MCSs in the conversation (e.g. through showing active listening or encouraging their partners and offering them the floor). When MCSs feel engaged, they will become more confident in speaking Cantonese. However, this may not necessarily improve MCSs' perceived quality of contact because they may feel overwhelmed by the pressure of being attentively listened to and having to speak. It is important to take into consideration MCSs' desired amount of speech or participation in the conversation when locals are making attempts to accommodate in order to reach an optimal level of accommodation.

Interpersonal control positively predicts the quality of contact and negatively predicts Cantonese confidence. MCSs tend to find interactions with locals of high quality when they perceive being treated with respect and have the freedom to move out of their prescribed roles (e.g. Mainland Chinese students or Mandarin speakers). Some MCSs prefer to communicate with locals in Cantonese

and perceive this as a way to negotiate their identities as ‘normal and accepted members’ of the local community (Sung 2023, 1168). For instance, when an MCS initiates a casual conversation with a local in Cantonese, the local’s response in Cantonese will signal an acceptance of the MCS’s identity as a Cantonese speaker/learner. This presents positive interpersonal control and shared equality with the local student, thus improving the MCS’s perceived quality of contact. It is important to note the existence of potential suppressor effects. As noted, interpersonal control may strengthen the effect of discourse management on Cantonese confidence. Interpersonal control concerns interactants’ role relationships, and discourse management is associated with the process of interaction (Coupland et al. 1988; Gallois et al. 1995). When MCSs perceive that the local interlocutors offer them the freedom to move away from their prescribed roles (accommodative interpersonal control), they may perceive more encouragement from the locals for them to participate in the conversation (accommodative discourse management) and perceive a higher level of Cantonese confidence. This complicated, potentially moderated, relationship requires specific future investigations.

In short, accommodative strategies that enhance MCSs’ Cantonese confidence do not necessarily improve the perceived quality of contact, and vice versa. The complexity of how these accommodative strategies contribute to MCSs’ adaptation may stem from the highly complicated and multi-faceted nature of intergroup communication. An array of macro-factors such as cultural, interpersonal, and intergroup dynamics situate an intergroup interaction episode (Giles, Edwards, and Walther 2023). These macro-factors have often been left out in L2 WTC research (Dewaele and Dewaele 2018). An example of these factors is language attitudes, including MCSs’ attitudes towards Cantonese (Sung 2020) and locals’ attitudes towards MCSs’ speaking Cantonese (Shum et al. 2023). At the broad national socio-political level, Hong Kong locals represent a minority and Cantonese is a minority language, whereas Mainlanders represent the majority and Mandarin is the majority language. When MCSs come to study in Hong Kong, as the national majority but locally minority group, they need to accommodate locals, a national minority but the local majority. They also need to learn and adapt to a nationally minority but locally dominant language. These nuances distinguish MCSs studying in Hong Kong from those studying overseas where they are a socio-political minority, either nationally or locally. The intergroup dynamic between MCSs and Hong Kong locals also differentiates itself from that between MCSs and host nationals overseas. The shared nationality and cultural origins may contribute to a strong desire for MCSs to establish solidarity with locals and expect understanding, encouragement and reassurance from locals. This may account for the prominent role of accommodative emotional expression in improving intergroup communication and MCSs’ sociocultural adaptation. These unique aspects highlight the complexity of intergroup dynamics between MCSs and locals and underscore the demand for studies like the current one to advance the understanding of such communication.

This study has limitations. This study used convenience and purposive sampling rather than random sampling for the concern of feasibility. However, the survey data were collected from a diverse range of MCSs in six major universities in Hong Kong that represented the bulk of the target population. The current study adopted a survey design and, as with any quantitative study, failed to provide an in-depth account of participants’ perspectives.

Despite these limitations, this study provides novel theoretical insights. It contributes to the CAT literature by incorporating L2 WTC to better account for intergroup communication between sojourning students and members of the host community. Wu et al.’s (2023) study outlined the mechanism by which CAT and L2 WTC were connected and worked together to account for intergroup communication. The current study took a step further and identified the distinct patterns of how specific accommodative strategies contribute to sojourning students’ L2 WTC and cross-cultural adaptation. This study also expands the literature on L2 WTC from primarily classroom-focused to real-world intergroup interactions, to a target L2 other than English, and to an Eastern cultural context.

The present study provides valuable practical implications. Our findings underscore the significant role of linguistic factors and intergroup communication in MCSs' sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong, which elucidates how Hong Kong higher education institutions, policymakers, and relevant organisations can better facilitate their adaptation by improving these linguistic and communicative aspects. Cantonese ability is key to MCSs' sociocultural adaptation. Although many universities offer Cantonese courses to non-local students, there are usually limited quotas. Our results suggest that universities need to increase the accessibility of these courses to non-local students, especially those interested in learning Cantonese, and enhance the effectiveness of these courses. Additionally, given the importance of enhancing high-quality contact between MCSs and locals, as suggested by our results, universities or organisations can organise social activities that include both MCSs and locals who show interest in developing social connections with the other group. The key is to create more opportunities for high-quality intergroup contact rather than mere frequent contact. Positive intergroup interactions will promote MCSs' sociocultural adaptation and reduce the likelihood of maladaptation and dropout. Ultimately, this will assist the Hong Kong government in achieving the goal of attracting and retaining non-local talents (UGC 2021).

There are a few directions for future research to pursue. Our findings highlight the prominent role of accommodative encounters in MCSs' sociocultural adaptation and different patterns of how the accommodative strategies contribute to their adaptation. Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to yield stronger inferences of causality. The potential suppression effects between the accommodative strategies and perceived Cantonese confidence are an interesting area to explore. Future research could also adopt a qualitative design and examine all of the five primary accommodative strategies in real-life communication, which can offer in-depth insights into how locals' accommodative strategies contribute to MCSs' adaptation. This is part of ongoing research. Communication is inevitably a dynamic process, with both interactants sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages simultaneously. How they perceive and evaluate each other's behaviours will influence their subsequent communicative behaviours. This study focused on MCSs. Future research can explore how locals' perceptions of MCSs' accommodative strategies influence their willingness to speak to them or accommodate them. These findings combined with ours will be valuable for advancing the understanding of intergroup communication between MCSs and locals and developing practical, theory-based workshops or courses to improve such communication.

## Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of MCSs' sociocultural adaptation to Hong Kong from the lens of intergroup communication and illustrates how linguistic and intergroup communicative factors influence their sociocultural adaptation. The findings outline the relationships between MCSs' Cantonese confidence, Cantonese WTC, perceived frequency of accommodative encounters with locals, quality and frequency of contact with locals, and their sociocultural adaptation. Our study also examines specific accommodative strategies and identifies distinctive patterns in improving intergroup interactions and MCSs' adaptation outcomes. The findings contribute invaluable insights to the literature on CAT and L2 WTC and shed light on how higher education institutions, policymakers, and relevant organisations can better assist with MCSs' sociocultural adaptation by enhancing their Cantonese ability and communication with locals. As noted, the unique intergroup relationship between MCSs and locals highlights the need for more research attention on their intergroup communication than currently is the case. We hope this study can draw more attention to this area.



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