The title of this book includes three terms that have opened up new and exciting areas in second language learning research: narrative, second language identity, and study abroad. In this introduction, we explain how these three concepts come together in the book. Second language identity and study abroad are discussed briefly here and in more detail in Chapters 2–3. In this chapter, we also outline the range of study abroad programmes available to Hong Kong students. Our discussion of narrative is situated first within the idea of second language identity and, later, in the context of the design of the Second language identities and study abroad research project on which this book is based. The chapter concludes with a brief outline of the structure and content of the book.

Second language identity and study abroad

Second language identity and study abroad are relatively new areas of interest in second language learning research. Second language identity, the main focus of this book, is an especially important area in which researchers have begun to reconceptualize the processes and outcomes of second language learning. Research on second language identity explores the ways in which learning a new language changes the learner as a person. This is in contrast to approaches that emphasize the acquisition and accumulation of language knowledge and skills. A person who knows something of a second language is a different person to the one who previously knew nothing of it. Knowing a second language influences both the learner’s sense of self and the possibilities for self-representation through language use. From this perspective, the acquisition of language knowledge and skills remain important, but it
Second Language Identity in Narratives of Study Abroad

is viewed not as the end point of second language learning, but as the starting point for the identity developments that second language learning entails.

There is still a good deal of debate on what exactly ‘identity’ and ‘second language identity’ mean. In this book, we begin from a social view of identity as a dialectical relationship between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ aspects of the self, involving our own sense of who we are, the ways in which we represent ourselves, and how we are represented and positioned by others. Our working definition of second language identity incorporates this view of identity and covers any aspect of it that is related to the knowledge and use of a second language. This implies that second language identity is a complex, multidimensional construct and that what we see of a person’s identities varies according to the context. We have multiple identities, and knowledge of a second language adds to the possibilities for being, or being seen as, a different person in different contexts. Nevertheless, we believe that people strive for coherence in the development of their identities. The development of second language identity is, therefore, largely a matter of incorporating experiences of second language learning and use into an ongoing sense of who we are. Second language learning is often a long-term process. Therefore, we are mainly interested in the ways in which second language identities develop over time and in response to new contexts of language learning and use. The main aims of this book are, first, to identify and model the different dimensions of second language identity (Chapter 3) and, second, to examine developments along these dimensions that can be observed in study abroad (Chapters 4–8).

Interest in study abroad is growing rapidly and, seemingly, in proportion to the growth of opportunities for overseas travel. In a recent overview, Kinginger (2009) describes how approaches to study abroad research have evolved from quantitative comparisons of the language learning gains of study abroad and ‘at home’ students to qualitative investigations of language learning and use in study abroad settings. In recent work, an interest in issues of identity has emerged alongside the shift in focus from study abroad participants ‘in the mass’ to the situated experiences of individual students in particular contexts of study abroad. For the most part this work has looked at how factors of social identity, notably gender, influence language learning process and outcomes. Our research builds on this work, but shifts the emphasis to the influence of study abroad experiences on students’ identities. Our research began from the observation that a period of study abroad often transforms students’ views of themselves as learners and users of