

Social Network Construction of Chinese International Students Studying Abroad

Haoer Hu*

ShaanXi Energy Institute, Xianyang 712000, Shaanxi, China

*Corresponding author: Haoer Hu, hh0717e@163.com

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: This paper begins with a general description of the problems of social network construction experienced by Chinese international students in their host countries. Then, based on cultural adaptation theory, the paper summarises two main causes of social network construction problems for Chinese international students: lack of social support and ineffective social participation. The lack of social support is mainly characterised by reliance on primitive family support, resistance to seeking social support, and difficulties building friendship networks. It is then concluded that Chinese international students' social participation is ineffective by analysing their performance in three areas: language barriers, ineffective use of social media, and lack of participation in leisure activities. In response to these problems, this paper proposes countermeasures such as establishing communities of practice and encouraging participation in leisure activities, aiming to provide an effective solution path for the social network construction of Chinese international students.

Keywords: Higher education; Social networks; Chinese international students

Online publication: March 7, 2025

1. The importance of social networking for international students

With the rapid internationalization of higher education and the growing number of higher education institutions, there is increasing emphasis on the quality of education and its impact on students. In addition, the experience and adaptation of international students in higher education institutions is one of the key areas of research. At the same time, the adjustment of international students has become a globally recognized concern. Recently, there has been a research interest in the social networks of international students in higher education institutions. This is because social networks are closely linked to social support, social capital, and quality of higher education. Social networks in this context refer to the networks that international students build with other international students and people in the host country to be able to access social support resources. A broad social network provides academic support and life guidance to international students through the effective transfer of information. It is trustworthy, unifying, and determined to help. Stable transnational social networks can also provide more opportunities for students to find employment ^[1].

Host countries can reap academic, social, and economic benefits as a result of the influx of international students. Interactions between local and international student populations can contribute to the development of local skills, build new values in exchange, and make national higher education institutions more inclusive ^[2]. It is for this reason that research into the social networking of international students can improve the quality of their study abroad experience and provide the basis for the continued development of higher education institutions.

The study abroad experience of Chinese students has not always been smooth. For Chinese students newly arriving in a host country, the first challenge they face is establishing a social network that can provide both academic and daily life support. This paper will analyse three main reasons why Chinese international students have difficulties in building social networks through a synthesis of literature related to social network building. It will then summarise the reasons and synthesise the views of scholars to give practical proposals to solve this problem.

2. Problems encountered in building social networks

2.1. The lack of social support

Social support is a necessary factor for international students to adapt to new environments in new societies. It is positively related to social skills, activity participation, and self-worth in the construction of social networks.

The first manifestation of the lack of social support is that Chinese international students still rely on the social networks they already have for social support ^[3]. First-year students, in particular, tend to rely on their family and friends in China when navigating an unfamiliar environment. However, as they live overseas, social support from family and friends can be delayed, and there is a discrepancy of information. These traditional social networks are unable to provide immediate social support for them abroad ^[4]. Also, when they rely too much on their previous social networks, they miss the opportunity to build new ones ^[5]. The reliance on Chinese social networks can lead to a sense that international students do not need to build new social networks.

A second manifestation of the lack of social support is that Chinese international students rarely actively seek additional social support. They often choose to solve problems on their own or seek help from friends. Influenced by Confucian culture, Chinese international students tend to exhibit social subtlety and restraint in their interactions ^[6]. In a new environment, Chinese international students rarely take the initiative to express their needs and ideas. This limits the effective expansion of Chinese international students' social networks. The first step in building a social network is to meet strangers and then to maintain those relationships that allow for further understanding. Keeping strangers at arm's length is not conducive to social networking.

A third indication of limited social support is the difficulty Chinese international students face in establishing friendship networks with diverse groups. The building of social friendship networks is an important part of social networking ^[6]. Building friendship networks involves three types of connections: relationships with other Chinese international students, interactions with students, teachers, and staff in the host country, and connections with international students from different nationalities. Many Chinese international students report that their interactions with people in the host country often lack depth, making it difficult to establish sustainable and meaningful connections ^[7]. Both the inability to adapt to new environments and the inability to communicate deeply affect the efficiency and quality of social networking

for Chinese international students.

2.2. Ineffective social engagement

The construction of social networks requires social support in addition to adequate participation in social activities. The primary reason for the consistently low level of social engagement among Chinese international students is the language barrier^[8]. Most Chinese students lack training in the language environment and lose the practicality of the language. Problems with English language skills can lead to psychological problems for international students, such as depression^[9]. Due to limitations in their English proficiency, Chinese international students often struggle to express their true thoughts as fluently and naturally as they would in their native language when seeking comfort from close friends. This can hinder mutual understanding and deeper connections. Non-native speakers cannot really think like native speakers, even after much practice and adaptation. This is one of the reasons why the language barrier is one of the factors that hinders the construction of social networks.

A second reason for low social engagement is the difficulty of using social networking sites. In the initial stages of adaptation, Chinese international students may feel pressured to interact face-to-face with local students. This makes it more difficult for them to build relationships with local students. Social networking sites (SNS) can help Chinese international students build social networks. More than one billion people in China use the internet, such as Weibo and Jitterbug. With such a large user base, social media has become the main form of social interaction. However, it is difficult for Chinese international students to freely use foreign social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in China^[10]. This results in little opportunity for Chinese international students to learn about local behavioural norms through local social media platforms and to interact directly with locals before arriving in the host country^[11].

A third factor that contributes to lower social engagement is the difficulty of engaging in leisure activities. Research has shown that participation in leisure activities can be effective in alleviating stressors in life^[12]. The cultural adjustment stress mentioned in the previous section also applies here. Chinese international students' participation in leisure activities not only promotes the building of friendship networks but also shares experiences that expand the inclusion of diversity. Satisfaction with leisure activities releases the pressure of loss and nostalgia that normally accumulates^[13]. Chinese international students' participation in leisure activities is indeed low. The reduced number of leisure activities limits the expansion of Chinese international students' social networks and the loss of building collaborative friendship networks through teamwork.

3. Proposals for the feasibility of building social networks

3.1. Building a community of practice

In their study of social networking among international students, some scholars describe social support as being facilitated through the development of a time-sensitive community of practice. Temporal significance in this context refers to a cyclical process whereby students who have been studying for a longer period of time provide information and support to the new students and pass on the experience. The community is initially formed by international students who need help and then continues to include new students as it grows. The community can host a variety of formal and informal events, such as academic exchanges or recreational activities, to engage members of the community and beyond. Local students were included as potential members

of the community, engaging in a community of practice as a sociocultural activity that fosters learning from shared experiences. Chinese international students gain experience and knowledge from their seniors through full participation in the community of practice. These practice activities actively involve the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills. Scholars, based on interviews with international students, conclude that all social activities students participate in contribute to their overall learning experience ^[14].

In addition to academic support, communities of practice can also provide support to Chinese international students in other ways. The experience of a community of practice can alleviate the stress of acculturation. This provides them with the opportunity to practice dealing with different people. Thus, the activities of Chinese international students in this community exhibit the characteristics of a community of practice. They share common goals and interests, follow the same behavioral norms, and embrace diverse values. This community of practice also offers Chinese international students the opportunity to rebuild their social network in the host country. To some extent, it reflects the university's efforts in promoting internationalization and fostering cross-cultural engagement. The student groups that constitute this community build relatively strong connections, learn together, and share and support each other in a short period of time. This is beneficial for them to build social networks ^[15].

3.2. Participation in leisure activities

Active participation in leisure activities can help international students gain a sense of belonging to counteract the discomfort they experience in a new environment and thus build social networks more smoothly. Serious leisure maximizes the benefits of participation in leisure activities through frequent and dedicated participation in leisure activities. A serious leisure participant remains committed to the activity, investing time and energy into it. Even when faced with challenges, they persist due to their passion and deep personal engagement with the activity. Through various activities, they express their unique characteristics and attract individuals who share similar traits or interests.

Participating in leisure activities also helps Chinese international students adjust to universities. Just like participating in a large competition, it provides students with pure enjoyment. These pleasures help to release them from the stress of the academic grind and adjusting to school. At the same time, regular participation in leisure activities can present challenges. Successfully resolving these issues without disrupting academic responsibilities provides students with a sense of accomplishment, which may serve as motivation to help them adapt to college life. In addition, participating in leisure activities can help Chinese international students build confidence in expressing themselves in public and enhance their overall self-esteem. For this reason, relevant school departments and student clubs should provide leisure opportunities for international students through collaboration. First, gymnasiums and student activity design centres can engage international students by designing recreational programs and providing adequate equipment and facilities. Second, as mentioned before, international students who are reluctant or unable to interact with strangers can establish virtual communication spaces for themselves. For instance, anonymous trolling forums or online knowledge quizzes and other activities can bring participants together both online and offline and encourage them to make new social connections.

4. Conclusion

The paper begins with an analysis of the current situation of Chinese international students who encounter

problems in building social networks in foreign countries where they study. They need to break down barriers to build effective social networks to provide support for their academic and life experiences. The paper then analyses the two causes of social support and social participation, providing an in-depth dissection of the components of the social network construction problem. However, these are not all the causes. Because most of the research in the literature has focused on how social networks are constructed and the importance of social networks, not many articles have analysed the causes of the problem. This is the limitation of this paper. In addition, this paper provides two suggestions for Chinese international students to help build social networks by analysing the proposals put forward by scholars in a dialectical way. It is hoped that this will serve as a reference for students who will be studying abroad to build a stable social network. It is also hoped that this paper will provide a direction for improving the internationalisation of institutions to attract more international students from China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding

“Research Project on Teaching Reform in Shaanxi Higher Education in 2023” (Project No.: 23GZ015)

References

- [1] Wu X, Zheng J, 2021, “Flexible Citizenship” in Chinese International Secondary School Students’ Transnational Social Networks: Opportunities or Constraints? *Educational Review (Birmingham)*, 73(6): 714–732.
- [2] Luo J, Jamieson-Drake D, 2013, Examining the Educational Benefits of Interacting With International Students. *Journal of International Students*, 3(2): 85–101.
- [3] Shu F, Ahmed S, Pickett M, Ayman R, McAbee S, 2020, Social Support Perceptions, Network Characteristics, and International Student Adjustment. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 74(6): 136–148.
- [4] Ye J, 2006, An Examination of Acculturative Stress, Interpersonal Social Support, and Use of Online Ethnic Social Groups Among Chinese International Students. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 17(1): 1–20.
- [5] Poyrazli S, Devonish O, 2020, Cultural Value Orientation, Social Networking Site Use, and Homesickness in International Students. *International Social Science Review*, 96(3): 1–22.
- [6] Choi S, Nieminen T, 2013, Factors Influencing the Higher Education of International Students From Confucian East Asia. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32(2): 161–173.
- [7] Page A, 2019, Ethnic Enclaves Transcending Space: Chinese International Students’ Social Networks in a European University Town. *Asian Ethnicity*, 20(4): 418–435.
- [8] Forbush E, Foucault-Welles B, 2016, Social Media Use and Adaptation Among Chinese Students Beginning to Study in the United States. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 50(3): 1–12.
- [9] Sümer S, Poyrazli S, Grahame K, 2008, Predictors of Depression and Anxiety Among International Students. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 86(4): 429–437.
- [10] Li X, 2020, Are All “Friends” Beneficial? The Use of Facebook and WeChat and the Social Capital of College Students in Macau. *SAGE Open*, 10(4): 1–9.

- [11] Johnston K, Tanner M, Lalla N, Kawalski D, 2013, Social Capital: The Benefit of Facebook ‘Friends’. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 32(1): 24–36.
- [12] Li M, Stodolska M, 2006, Transnationalism, Leisure, and Chinese Graduate Students in the United States. *Leisure Sciences*, 28(1): 39–55.
- [13] Walker G, Halpenny E, Deng J, 2011, Leisure Satisfaction and Acculturative Stress: The Case of Chinese-Canadian Immigrants. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 43(2): 226–24
- [14] Spencer-Rodgers J, 2001, Consensual and Individual Stereotypic Beliefs About International Students Among American Host Nationals. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 25(6): 639–657.
- [15] Ke Y ,So D, 2024, Social Network Analysis of Asian International Student Mobility Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic: Centered on South Korea. *Association of Global Studies Education*, 2024,16(2): 59–96.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations