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## Do Ethnic Roots Relate to Social Fit? Evidence from Chinese-Indonesian and Non-Chinese-Indonesian Students in China

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**ABSTRACT:** *As the number of Indonesian students in China increases, understanding the determinants of their adaptation and sense of social fit (SSF) becomes essential. SSF is one of the key predictors of psychological well-being and academic success. This study had two aims: (1) to identify factors influencing SSF among Indonesian students and (2) to examine ethnic roots (Chinese vs. non-Chinese Indonesians) in shaping SSF in China. Using a quantitative design, survey data were collected from Indonesian students across China. The findings show that students of Chinese descent reported higher SSF than those of non-Chinese descent, and higher Chinese language proficiency was modestly but significantly associated with stronger SSF. These findings suggest that process-oriented factors, especially communicative competence and cultural-linguistic proximity, are more consequential for social fit than static status attributes, underscoring the need for sustained language and cross-cultural engagement programs targeting Indonesian and other international students in China.*

**Keywords:** Sense of social fit, Indonesian students, Chinese-Indonesian, ethnic roots, international students in China

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## INTRODUCTION

China has become an alternative study destination for international students, including those from Indonesia. Studies show an increase in the number of Indonesian students in China from 2004 to 2018 (Wei Hong et al., 2019). In fact, Indonesia ranks second among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in terms of total student numbers in China (Maulana, 2018). Along with increased mobility, international students face various challenges that affect their social lives (Koech et al., 2025). Cross-national studies demonstrate the link between social interaction, belonging, and well-being (Smith & Watson, 2022; H. Zhang et al., 2025). In the context of Chinese universities, research also highlights the diverse experiences of belonging among Chinese students and the international community, influenced by campus policies, academic culture, and power relations in the classroom (Gao & Liu, 2021; Huo et al., 2024). Overall, these findings confirm that the interaction between individual characteristics and campus social ecology shapes social fit.

Connectedness and social fit are important factors associated with academic engagement, psychological well-being, and academic retention (Mohamad & Manning, 2023; Walton & Cohen, 2007). The literature suggests that strong belonging is correlated with emotional support, life satisfaction, and intention to continue in higher education while also reducing the risk of psychological problems (Liu et al., 2025; Tian et al., 2021). Conceptually, social fit reflects the extent to which students perceive themselves as “fitting” with campus norms, values, and social networks and feel comfortable and recognized in daily interactions (Samura, 2016). Thus far, the literature concerning international students has been largely dominated by the topics of sense of belonging and adaptation (Yildirim et al., 2021). Therefore, expanding the concept of sense of belonging from mere social connections to encompass various forms of fit would be highly beneficial (Browman, 2025). To assess college and social belongingness, researchers can utilize the Sense of Social Fit (SSF) scale, which operationalizes belonging primarily as perceived social acceptance and social match within the academic environment (Maghsoodi et al., 2023). Previous research has demonstrated that social belonging on campus is positively associated with students’ grades, success, and well-being (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; van Kessel et al., 2025).

Fundamentally, Indonesian international students in China do not constitute a homogeneous group but rather an entity characterized by ethnic demographic diversity, encompassing ethnic Chinese (华人 *Huárén*) and nonethnic Chinese individuals (Gunawan, 2018). At the individual level, identity operates as a primary determinant of social inclusion or exclusion, directly shaping students’ mobility experiences and everyday interactions in China (Theo, 2018). Notably, for ethnic Chinese students, undertaking education in China frequently entails an additional dimension of reconnecting with their ancestral roots (Setijadi, 2015). For these students, cultural proximity facilitates daily adaptation, as they typically arrive with inherent cultural capital (He & Fei, 2025; Hoon, 2019). Such historical

and cultural affinity yields distinct advantages, including an intuitive grasp of social norms and ease of linguistic navigation, which subsequently grant them more seamless access to local social networks.

Conversely, international students lacking such linguistic and cultural backgrounds, along with a lack of support systems, face substantial challenges (Tang et al., 2024). This situation arises because language barriers and cultural distance can erode students' social connectedness within the academic environment (Bethel et al., 2020). In contrast, social support, emotional well-being, and conflict resolution skills positively correlate with life satisfaction and social integration (Aljaberi et al., 2021). Research conducted in China indicates that social connectedness is inextricably linked to students' academic success and retention (Rehman et al., 2023). Consequently, the disparity in cultural and linguistic capital between ethnic Chinese and nonethnic Chinese Indonesian students can lead to distinct trajectories of campus integration. However, the literature in China still leaves a significant gap regarding how ethnic origin-specific differences between Indonesian students of Chinese and non-Chinese descent are related to social fit during study (Gunawan, 2018; Mahmood et al., 2026). Differences in initial networks, language/cultural access, and inherent stereotypes could theoretically produce different patterns of social fit across groups (Bethel et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2024). Building on these premises, this research challenges the prevailing assumption that ethnic roots alone dictate social fit.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Sense of Social Fit**

Drawing from the literature on social psychology and higher education, a sense of social fit is understood as a cognitive-affective assessment that the self “fits” and “deserves to be” within a community, such as a campus environment, that is close to, but not identical to, the concept of belonging. Classic experiments demonstrate that social cues affirming group acceptance can enhance the sense of belonging and academic achievement among stereotyped groups (Walton & Cohen, 2007). A more recent perspective centers social fit alongside self-concept fit (the match between academic activities/goals and self-concept) and goal fit (the match between personal goals and institutional structures), thus understanding belonging as a dynamic, multidimensional construct (Browman, 2025). In another framework, “authenticity as fit” explains how the experience of being oneself within an environment acts as a mechanism linking identity, inclusion/exclusion, and psychological well-being (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018).

The determinants are contextual and heavily mediated by situational cues about “who fits” in classrooms, laboratories, and organizations. Research in science education suggests that inclusive signals of fit, such as classroom norms that acknowledge diversity or role models representing underrepresented groups, are associated with retention intentions and academic persistence (Lewis et al., 2016). At the organizational level, microinclusion practices (small gestures that

convey acceptance and recognition) have been shown to strengthen a sense of fit and broaden the participation of minority groups (Muragishi et al., 2024). More broadly, institutional fit, for example, in how public participation is organized, offers a social-psychological lens for understanding when environments facilitate or hinder a sense of “belonging” (DeCaro & Stokes, 2013). From a measurement perspective, the Sense of Social Fit Scale provides a psychometric foundation for assessing social fit in a student population, as its factor structure, reliability, and validity have been established, enabling cross-group comparisons and intervention evaluation (Maghsoodi et al., 2023).

### **Indonesian Students in China and Chinese Indonesians**

In line with these findings, the mobility of Indonesian students to China has shown significant development. Wei Hong et al., (2019) showed that over the past decade, the number of Indonesian students in China has increased, marked by satisfactory achievements and continued expansion of scale. This increase in Indonesian students in China aligns with China's diplomatic pattern in education (Nur Mutia & de Archellie, 2023). Furthermore, this positive trend is supported by increased scholarship allocations, which are increasingly prioritized for students at that level (Wei Hong et al., 2019). In the ASEAN regional context, the number of Indonesian students in China ranks second, behind only the number of students from Thailand (Maulana, 2018).

Indonesian international students in China come from a multicultural and multiethnic nation and include those of both Chinese and non-Chinese descent (Gunawan, 2018). The 2021 Indonesia Government population census showed that Chinese Indonesians constitute 4-5% of the total population, approximately 7 million people (Sabila et al., 2025), which makes Indonesia occupy the first position with the largest number of overseas Chinese in the world, followed by Malaysia and the Philippines (Poston & Zhang, 2021). The Chinese Indonesians ethnic group is a heterogeneous and complex community (Suryadinata, 1976), and they are a minority group who have lived in Indonesia for centuries (Tong, 2011).

Their position is often described as a “perpetual immigrant” who is never fully accepted as part of the nation. Various policies from each regime demonstrate this, particularly in Indonesia from the preindependence period through 1998 (Dyahapsari & Nugraha, 2020). One of the unique characteristics of Chinese Indonesians is that they are able to adapt, such as by using local names and speaking the local language (Lie & Bailey, 2017; Yuliana & Yanti, 2023), and at the same time, they still maintain their ancestral culture and language (Gio & Pandrianto, 2025; Hoon, 2021). At this stage, centuries of historical experience, a minority position often perceived as a “perpetual immigrant” and strategies for adaptation while preserving ancestral heritage have shaped the distinctive ethnic roots of Chinese Indonesians. In this article, the term *Chinese Indonesians* refers to Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent, regardless of their language use or degree of assimilation. This configuration of ethnic roots will be discussed and has the potential to shape how Chinese Indonesians negotiate social fit when interacting and building relationships on Chinese universities.

## **Ethnic Root and Social Fit**

Ethnic background plays a crucial role in shaping social fit. This is possible because individuals possess in-depth knowledge of culture and language, which is transmitted trans-generationally and maintained through family traditions (He & Fei, 2025). Within this framework, genealogy serves more than simply as the recording of past kinship history; it becomes a dynamic process or movement along the life course that facilitates individuals' expanded participation in various social arenas (Bilgory-Fazakas & Armon-Lotem, 2025). Ethnic roots operate through place attachment mechanisms triggered by nostalgic memories and affective arousal toward the ancestral homeland, both as a tangible place visited and as a cultural image brought to life through language, rituals, and diasporic networks (Hu & Dai, 2021). Evidence from the Chinese diaspora demonstrates that they derive benefits from explicit instruction on culture-specific conceptions of race and nationality in China and the social context, as well as how this can affect their experiences in their ancestral homeland (Jing-Schmidt et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the experience of authenticity in the interaction with ancestral cultural heritage can deepen attachment to place and foster loyalty, an effect that is stronger when the experience is considered sacred or meaningful (Belabas & de Jong, 2024). Such perceptions of authenticity can manifest as a sense of authenticity in academic and social spaces, linking ethnic identity with community acceptance, thereby strengthening social fit as well as intentions to persist and actively participate in the university ecosystem (Kurniawan & Suprajitno, 2019). Finally, participation in cultural/heritage practices is correlated with increased psychological well-being mediated by nostalgia and cultural attachment (Thies & Falk, 2023). This well-being is a crucial prerequisite for cross-cultural social fit: it reduces the burden of adaptation, expands cross-group networks, and opens up more inclusive spaces for identity negotiation (T. Zhang & Ren, 2024).

## **Research Question**

However, there is limited evidence on whether ethnic roots contribute to social fit when students learn within unique university norms, language, and academic practices. Given Indonesia's ethnic diversity and the increasing influx of Indonesian students to China, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What factors determine the sense of social fit of Indonesian students in China?

RQ2: Do ethnic roots relate to the sense of social fit of Indonesian students in China?

## METHOD

This study used the Sense of Social Fit (SSF), the scale that assesses students' level of social fit/attachment to the campus environment. Psychometric findings Maghsoodi et al., (2023) indicate that the SSF reflects a single general factor (general college belonging), and its dimensions capture a sense of acceptance, social fit, institutional identification, and operational cultural capital for navigating academic practices. The primary score is calculated as the average of the 17 items (higher = stronger sense of social fit), including the reverse-keyed (unfavorable) items. Prior to the main data collection, we conducted a pilot online survey on a small sample of universities in three locations in China with a total of 46 respondents, comprising 30.43% males and 69.57% females. Internal reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ( $\alpha = 0.994$ ), with corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.831 to 0.979. All items met the criteria.

### Participants

A total of 426 Indonesian students (male = 38% female = 62%) participated in an online survey. Respondents were enrolled in undergraduate (43.9%), master's (20.2%), doctoral (13.1%), and other (22.8%) programs. The online questionnaire was distributed through WeChat groups. The researchers also asked fellow students who had networks of Indonesian student WeChat groups in other cities to help distribute it. We distributed it to dozens of Indonesian WeChat groups, and each WeChat group has a different number of members ranging from tens to hundreds of members in a group. Participation in this study was voluntary. The study also included statements on respondents' demographics, such as gender, descent, education, major, time of stay, and self-identification questions about Chinese language ability.

The length of stay in China ranged from one year to more than three years, with 34.7% of respondents spending one year, 26.5% spending two years, 20.9% spending three years, and 17.8% spending more than three years. By ethnic origin, the sample comprised 287 Chinese (67.4%) and 139 non-Chinese (32.6%) individuals (see Table 4). The mean age of the participants was 23.8 years (SD = 4.906, range = 17–39 years). Although collected online, the sample composition still reflects a broad range of key population characteristics.

Table1. Demographics of the participants

Demographic	Description	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	162	38
	Female	264	62
Do you identify as being of Chinese descent?	Yes I am Chinese	287	67.4
	Non Chinese	139	32.6

		Doctor Program	56	13.1
Education		Master Program	86	20.2
		Bachelor Program	187	43.9
		Other	97	22.8
	Major	Social Science and Humanities	188	44.1
STEM		238	55.9	
How Long in China	Year 1	148	34.7	
	Year 2	113	26.5	
	Year 3	89	20.9	
	More than 3 years	76	17.8	
	Completely don't Understand	8	1.9	
Chinese Language Proficiency	Know a Little	26	6.1	
	Average	184	43.2	
	Fairly Proficient	126	29.6	
	Very Proficient	82	19.2	

## FINDINGS

This section outlines the empirical evidence concerning the determinants of *SSF* across various demographic profiles.

*Table2. Inferential Statistical Analysis of SSF*

Mann–Whitney Test		
Variable		
Gender and SSF	Mann–Whitney U	20284.5
	Wilcoxon W	33487.5
	Z	-0.891
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.373
Ethnic Roots and SSF	Mann–Whitney U	14883
	Wilcoxon W	24613
	Z	-4.251
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0
Major and SSF	Mann–Whitney U	22284

		Wilcoxon W	50725	
		Z	-0.07	
		Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.944	
<b>Kruskal-Wallis H Test -Test Statistics</b>				
Variable				
Education Level and SSF		Kruskal-Wallis H	7.157	
		df	3	
		Asymp. Sig.	0.067	
Duration of stay in China and SSF		Kruskal-Wallis H	1.208	
		df	3	
		Asymp. Sig.	0.751	
Chinese Language Skills and SSF		Kruskal-Wallis H	32.799	
		df	4	
		Asymp. Sig.	0	
Chinese Language Skills and SSF		Kruskal-Wallis H	32.799	
		df	4	
		Asymp. Sig.	0	
<b>Nonparametric Correlations Test</b>				
			Chinese Language Skills	SSF
Spearman's rho	Chinese Language Skills	Correlation	1	.244**
		Coefficient		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0
	SSF	Correlation	.244**	1
		Coefficient		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0	.
		N	426	426

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Given that ethnic roots and Chinese language proficiency emerged as statistically significant variables associated with SSF in the preceding analyses, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how these two variables jointly and independently contribute to students' sense of social fit. This additional analysis was deemed necessary to move beyond bivariate examination and to assess the relative predictive weight of each variable when considered simultaneously, thereby offering a more

comprehensive picture of the dynamics underlying SSF among Indonesian students in China.

*Table3. Multiple Regression Analysis*

<b>Multiple Regression Analysis</b>						
Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	,355 <sup>a</sup>	,126	,122		1,365	
a. Predictors: (Constant), Chinese Language Level, Ethnic Roots						
<b>Anova<sup>a</sup></b>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	113,437	2	56,718	30,439	,000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	788,200	423	1,863		
	Total	901,637	425			
a. Dependent Variable: SSF						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Chinese Language Level, Ethnic Roots						
<b>Coefficients<sup>a</sup></b>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4,245	,323		13,140	,000
	Ethnic Roots	-,704	,141	-,227	-4,992	,000
	Chinese Language Level	,427	,071	,273	5,999	,000
a. Dependent Variable: SSF						

## DISCUSSION

### Gender and SSF

A Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to compare Sense of Social Fit Scale scores between male and female participants. The results indicated no statistically significant difference between the two groups,  $U = 20,284.50$ ,  $z = -0.891$ ,  $p = 0.373$ . This finding suggests that the distribution of sense of social fit scores is broadly comparable across genders. Although gender is often considered an important variable influencing mental health and social adjustment (Jin et al.,

2023; Lee et al., 2009), its influence may be more nuanced or limited to specific domains. Wang et al. (2015) found that while online social support had a stronger impact on women's psychological adjustment, this gender-moderating effect was not found for sociocultural adjustment. The findings of this study suggest that although there are differences between male and female students in their sense of social fit, there are no significant gender-based differences in their levels of social adjustment in China. These results suggest that while gender can influence an individual's perception of their social environment, this factor is not strong enough to influence their overall sense of social fit. Our study demonstrates that there are other factors influencing this SSF. This is substantiated by previous research indicating that gender is not the sole positive predictor of international students' adjustment (Lee et al., 2009). Other factors, such as successfully learning culturally appropriate behaviors in the academic environment (García & Garza, 2016; Malota & Mucsi, 2025), along with ethnic or cultural roots and language, may have a greater influence on how Indonesian students adjust to the university environment in China.

### **Ethnic Roots and SSF**

Statistical tests comparing the level of sense of social fit (SSF) between students who identify as Chinese and non-Chinese show a significant difference ( $U = 14883.00$ ,  $z = -4.251$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The mean SSF score of Chinese students ( $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) was higher than that of non-Chinese students ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ). This finding suggests that ethnic roots are closely linked to variations in SSF among Indonesian students at Chinese universities. This finding aligns with previous studies that have identified the ability to integrate with the host country's culture as one of the most influential predictors of international students' adjustment (C.-C. D. C. Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). The adoption of the host culture is positively associated with social connectedness and perceived support (Cao et al., 2018); however, maintaining the original culture is associated with greater well-being when enculturation is accompanied by a strong connection to the host society (Du & Wei, 2015). In both of these cases, Indonesian Chinese descendants continue to preserve their ancestral culture in Indonesia (Gio & Pandrianto, 2025). This suggests that racial/ethnic diversity should be studied as something “fluid and dynamic” rather than something static or fixed (Boiger, 2008; Graham et al., 2022).

Other studies have shown that ethnic identity is positively associated with adaptation to local culture, where the stronger the sense of identity is, the better the adjustment (Hai et al., 2025). Similar phenomena have also been found in Korean and Dutch students (Kim & Feyissa, 2022; Rienties et al., 2012). Cultural origins have been shown to play a role in how students adapt to new environments (Shafaei et al., 2019). A “culture fit” condition for international students who are compatible with Chinese culture is very beneficial, making adaptation easier (Li & Zhang, 2025). Consequently, this proximity in cultural heritage acts as a psychological bridge that effectively minimizes acculturation barriers. This empowers ethnic Chinese Indonesian students to utilize their identity fluidity as

social capital, ultimately strengthening their connectedness and smoothing their social navigation in the academic environment in China.

### **Major and SSF**

Our statistical test results showed no significant difference in sense of social fit between international students majoring in STEM and those majoring in social sciences in China ( $U = 22284.00$ ,  $z = -0.070$ ,  $p = .944$ ). This finding indicates that disciplinary grouping (STEM vs. Social Sciences) is not a primary determinant of students' social adaptation. It appears that the universal experience of being an international student, including cultural, linguistic, and academic adaptation to a new environment, is far more dominant and creates a collective experience that negates differences between majors. This finding aligns with Aloo (2021), who noted that the fluidity of disciplinary categories such as the shift of Economics to STEM does not necessarily have a significant impact or drastically change students' choices. Success, and likely social adaptation, is determined more by the fit of an individual's interests and talents to the chosen field (Amin et al., 2021). This result further implies that the shared status of being an international student may serve as a stronger social equalizer than disciplinary boundaries in shaping students' SSF.

### **Education Level and SSF**

A Kruskal–Wallis H test was conducted to examine differences in Sense of Social Fit Scale scores across education levels. The results indicated that the differences among educational groups were not statistically significant,  $H(3) = 7.157$ ,  $p = 0.067$ . Therefore, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that sense of social fit differs meaningfully across education categories among Indonesian students in China. The experience of social adaptation in a new university environment is likely more influenced by background factors and social context than by the level of the study program. This finding aligns with Ahn and Davis (2023) findings indicating that academic engagement and social engagement are two independent and equally important pathways. In the context of our Chinese sample, contextual factors such as status, for example, being an immigrant student, likely overshadowed any differences that educational level might bring.

### **Duration of Stay in China and SSF**

Our findings indicate that the length of stay in China was not significantly associated with SSF ( $H(3) = 1.208$ ,  $p = 0.751$ ), thus suggesting that duration cannot be used as a sole explanatory factor for social fit. This finding aligns with the view that social adaptation is nonlinear and multidimensional, allowing the influence of time to be easily overshadowed by process factors (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Rienties et al., 2012). While there is evidence of changes in adaptation over time in international students (An & Chiang, 2015), recent evidence suggests that length of stay is not a key variable for sociocultural

adaptation (Güzel & Glazer, 2019). Furthermore, research evidence challenges the U/W curve narrative, and the effect of length of stay may disappear once other factors are taken into account (Al Juboori et al., 2025). This acculturation process is described as a complex and multifaceted experience (Kosic, 2025), with various factors influencing it (Ergin-Kocaturk et al., 2025). Consistent with this, various studies have confirmed that the quality of engagement is a stronger determinant of SSF than the length of time in the form of social support, especially from local friends, which moderates the effect of acculturation strategies on adaptation (Ng et al., 2017). Substantively, this confirms that “longer stay” does not automatically mean “better social fit”; what is crucial is what happens during the stay.

### **Chinese Language Skills and SSF**

A Kruskal–Wallis H test revealed significant differences in SSF scores across categories of Chinese language proficiency  $H(4) = 32.799, p < .001$ . This finding indicates notable variations in social fit levels among different proficiency groups. Consistent with this result, Spearman’s rho correlation analysis identified a statistically significant positive relationship between Chinese language proficiency and sense of social fit ( $r_s = .244, p < .001$ ), suggesting that higher language proficiency is associated with a greater sense of social fit. As previous research has found, language proficiency is a positive predictor of international students' adjustment (Lee et al., 2009). Among international students in China, language proficiency acts as a mediator for self-development (Azram et al., 2025), and language self-confidence emerges as a key factor supporting social and academic adaptation (B. Yu & Shen, 2012). Language serves not only as a transactional communication tool but also as relational capital that facilitates access to interactions with host nationals, expands networks, and alleviates the psychological burdens associated with academic and social participation. Research in immigrant populations suggests that learning a local language promotes a sense of belonging, fosters autonomy and self-confidence, and mitigates social isolation and exclusion (Queirós et al., 2025). This indicates that achieving a certain threshold of language proficiency has the potential to enable nonethnic Chinese students to mitigate the gap in social congruence resulting from the absence of ethnic ties. In essence, linguistic competence serves as a dynamic compensatory mechanism that empowers international students to proactively decode complex cultural scripts, negotiate their social identities, and forge meaningful intercultural bonds, thereby transforming an initial cultural distance into a tangible pathway for profound social integration.

### **Multiple Regression Analysis**

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the impact of Ethnic Roots and Chinese Language Level on SSF. The analysis (F test) revealed that the overall regression model was significant,  $F(2,423) = 30.439, p < 0.001$ . This model yielded  $R^2 = 0.126$ , indicating that ethnic roots and Chinese language level collectively explained 12.6% of the total variance in the SSF

variable. Furthermore, partial testing (t test) demonstrated that both predictor variables significantly influenced SSF. The ethnic roots variable exhibited a significant negative effect ( $B = -0,704, t = -4,992, p < 0,001$ ). In contrast, the Chinese language level variable showed a significant positive effect ( $B = 0,427, t = 5,999, p < 0,001$ ). Based on these results, it can be concluded that an increase in the Chinese language level is associated with an increase in SSF. These findings affirm that international students' social fit is not exclusively determined by their ethnic identity background but also by more immediate adaptive resources, specifically their Chinese language proficiency. Consequently, the Chinese language level can be conceptualized as a protective factor facilitating students' social adjustment within the academic environment. This is consistent with previous literature highlighting the multifaceted benefits of local language proficiency for international students (B. Yu & Shen, 2012; Q. Yu et al., 2024). Ultimately, these results underscore that while ethnic heritage represents a relatively static demographic variable, linguistic proficiency functions as a dynamic and actionable catalyst, empowering students to proactively bridge cultural divides, negotiate their social fit, and cultivate resilience within a foreign academic landscape.

### **Language, Ethnic Roots, and Enhancing Social Fit**

The findings of this study suggest several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study supports a process-oriented conceptualization of social fit: SSF is not a static trait tied to immutable characteristics but rather a flexible condition primarily shaped by processual factors such as Chinese language proficiency and the quality of socioacademic engagement. Ethnic roots are important, but primarily as a source of cultural-linguistic capital that can facilitate early adjustment, rather than as a fixed determinant of long-term trajectories. This perspective encourages scholars to conceptualize ethnicity and language as dynamic resources that interact with institutional and interpersonal contexts.

Practically, these findings suggest that universities hosting Indonesian and other international students should prioritize process-based interventions rather than assuming that SSF will naturally increase as students spend more time in the host country. Interventions could include (a) integrated Chinese language and culture courses that combine language and culture learning with collaborative projects involving local students, (b) peer mentoring schemes that pair new international students with local or more experienced international students, (c) mixed clubs and communities that encourage cross-cultural interaction and (d) activities explicitly designed to build language confidence and understanding of Chinese culture in real-world contexts. Such steps may be especially important for students who do not have ethnic or cultural ties to the Chinese community, as they may help offset initial deficiencies in the SSF.

### Limitations and directions for future research

This study requires improvement in the future. First, its cross-sectional design is only able to identify correlations, not causal relationships. We cannot definitively conclude whether language proficiency leads to increased social fit or whether, conversely, students who are inherently more adaptable (higher in social fit) are more motivated to improve their language skills. Future longitudinal studies are needed to map this reciprocal relationship over time. Second, generalization of these findings should be done with caution. Our sample, although quite large (N = 426), is flawed, as it is susceptible to self-selection bias, meaning that the participating individuals may not be representative of the broader population, despite being distributed through various WeChat groups of Indonesians in China; possibly, in that group, there are students who have graduated or are no longer in China. As a result, this sample may not fully represent the diversity of the overall population. Moreover, the adaptation experiences of Indonesian students in other regions or universities in China may differ significantly, depending on the social ecology and institutional support available. Third, the language proficiency variables rely on self-report rather than HSK (*Hànyǔ shuǐpíng kǎoshì* 汉语水平考试= Standard Chinese Language Test) levels. Using self-report is susceptible to perception bias, and using HSK levels may not fully reflect everyday communicative skills, which are crucial for social fit. Finally, Indonesia is a country rich in ethnicities, and in the future, a more comprehensive identification is needed to see the existing differences.

### CONCLUSION

The sense of social fit (SSF) pattern of Indonesian students at Chinese universities is primarily determined by process factors, particularly Chinese language proficiency, rather than by status attributes or length of stay. Demographic variables, including gender, field of study (STEM vs. social), and educational level, did not show significant differences in SSF. Additionally, length of stay was not significantly associated with SSF. Thus, a longer stay does not automatically equate to a better sense of fit; what matters more is what students do during their stay, such as accessing cross-cultural friendship networks, communicating effectively in the local language, and actively engaging in the campus environment. This pattern indicates that social fit is not a static state but rather a spectrum that increases as students adapt to their new environment.

Another finding suggests that ethnic roots influence SSF. Students who identify as Chinese tend to report higher SSF than their non-Chinese counterparts. This difference is consistent with the idea that cultural-linguistic proximity provides initial cultural/linguistic capital, such as understanding social norms and symbols, ease of daily communication, and quicker access to host-national networks. However, the language findings above also suggest that the SSF gap can be narrowed through increased language competence and opportunities for meaningful interaction. Thus, the ethnic effect is not the key factor but rather a capital advantage that can be countered through appropriate interventions. These

findings encourage universities to prioritize process-based interventions to improve SSF in international students.

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- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

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