



*Journal of International Students*  
Volume 15, Issue 9 (2025), pp. 205-230  
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)  
jistudents.org  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/5zrmtc41>



## Exploring the Development of Cross-Cultural Social Connectedness: A Qualitative Study of Malaysian International Students in China

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**ABSTRACT:** *Social interaction is essential for international students in rebuilding support systems in their host country; however, the complexity of this process remains insufficiently explored. Guided by the conceptual framework of social connectedness, this qualitative case study examines the types, influencing factors, and characteristics of social interactions among four Malaysian international students at a Chinese higher-education institution. Analysis of data from face-to-face interviews, informal conversations, and social media posts revealed five social connectedness types—expansion, deepening, weakening, avoidance, and flexibility—shaped by distinct personal and contextual factors. Further analysis revealed three characteristics of social connectedness: proactive, nongoal-oriented, and restricted. This study extends the conceptual framework by demonstrating the adaptive functions of disconnection, interpersonal tensions within deep relationships, and the context-dependent nature of social interaction flexibility. The study also advances the understanding of how agency shapes diverse trajectories of social connectedness, supporting cross-cultural learning and personal growth.*

**Keywords:** international students, social connectedness, social disconnectedness, individual agency, qualitative case study

**Received:** 19, 2, 2025 | **Revised:** 12, 7, 2025 | **Accepted:** 12, 7, 2025

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## INTRODUCTION

China, a major destination for international education, hosted approximately half a million international students in higher education institutions in 2019 (IIE, 2020), with 258,000 enrolled in degree programs (MOE, 2019). International students leave behind familiar social ties and support systems of their home country, entering unfamiliar cultural and interpersonal environments (Schartner, 2015). They develop new social connections, with differences in whom they choose to engage and the extent to which they exercise personal agency (Li & Gong, 2022; Liang & Chen, 2016; Yaghout & He, 2020).

The literature has primarily explored the efforts and positive outcomes of international students in forming connections with students from the host country and other countries. For example, greater engagement with host nationals is correlated with increased life satisfaction and reduced homesickness (Hendrickson et al., 2011), whereas interactions with other international students enhance well-being and a sense of belonging (Schartner, 2015).

However, relative to English-speaking contexts, the cross-cultural social connectedness of international students in China remains understudied. Studies in the Chinese context show that students primarily interact with peers from their home country or neighboring countries, maintaining limited contact with Chinese students (Liang & Chen, 2016; Yaghout & He, 2020; Yang, 2005), despite Chinese universities' strategies to encourage interactions between domestic and international students (MOE, 2018; Yang et al., 2023). According to the conceptual framework of social connectedness (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022; Tran & Gomes, 2017), such limited engagement may indicate a lack of belongingness. However, this interpretation overlooks the complexity and variability of social connections, as not all students actively seek connections (La Garza & Ono, 2015): some may avoid ineffective interactions, protect themselves from perceived negative host cultural influences, or focus on academic goals. Nevertheless, intercultural relationships often involve personal growth, where students gain transformation through social engagement. However, current research has insufficiently addressed how these connections influence broader academic and life trajectories. A more nuanced inquiry is needed to uncover the processes and characteristics of international students' social connectedness.

This study draws on the conceptual framework of social connectedness, combined with the authors' own cross-cultural experiences, to examine the dynamic development of international students' interpersonal relationships within the Chinese higher education context. It contributes to the literature by providing a more comprehensive account of how international students shape their social connections and explores the broader theoretical implications of these processes. In doing so, this study addresses three research questions:

- (1) In the context of Chinese higher education, how do international students develop social connectedness?
- (2) What factors influence the processes underlying social connectedness?
- (3) What individual characteristics emerge during these processes?

This research employs a qualitative case-study approach to address these questions. The findings are expected to benefit institutions aiming to improve support for international student integration.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social connectedness as a conceptual framework**

Grounded in research on loneliness and psychological well-being, the concept of social connectedness emphasizes individuals' sense of belonging and capacity for positive interpersonal relationships (Bowins, 2021, p.41). In transnational settings, international students' connectedness encompasses relationships with people, places, communities, and institutions in the host society, significantly influencing their well-being, academic performance, and life trajectories (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022; Tran & Gomes, 2017). Such connectedness can be facilitated by institutional support (McFaul, 2016) or student-initiated community practices (Schartner, 2015), forming a support system for meaningful daily life engagement.

Conversely, social disconnectedness is conceptualized as the absence or loss of belonging to a community, a location, or a set of values (Tran & Gomes, 2017). For international students, this may lead to poor sociocultural adaptation, greater academic difficulties, and lower satisfaction with the study-abroad experience (Quinton, 2020; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). Therefore, according to the social connectedness conceptual framework, low relational engagement is associated with diminished psychological and social outcomes. However, this binary framing may overlook the challenges of maintaining connections and the potential value of intentionally withdrawing as a coping strategy. Accordingly, incorporating a dialectical perspective may enhance the comprehensiveness of the framework and better reflect the complexity of international students' social experiences.

### **Patterns of social connectedness: From home clustering to multicultural engagement**

A common early pattern in the social connectedness of international students is cultural clustering, where connections are predominantly formed with compatriots or other international students (Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Schoe et al., 2022). This tendency is shaped by the size of the home community—specifically, large conational groups provide abundant opportunities for mono-cultural interactions (Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017), whereas smaller groups limit social interactions with compatriots (Li & Zizzy, 2018), prompting more diverse contacts (Byrne et al., 2019; Yu-Wen, 2002).

At this early stage, international students often struggle to establish meaningful relationships with host country students (Schartner, 2015). These contacts tend to be superficial and unsustainable (Li & Zizzy, 2018; Montgomery

& McDowell, 2009), often structured through instructional interventions such as mixed-nationality classes (Rienties & Nolan, 2014) or academic working groups (Bennett et al., 2013).

Over time, students' social connectedness patterns diverge in a nonlinear and heterogeneous manner. Rienties and Nolan (2014) reported that most Confucian Asian students maintain strong intragroup ties, whereas students from other countries gradually develop cross-cultural friendships. Another UK-based study further categorized four patterns that emerged within nine months after enrollment: dominant contact with nonnative international students, avoidance of conational ties, emotional reliance on home peers, or simultaneous engagement with both home and host peers (Schartner, 2015). Host relations—even those initially formed through institutional assignment—may evolve into meaningful connections when they are based on shared intercultural experiences, mutual goals, and long-term academic cooperation (Bennett et al., 2013). These findings reflect a shift from initial clustering to more individualized, meaningful, and strategic approaches to cross-cultural social connectedness.

Nevertheless, the motivations behind shifting patterns of social connectedness in this context, particularly the role of social disengagement, remain underexplored. One possible explanation is that disconnection is often viewed as detrimental to intercultural interaction (Tran & Gomes, 2017), leading to its interpretation as a sign of unsatisfactory integration. This assumption may overlook intentional, adaptive, or contextually appropriate forms of social nonparticipation that fall outside the conventional success-failure dichotomy, calling for further investigation.

### **Influencing factors of social connectedness**

Multiple factors shape international students' cross-cultural social connectedness, including individual traits, institutional practices, and broader sociocultural contexts. At the personal level, studies emphasize the role of personality, beliefs, language proficiency, and agency. Extroversion and open attitudes facilitate friendships with host nationals, but overly friendship-oriented efforts may hinder cross-cultural relationships (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Yu-Wen, 2002). A sense of self-worth supports cross-cultural interaction (Quinton, 2020; Glass & Westmont, 2014), whereas heightened sensitivity to face concerns can intensify social pressure (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). Additionally, difficulties in using the host language and English as lingua franca pose barriers to cross-cultural interactions (Byrne et al., 2019; Gao & Wesely, 2024; Meng et al., 2021).

Agency (Bennett et al., 2013) is a particularly important factor. In this context, as the ability to mobilize linguistic, social and cultural resources in pursuit of interpersonal connection (Li & Gong, 2022; Meng et al., 2021), agency may manifest in seeking peers with similar psychological adjustment and higher sociocultural adaptation levels (Sadewo et al., 2020) or in creating peer-based support communities (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). However, the literature continues to portray agency as goal-directed and instrumental, aiming to

compensate for the absence of prior social networks (Schoe et al., 2022) or to achieve academic success (Bennett et al., 2013). This neglects diverse forms of agency, such as low willingness to engage in social participation, reliance on home cultural communication, and de-emphasis on social engagement (Page & Chahboun, 2019; Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017).

Institutional structures such as student organizations, academic practices, and cultural activities facilitate interpersonal relationships and engage in cross-cultural exchanges within study groups (Kamran & Awan, 2024; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). Residential arrangements, however, yield mixed results: shared housing can foster cross-cultural contact (Schartner, 2015), but international dormitories may reinforce segregation from the local community (Byrne et al., 2019), thereby weakening interactions with host students.

At the sociocultural level, public-private boundaries and social distances influence interactions between students from their home countries and host countries (Gareis, 2000). Cultural distance and discrimination also limit connections between host and international students (Meng et al., 2021). Challenges also arise within the home student community—in particular, students who deviate from home cultural expectations, such as dress codes or social behaviors, may encounter criticism from fellow nationals or those with the same cultural backgrounds (Byrne et al., 2019). This form of intracultural tension remains underexplored, underscoring the need to move beyond binary host-versus-home modes of integration. Furthermore, gaps remain in understanding how students interact with these intersecting factors over time and how they contribute to social disengagement or selective interactions.

Overall, the literature review reveals a lack of research on the role of social disengagement and the factors driving the development of social connectedness among international students within the Chinese context. By addressing both social engagement and disengagement and foregrounding the role of agency in shaping social connectedness, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced theoretical understanding and enrich the global dialogue on international student integration across various sociocultural settings.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

This study employs a qualitative case-study approach, enabling researchers to explore diverse experiences from individuals' cultural perspectives and to develop in-depth, evolving interpretations of social reality (Yin, 2018, p.15–16). Here, “social reality” refers to the navigation of international students within unfamiliar cultural environments through social interactions. By collecting and analyzing students' narratives regarding their efforts to build social ties and exercise agency, this study generates nuanced knowledge about the diverse and complex ways in which social connections are formed in a shared study-abroad context and contributes to the theoretical generalization of this particular social reality explored (Yin, 2018, p. 20–21).

**Sampling and participants**

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants on the basis of criteria aligned with the research questions (Bryman, 2012, p.422). To ensure rich, reflective data, this study focused on students enrolled in degree programs for at least two years (Yu, 2008), as they had already moved beyond the initial culture shock and were able to both reflect on prior social experiences and continue to develop those experiences.

The first author distributed research invitations to three schools at a top-tier university in Beijing, China, with large international student populations. Two agreed to support the study through their international student offices. Finally, four third-year undergraduate Malaysian international students from the School of Chinese Language and Literature participated in the study. A sample of four participants is considered valid, as the rich data generated allow analytic generalization (Yin, 2018) while preserving in-depth exploration (Bryman, 2012, p.425).

The first author met the students in person to gather background information and confirm their participation. All the students provided informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms (in Chinese Pinyin) to ensure privacy; these are used henceforth. Table 1 provides brief participant profiles.

**Table 1. Portraits of the four participants**

Participant pseudonym	Si	Rui	Shu	Xiao
Gender			Female	
Religion			Islam	
Program	Chinese language, undergraduate			
Initial social connections	Lived in international student dormitories, separated from domestic students during the study. Therefore, their initial social connections were with peers from their home country			
Initial host language proficiency	Pre-beginner			
Aims for studying in China	To ensure future employment; Full scholarship provided by the program	To break free from family influence; Following her own will	To comply with parents' wishes by relinquishing her own will	To pursue a career in teaching in the future
Initial attitudes toward host country interaction	Open to social interactions	Open to social interactions	Worries about not knowing how to interact with others	Did not prioritize issues of social interactions

## **Data collection**

The data sources included face-to-face interviews, informal conversations, and social media, enabling multidimensional investigations of social connectedness. Given that researchers are instruments of knowledge production (Kvale, 2007, p.86), we recognized our own cultural and experiential positioning (Creswell, 2007, p.47). Both authors had previously taught Chinese abroad and, as researchers with similar cross-cultural experiences, understood participants' social interactions from an insider's perspective while also observing and analyzing their social participation from an outsider's standpoint.

Face-to-face interviews—the primary data source—were conducted from June to December 2019, with a 4×4 interview design: each participant was interviewed four times at intervals of 1.5 months on average, yielding 14 hours of data. This multiround interview format enabled in-depth exploration (Bryman, 2012, p.213) of the participants' experiences of social connectedness, captured the evolving nature of their social relationships, and fostered mutual trust between the researchers and participants by creating a more relaxed atmosphere. Informal conversations primarily took place in public areas on campus, focusing on participants' recent life situations, which compensated for the researchers' limited direct and full observation of their social engagements. Social media data were drawn from WeChat Moments, a widely used social media platform in China, to obtain authentic insights into daily life and emotional expression. These served as supplements by offering new data, prompting follow-up interview questions and helping verify consistency across narratives.

The interviews followed a semistructured format, guided by prepared questions but adaptable to participants' responses (Bryman, 2012). For example, when asked “During your time studying in China, how did you interact with Chinese people? To what extent did you engage in such interactions?”, the participants were encouraged to request clarification, highlight ambiguities, or elaborate on their perspectives. This format also enabled the researchers to follow up on participants' responses, allowing for deeper exploration of their experiences. With the participants' informed consent, the interviews were audio-recorded. The first round used prepared questions; subsequent rounds reviewed and confirmed prior data, incorporated new questions from supporting materials, and clarified inconsistencies. By the fourth round, since all aspects of participants' cross-cultural social connectedness had been fully developed, data saturation had been considered reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Notably, the first round of interviews was conducted in pairs at the request of one participant. Shu, who was shy, preferred to be interviewed alongside Xiao. Although paired interviews could risk one participant dominating or misinterpreting the other, they also fostered collaborative meaning-making (Amadasi & Hoilday, 2017), reduced anxiety, and encouraged openness, and disadvantages could be addressed in subsequent interviews.

## **Data analysis**

The data were analyzed via first- and second-cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2013). Throughout the process, the researchers wrote analytic memos (Saldaña, 2013) to reflect on the coding decisions and identify similarities and differences among individuals through comparative analysis. Using MAXQDA 2018, transcripts were first reviewed for contextual understanding and then segmented into independently coded units. A combination of elemental, affective and exploratory methods was employed to address Research Questions 1 and 2. These approaches facilitated the identification of codes presenting participants' evolving social behaviors over time, their perspectives and attitudes toward social interactions, and the emotional dynamics embedded in these experiences. By comparing and interpreting these codes, a set of concepts related to types of social connectedness and their influencing factors was developed. Postcoding transitions were subsequently applied to reanalyze the data by grouping the concepts into broader categories, which allowed for a more systematic identification of the developmental types of social connectedness and the factors shaping them. To respond to Research Question 3 regarding individual characteristics, the study drew on pattern coding in the second-cycle coding. Concepts and categories related to participants' behaviors, strategies and attitudes toward social engagement were integrated to construct more salient patterns of social connectedness, revealing distinct individual trajectories and engagement styles. The codes, concepts, and categories are summarized in Table 2.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was ensured by addressing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Bryman, 2012). First, credibility was achieved through respondent validation (Bazeley, 2013, p.408; Bryman, 2012, p.391). From the second round of interviews, the primary findings of the previous round were presented to the participants for verification. After all the case analyses were completed, the full set of findings was shared with the participants to confirm alignment with their lived experiences. Discrepancies between the findings and participants' experiences were revised accordingly. Second, to ensure dependability, two researchers with qualitative research experience assessed the consistency of the data coding. Approximately 12,000 words were randomly selected from the transcripts (Bowles, 2010) and independently coded. Inter-coder agreement was 77.1% and 90.0%, respectively, indicating satisfactory coding consistency. Third, transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participants' intercultural social interactions, which illustrated their evolving relationships with home, host, and international peers. This enabled theoretical generalization of international students' cross-cultural relationships that transcended situational immediacy (Bazeley, 2013, p.410; Yin, 2018). Finally, confirmability was enhanced by the participants' life stories and interactions with the researchers. The participants were encouraged to provide additional details, clarify inconsistencies, and address contradictions within their narratives. They were also allowed to move beyond the preset questions and assumptions, prompting the researchers to continuously reflect on the data analysis and interpretation processes until a shared understanding of the social realities being described was reached (Kvale, 2007).

**Table 2. Categories, concepts, and codes**

<b>Core categories</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Concepts</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Connection and disconnection as meaningful processes of social engagement	Expansion of social connectedness	Instrumental motives	Improving host language proficiency (e.g., <i>“seeking to improve Chinese”</i> ); Obtaining academic assistance (e.g., <i>“asking others to help answer questionnaire”</i> ); Gaining information about China (e.g., <i>“asking locals about interesting places to visit”</i> )
		Social motives	Desire to make many friends (e.g., <i>“you should make many, many friends”</i> ); Enhancing understanding through conflict resolution (e.g., <i>“conflicts are a normal part of life”</i> ); Interactions based on religion (e.g., <i>“meeting others at the mosque”</i> )
	Deepening of social connectedness	Building deep friendships	Support and mutual trust (e.g., <i>“I think she understands people”</i> ); Efforts to maintain relationships (e.g., <i>“I need to hold back”</i> )
		Integrative motives	Obtaining in-group identity (e.g., <i>“they accept me”</i> )
	Weakening of social connectedness	Decline of instrumental motives	Improvement in host language proficiency (e.g., <i>“my Chinese has improved”</i> ); Lack of in-depth communications (e.g., <i>“relationships are not very deep”</i> ); Unverified rationalized assumptions (e.g., <i>“I assume Chinese students are very busy.”</i> )
			Lack of actions that enhance effective interactions
		Avoidance of social connectedness	Exclusion of specific groups

		Cultural norms of the host country	Inability to adapt to the host cultural norms (e.g., <i>"I do not get used to being treated by others"</i> )
		Solidifying negative impressions of the whole community	Negative experiences (e.g., <i>"He took away the registration form"</i> ); Low levels of acceptance of individual differences (e.g., <i>"I'm not used to their personalities"</i> ); Amplification of negative impressions (e.g., <i>"THEY don't accept others' opinions"</i> )
	Flexibility in social connectedness	A mindset of letting things take their course	No specific interaction goals (e.g., <i>"I don't have many thoughts on that"</i> ); Lack of proactive interaction (e.g., <i>"I don't take the initiative to interact with Chinese students"</i> )
Agency shaped diverse characteristics of social connectedness	Proactive engagement of social connectedness	Proactive interaction	Full utilization of interpersonal resources (e.g., <i>"I ask them for help"</i> )
		Personal growth	Effective achievement of communication goals (e.g., <i>"If I want to be happy, I go find my friends"</i> ); Sense of accomplishment (e.g., <i>"I've grown up"</i> )
	Nongoal oriented social connectedness	Goal-neutral	Engaging in relational dynamics (e.g., <i>"I talk to whomever I come across"</i> );
		Learning through interaction	Regulating negative emotions (e.g., <i>"calm down"</i> )
Restricted social connectedness	Discrepancy between intention and action	Strong desire for connection (e.g., <i>"I want to make close friends"</i> ); Lack of reciprocal interaction (e.g., <i>"If they don't message me, I assume they're busy"</i> );	
		Self-withdrawal and avoidance	Inability to meet personal expectations (e.g., <i>"However, I don't have friends"</i> ); Nature of interpersonal connection (e.g., <i>"One day, they will leave"</i> )

## RESULTS

A cross-case approach was adopted to elaborate on the processes, influencing factors, and characteristics of international students' cross-cultural social connectedness. This approach facilitated the identification of core categories with theoretical significance, while illustrating these categories through the participants' lived experiences. Table 3 presents the key findings, along with the associated categories, concepts, and illustrative examples.

**Table 3. Summary of research findings**

Research questions (RQs)	Major findings	Primarily reflected categories and concepts	Typical examples
RQ1: How do international students develop social connectedness?	Identified five types of social engagement in the development of participants' cross-cultural social connectedness	(1) Weakening  (2) Avoidance  (3) Flexibility	Lacked initiative owing to introversion and cultural misunderstanding (Shu)  Withdrew from Chinese peers over discomfort with hospitality customs (Xiao)  Employed unplanned, natural interactions (Xiao)
RQ2: What factors influence the process of social connectedness?	Identified various factors facilitating the formation of each distinct type	(1) Instrumental motives decline  (2) Social withdrawal  (3) Adaptive mindset	Reduced contact after language goals met (Si, Weakening)  Avoided contacts with conationals (Si, Avoidance)  Letting things take their course (Xiao, Flexibility)
RQ3: What individual characteristics emerge during this process?	Identified three individual characteristics that shaped the development of cross-cultural social connectedness	(1) Proactive  (2) Nongoal oriented  (3) Restricted	Goal-driven initiative in building social ties (Si)  Flexible, present-focused openness to social interaction (Xiao)  Instrumentally confined and emotionally distanced relationships (Shu)

## **Development of cross-cultural social connectedness and influencing factors**

This subsection addresses Research Questions 1 and 2 by demonstrating the five developmental types of cross-cultural social connectedness and the factors facilitating progression within each type.

### ***Expansion of social connectedness: On instrumental and interaction functions***

Newly established social connections represented participants' initial efforts to build networks within the host country. Instrumental interactions were found to be directly related to improving Chinese proficiency, completing coursework, and acquiring local information. Activities such as the "Chinese Corner" provided immediate platforms to expand communication with Chinese students during their early stages of study in China. Rui expressed eagerness to have her Chinese friends correct her language errors or use social media to learn Chinese expressions: "Many of my Chinese friends post on WeChat Moments, which helps me learn how they express themselves, so I can use those phrases next time." Similarly, Si joined "Chinese Corner" not to pursue friendship but to "find a language partner to help me learn and improve my Chinese" and to complete academic tasks. Additionally, she often visited off-campus local parks to engage in conversations with residents, further enhancing her Chinese language skills.

Instrumental goals were not always successfully realized. Shu's attempt to practice Chinese with compatriots was met with confusion, which prevented her from receiving support. This limitation, however, was mitigated by Chinese students' language assistance and life support. As she noted, "When I need help, I send them a message on WeChat, and they respond as soon as possible." Such interactions helped her effectively address language and life challenges.

Unlike instrumental goals, interaction goals address the emotional and social voids caused by the disruption of familiar social environments and resources (Ward et al., 2001). Si actively sought engagement with foreigners through off-campus activities. Rui further expressed her belief that "When you study abroad, you are not just there to make friends with people from that country; you should also make many friends while abroad. Making friends is not a mistake."

However, forming friendships has proven complex. Differences in cultural values and behaviors lead to conflicts, indicating that expanding social connectedness is not always harmonious. Rui shared her experience of acting as a "language interpreter and coordinator" during a trip with students from various countries. This role placed her in a dilemma, as she had to endure the tour guide's complaints about the students' laziness, address the students' criticisms of the tour guide's demeanor, as well as their mutual accusations, while managing the emotions of all parties involved. However, her awareness of the need to listen to different viewpoints and her positive attitude enabled her to appreciate the characteristics of different cultures while fostering friendships. She stated:

Although there were conflicts, I still felt very happy because we became friends. It seems that there were bad experiences and that conflicts arose from disagreements, but I still don't think it's that bad, because there are still positive aspects. I try to view the situation from the brighter side; this is not a big problem. Conflict is a normal part of life, so it is to be expected.

Religion also drove social connectedness. Most of Xiao's friends in China were Muslims, and mosques offered spaces to connect with other believers. During worship services, congregants gather together, making it easy for Xiao to "find common topics," creating a sense of belonging. In a foreign culture where Islam is a minority religion, the mosque provided a supportive social environment for Xiao to engage in interpersonal interactions.

***Deepening of social connectedness: On friendship, relationship maintenance, and identity transformation***

As social connectedness intensifies, participants establish themselves within the host social environment and expand their social networks. One factor driving social connectedness is mutual support and trust, wherein one party offers advice and helps the other overcome difficulties, while the other reciprocates with openness and appreciation. These dynamics were evident in the close friendship between Si and her Japanese classmate. As Si stated,

With others, she only expresses her happiness and tends to hide her troubles. Because I have a positive mindset, sometimes I offer her advice, and if I can't find a solution, I try to cheer her up and coax her to feel better... In addition, I think she might worry that if she discusses her issues with her Japanese classmates, they spread to others and become widely known. However, if she confides in me, it keeps between us.

This sense of trust is also present in Xiao's friendship with a Thai student she met at the mosque. Initially grounded in a shared religious identity and Chinese language tutoring, their relationships deepened as the Thai friend's empathy and companionship helped Xiao manage personal stress, transforming their bonds into one marked by mutual care and gratitude.

As friendships with students from other countries deepen, participants face challenges in managing relationships with conationals—a prominent issue being that the host country's language and culture intensify conflicts within these relationships. Rui found her interactions with compatriots to be "more complex". When she attempted to adopt local customs, she frequently faced criticism from her classmates. Additionally, when discussing deeper topics, she was cautious not to allow differences in values to strain their relationships. Her coping strategies included avoiding sensitive topics, compromising on certain values, and refraining from excessive displays of cultural adaptation. As she navigated growing friendships with students from other countries, she struggled to balance

these ties with those with her home student community (Schartner, 2015). Initially, although uncertain about both maintaining relationships with compatriots and engaging with international friends, she gradually came to accept that pleasing everyone was unrealistic and chose instead to act in alignment with her authentic self. As she put it:

Now I am not interested in their comments. In fact, they do not say anything anymore, and they are getting used to it: “Alright. This is your personality. So if you choose to go out, then go ahead! We’ll go out next time.” This is how we handle things.

Another factor facilitating deep connections is obtaining in-group identity. One challenge to integrating into local students’ social networks is overcoming the influence of implicit group boundaries rooted in Confucian culture. Despite Rui’s consistent participation in the Chinese Corner, she struggled to advance her relationships with Chinese students. However, after transitioning from participant to organizer, she unexpectedly discovered that “after engaging more with Chinese students, they became more accepting of me... They reached out to me, and I felt they wanted to be my friends, so I enjoyed chatting with them.” This suggests that being accepted as an insider is a prerequisite to deepening connections with Chinese students.

### ***Weakening of social connectedness: On the decline of instrumentality and lack of motivation for interactions***

A decline in instrumental motivation can underlie the weakening of social connectedness. Once the participants achieved greater proficiency in Chinese, their language-exchange relationships with Chinese students gradually diminished. Si no longer viewed interaction with Chinese students as essential to her language improvement, stating that “practicing with foreign friends is also effective... we are no longer that close.” Similarly, Rui observed that some Chinese students she met at Chinese Corner did not recognize her when they met again, suggesting that Chinese students’ interactions with international students may be instrumental and temporary in nature.

When explaining the weakening of social ties with Chinese students, most participants provided unverified rationalized assumptions on the basis of observations rather than facts. Si, Rui, and Xiao mentioned increased academic workload as a reason for reduced interactions. However, because this explanation attributed the decline in social interactions solely to their own circumstances, they also incorporated an other-oriented perspective, attributing the decline to Chinese students’ demanding schedules. According to Rui:

Chinese students study very hard and are truly busy. We just do not have time to meet or stay in touch because I worry about bothering them.

This reasoning, while seemingly considerate, served more as a protective narrative to justify such distancing—as Si candidly acknowledged, “the relationships aren’t deep enough, so we make excuses about being afraid of bothering each other.” Such statements reflect how instrumentally formed ties often lack the emotional depth needed for sustained connection.

Another factor contributing to the weakening of social connectedness is the lack of initiative in fostering bidirectional interactions. Although Shu received academic assistance and general support from Chinese students, she did not initiate contact. She attributed this to her introverted personality and difficulties navigating cultural differences: “Sometimes when I talk to them, they don’t quite understand, perhaps because our thoughts are different.” Shu’s experiences suggest that when participants lack the courage to overcome introversion and fail to take active steps to engage in intercultural negotiation to enhance mutual understanding, their social connections weaken.

### ***Avoidance of social connectedness: On negative emotions and cultural differences***

During their studies in China, some participants deliberately avoid engaging with certain groups. Si explicitly expressed disengagement from her ethnic peers, perceiving their interactions as overly cautious and governed by rigid social expectations. She remarked, “they expect me to contact them first before they maintain the connection.”

Additionally, the psychological discomfort caused by host cultural norms leads to social avoidance. Xiao’s friendships with Chinese students waned because she found it challenging to accept Chinese hospitality customs: “I am not used to being treated by others, but my Chinese friends insisted on paying the bill. That was quite embarrassing so that I barely communicated with them from then on.” She believed that even when a close friend pays the bill for her, it is important to “make it clear before the meal.” In Chinese culture, hospitality is a means of expressing closeness and strengthening relationships. However, Xiao found such practices to conflict with her cultural norms, and she felt that their relationship had not yet reached a level that justified such gestures.

The generalization of solidified negative impressions also leads to the avoidance of social connections. These impressions start at the individual level and subsequently affect interactions with the entire group. Shu, a devout Muslim, recounted a classroom incident during a discussion on the topic “having faith leads to happiness.” When a student from another country opposed this viewpoint, she perceived it as more than a personal disagreement: “They believe their viewpoints are correct and are unwilling to accept others’ perspectives. Therefore, I’m not very willing to communicate with them.” She used the plural “they” rather than the singular “he/she”, indicating that she projected this individual’s unwillingness to accept differing opinions onto the entire group. Such overgeneralizations led to the assumption that others would exhibit similar behaviors, thus erecting barriers against interpersonal engagement and creating

defensive mechanisms. This self-fulfilling prophecy ultimately prevents Shu from recognizing the complexity inherent in social interactions.

### ***Flexibility in social connectedness: On “letting things take their course”***

This type of social connectedness illustrates how some participants enter the host society without predefined social goals, opting instead for modes of interaction that align with their preferences and immediate contexts—Xiao refers to this as “let(ing) things take their course”:

I will communicate with whomever I meet. I don’t think too much about making friends with people from any particular country or about whether or not to make Chinese friends. Honestly, that never crossed my mind.

Xiao emphasized focusing on the present state of social interactions and relationship experiences, making judgments during actual interactions rather than planning ahead. Rather than actively seeking friendships, she chose to participate in activities such as “Chinese Corner” when invited or accompanied by others, responding to social opportunities as they arose. Her stance resonates with the Chinese concept of “naturalness”, which implies operating in accordance with the inherent nature of things without intentional interference. This perspective reflects a relaxed, nongoal-oriented approach to social interaction: while she did not actively pursue new relationships, she remained open to forming them. Although her interactions with compatriots, Chinese students, and other international students were limited, she established meaningful relationships, as exemplified by her friendship with the Thai student.

Overall, the five identified types highlight the dynamic and multifaceted nature of participants’ social experiences, shaped by a range of factors, including motivation, sociocultural context, and personal strategies.

### **Emergent individual characteristics driving the development of cross-cultural social connectedness**

On the basis of the participants’ experiences, this subsection discusses three individual characteristics that shaped their cross-cultural social connectedness, addressing Research Question 3.

#### ***Proactive engagement in social interaction***

The first characteristic is the proactive social engagement mindset, typically displayed by Si and Rui. They maintained open attitudes toward cross-cultural interactions and recognized the value of establishing broad interpersonal networks during their time abroad, effectively leveraging interpersonal resources to achieve their social goals. Although Si held distinct preferences for engaging with specific cultural groups, Rui adopted a more inclusive approach. Both exhibited strong

initiative and intention in social participation. Reflecting on her studies in China, Si acknowledged her efforts in social interactions, while Rui experienced continuous personal growth through extensive social engagement, even helping others expand their social networks: “When others face problems and don’t trust anyone else, they come to me to share their issues and ask for my help.”

### ***Nongoal-oriented social interaction***

The second characteristic is a nongoal-oriented attitude toward social interactions, exemplified by Xiao. Her focus was on “learning happily and living well in China” rather than actively pursuing specific social outcomes. Therefore, she did not predetermine whom to interact with or to what extent. Owing to her introverted personality, she rarely took the initiative to engage with others. However, this did not mean that she avoided social interactions; rather, her decisions to connect with others, develop close friendships, or withdraw from relationships were guided by situational needs. Throughout Xiao’s study in China, her social connectedness remained loose. Nonetheless, her flexible and emotionally balanced attitude helped her manage interpersonal tensions and maintain a positive study-abroad experience:

If someone does something that makes me angry, my anger lasts just a moment, and then I calm down and think, “It’s okay, just let it go.”

### ***Restricted social interaction***

The third characteristic is restricted interpersonal relationships, represented by Shu. Despite her desire for connection, her relationships remained limited due to her strong focus on instrumental goals and her limited capacity for negotiating cross-cultural meaning with Chinese students. She also missed opportunities for broader engagement with international students owing to her fixed negative impressions. As a result, she maintained only low-level relationships with compatriots, Chinese students, and students from other countries. The friendships she longed for never materialized, leading to her strongly negative interpretation of the nature of interpersonal relationships: “It often comes to me that everyone else is destined to be a passer-by in our lives. One day, they will leave. Therefore, even though they are now surrounded by friends, they will eventually be far away. They own the future, but I own the present.” Shu viewed “separation” as permanent and “gathering” as temporary. Her summary of interpersonal relationships became justifiable for her inability to develop lasting friendships, resulting in failure to form friendships during her studies in China.

In summary, the development of cross-cultural social connectedness is closely tied to individual dispositions and orientations toward social interaction. Whether proactive, nongoal-oriented, or restricted, these characteristics influence both the extent and quality of participants’ interpersonal experiences, highlighting

the formative role of individual agency in shaping cross-cultural social connectedness.

## DISCUSSION

Drawing on the conceptual framework of social connectedness, this qualitative case study explored five types of cross-cultural social interaction among four Malaysian international students in China. While the literature highlights the benefits of “connectedness” in addressing cross-cultural challenges and fostering well-being (Schartner, 2015; Ward et al., 2001), framing “disconnectedness” as a lack of belonging, with potential physical and psychological consequences (Tran & Gomes, 2017, p.7), this study reveals a nuanced picture: disconnectedness, often seen as social withdrawal, serves as a protective strategy, helping participants avoid interpersonal conflicts and alleviate cultural pressure in the host society. Moreover, connectedness did not always unfold smoothly, as maintaining close friendships could also generate interpersonal tensions.

One reason for weakened social connectedness was the reduced need for language-based interaction with host students. This finding supports Brown’s (2009) argument that linguistic fluency does not guarantee social relationships with host nationals. In our study, the initial motivation to improve Chinese language skills shifted toward forming relationships with other international students, reflecting broader desires for multicultural interactions. Future research should examine the dynamic interplay between target language development, host–national engagement, and cross-national peer networks.

Previous studies have explained international students’ avoidance of social engagement as resulting from their inability to develop close friendships with host nationals within a limited stay period (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013) or as a strategy to maintain home culture and identity (Li & Zizzy, 2018). In contrast, this study identifies social avoidance as a coping strategy in response to cultural and interpersonal stress. For example, Xiao deliberately distanced herself from Chinese friends to avoid local hospitality customs. Beyond the avoidance of host-national engagement, Si’s case illustrates a deliberate choice to not engage with conationals. These findings both echo that some international students choose not to establish close relationships with conationals (Rienties & Nolan, 2014) and sheds light on the reasons underlying such distancing—specifically, discomfort with conational social norms. Notably, Si’s selective engagement was enabled by a socially supportive environment: most students lived on campus, which facilitated frequent and meaningful multicultural interactions.

Even within conational friendships, participants navigated cultural expectations and shared history (Byrne et al., 2019). As Rui’s experience shows, embracing host cultural values or seeking cross-cultural friendships could disrupt harmony within the home community. To mitigate these tensions, participants adopted strategies such as emotional regulation, self-reconciliation, selective self-disclosure, seeking understanding from peers, and ongoing negotiation of boundaries and expectations, suggesting that even conational friendships in the host environment are not insulated from multicultural dynamics.

Notably, flexibility offers a new perspective on international students' social engagement that goes beyond the binary of connectedness and disconnectedness. Characterized by Xiao's "letting things take their course" approach, it challenges previous assumptions that international students prioritize academic or career goals over social integration (Page & Chahboun, 2019; Volet & Ang, 2013). In this study, some participants did not engage in social interactions through a predetermined hierarchy of social goals or deliberate language learning efforts but through spontaneous, context-driven encounters. This mixed mode—both participatory and detached—suggests a reduced sense of agency but also alleviates the pressure of unmet interpersonal expectations, allowing participants to maintain a balance between themselves, others, and their social environment.

Among the factors influencing social connectedness, one salient aspect is trust in close relationships. While past research has emphasized mutual interests, openness, loyalty, and reciprocal self-disclosure (Gareis, 2000), our study reveals a more heterogeneous foundation. Extroverted and expressive individuals offered support, companionship, and discretion, whereas more reserved individuals reciprocated with gratitude and emotional dependence. This suggests that the mutual disclosure of personal information (Kim, 2001, p.128) can vary, which may be related to the personality and feminine traits of the participants in this study. If they are less skilled at self-expression, they tend to respond with psychological affirmation and sincerity, building trust and intimacy through alternative forms of emotional engagement.

Religion emerged as another meaningful domain for connection. Prior studies note that shared faith is a basis for social bonding (Philip et al., 2019; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). In our research, religious affiliation enabled participants to develop relationships beyond formal institutions, particularly where campus-based religious communities were limited. For Shu and Xiao, religious settings fostered ties with other Muslims. The mosque, as a culturally familiar "enclave," functions not only as a place of worship but also as a supportive social space. This highlights the need for more research on how international students establish social connectedness in religious contexts, especially when sociocultural and institutional support is lacking.

Finally, this study identified individual characteristics that shaped students' relational trajectories, supporting critiques of viewing international students as a homogeneous group (Gargano, 2009) and echoing Trice's (2004) observation that personal agency influences how international students shape relationships. The participants followed diverse relational pathways—proactive, nongoal-oriented, and restricted—rather than progressing along a single, linear trajectory from conational to host-national engagement. The extent and manner in which they exercised agency shaped both their relationships and their personal growth. Those with clear goals and adaptive strategies built broader, deeper, and more satisfying social networks, through which they developed a stronger sense of identity and enhanced capacity to support others. Others, despite internal tensions between their desire for friendship and passive involvement in social interaction, gained profound insights into the nature of human relationships. For some, growth emerged from spontaneous, meaningful interactions, as well as from their

capacity for self-regulation, rather than deliberate social pursuits. These different expressions of agency led to diverse patterns of social connectedness, each contributing to meaningful life experiences.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study identified five types of cross-cultural connectedness, their driving factors, and the distinct personal characteristics associated with social connectedness among four Malaysian international students in China. The expansion and deepening of social connections supported the conceptual framework of social connectedness by demonstrating how participants engaged in linguistic, academic, religious, and daily life interactions to build deepening and meaningful relationships, contributing to belonging and personal growth. In contrast, the “weakening” and “avoidance” types revealed how intentional social disengagement helped participants manage social discomfort and avert potential conflicts. Notably, the “flexibility” type reflects a noncommittal approach characterized by the absence of fixed expectations and openness to spontaneous interaction. Across all types, even close relationships involved navigating tensions, suggesting that connection does not always yield positive outcomes and that disconnection can serve adaptive or constructive purposes. These findings offer a more nuanced understanding of “connectedness” as positive sociocultural adjustment and “disconnectedness” as failed integration, calling attention to their emotional and strategic complexity.

The study also deepens the understanding of the diversity of social connectedness and the role of individual agency. The participants’ engagement characteristics reflected distinct patterns of agency and were shaped by their ability to mobilize personal and relational resources, in turn fostering various forms of personal growth. The findings offer analytical value for similar intercultural contexts.

### *Implications and limitations*

Practically, the study highlights the need for higher education institutions to adopt inclusive and flexible policies for international students. Institutions should respect students’ varying preferences for engagement and provide personalized support accordingly. Multilingual learning groups, culturally familiar religious spaces, and peer-support networks should be incorporated to create a socially diverse campus ecology. Psychological services should also accommodate both socially active students and those who prefer solitude, acknowledging the full spectrum of social preferences and needs.

Several limitations to this study need to be acknowledged. This study focuses on international students in Beijing-based higher education institutions, and the findings may not be transferable to other regions. Additionally, it is uncertain whether students with similar backgrounds would demonstrate comparable patterns of social connectedness in other host country contexts. Future research

should involve participants from a more diverse range of backgrounds to better capture the complexity of international students' relational dynamics and generate more globally relevant theoretical insights.

## Funding

This research project is supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities of Beijing Language and Culture University (22YBB24).

## Acknowledgment

*In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:*

- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

*We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to all the participants for giving their time to participate in in-person interviews and to contribute to this research. In preparing this manuscript, the authors utilized ChatGPT to assist in composing more detailed and organized sentences. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.*

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