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Chinese International Students' Collective Navigation of their Study Abroad Experiences: Analysis of *Xiaohongshu* Posts About UK University Life

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the experiences of Chinese international students at London universities by analyzing 1,791 Mandarin-language posts from the *Xiaohongshu* site (RedNote). Six interconnected themes were identified in this naturally occurring discourse, reflecting the topics and concerns that these students themselves considered important. The themes are community and social life; identity and belonging; academic adaptation; future planning and uncertainty; managing daily life; and navigating structural and institutional systems. A key observation from this analysis lies in these students' use of social media to transform individual experiences and struggles into a kind of 'collective navigation' of the challenges and meanings of being an international student. This was accomplished through the extensive use of cultural capital to broker shared understandings and transform individual psychological experiences into a distributed social process of acculturation and withdrawal. This provides a new framework for understanding sojourner adaptation in academic settings.

Keywords: Acculturation, Chinese international students, computationally assisted analysis, cultural identity, online discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship on the experiences of Chinese international students has explored aspects such as the (mis)alignment of educational systems (Bai & Wang, 2024), identity navigation between heritage and host cultures (Yang & Du, 2025), family-centered support systems (Xu, 2025), disciplinary influences (Zou & Fu, 2025) and coping mechanisms (Lai et al., 2023). This builds on earlier studies highlighting differences in academic expectations (Constantine et al., 2004), motivational differences (Yan & Berliner, 2013), and adaptation challenges (e.g., Hou & McDowell, 2014). This study contributes to this research in three ways. First, it offers insights from naturally occurring data to complement researcher-initiated data collection methods (e.g., Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Second, studying students' own conceptualization of their experiences reveals complexity and connections between study, practical daily life, emotional experience, and sense of belonging. This differs from the kinds of institutional categories that typically structure support systems (Xue & Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025). Finally, although recent scholarship recognizes active identity construction (e.g., Yang & Du, 2025), this study provides a systematic analysis of identity positioning work (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998) in naturally occurring peer discourse.

This was accomplished through a computer-supported qualitative content analysis of 1,791 posts on the Chinese social media platform *Xiaohongshu* (RedNote), through which students documented their study experiences in London using their native Mandarin. This data source captured real-time sensemaking, revealed organic connections between challenges, and provided culturally embedded discourse using students' own linguistic repertoires. In analyzing these data, the study focused on two lines of enquiry. The first goal was to determine how Chinese international students conceived of and narratively constructed their study experiences. The second goal was to explore the role that their participation in online peer communities played in these students' experiences and adaptation. What emerged is the idea of 'collective navigation'. This reflects how the peer networks these students participated in transformed individual psychological experiences into a distributed social process of acculturation and withdrawal. This extends findings on the navigation of identity (Xu, 2025) by examining peer networks as complementary support structures to families and institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese Students in Western Higher Education

Studies into Chinese students' experiences in Western higher education consistently report two main features. A first observation concerns the complexity of this student experience. This encompasses challenges with academic study (Bai & Wang, 2024) as well as a range of other interacting factors. For instance, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) reported that, while academic integration was a key stressor, it interacted with a range of other factors, including language barriers, social integration, and experiences of discrimination. These interacting features are found in other studies (e.g., Tan & Yates, 2011) alongside a culture of intense academic competition (Muthanna & Sang, 2015) and the importance of parental expectations and influence (Huang & Gove, 2015). The interaction between these factors is important. For instance, Constantine et al. (2004) reported that 65% of international students reported moderate to severe anxiety during academic tasks. This anxiety led to social withdrawal as the most common coping mechanism, thus worsening students' integration (Lai et al., 2023). Similarly, the anxiety associated with completing academic tasks reflects differences between Chinese and Western academic conventions rooted in deeper cultural norms and value systems (Meyer, 2016). Therefore, the international student experience is helpfully understood as involving overlapping challenges of language barriers, cultural shock, loneliness and homesickness, as well as navigating unfamiliar educational contexts and experiencing discrimination (Yan & Berliner, 2013). This study explores this complexity in two ways. First, the content analysis seeks to capture which concerns and topics Chinese students themselves raise and discuss on social media. Through computer-assisted keyword searches, it was possible to map what these students themselves focused on. Second, these students share information about these topics as part of their acculturation. Therefore, this study's analysis of these naturally occurring data also explores how students actively construct their own meanings about their experiences and shape their own strategies for success, or indeed survival.

The second observation concerns integration with local students, where Chinese students are often portrayed as failing to integrate. The context of this 'failure' is research that highlights the advantages of integration. For instance, Hendrickson et al. (2011) emphasize the value of friendship formation for the adjustment and enjoyment of study abroad. Similarly, friendships with local students have been found to enhance both language development and cultural experience, improving academic satisfaction (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). However, Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) reported that interactions with non-Chinese peers, particularly local students, were the most persistent source of difficulty. Similarly, Hou and McDowell (2014) reported that in- and out-group dynamics between UK national and Chinese students were reinforced through spatial arrangements, linguistic choices and divergent participation expectations. These challenges extend beyond language proficiency (Xiaofang, 2025) to encompass lifestyle differences, limited contact opportunities, and systematic

exclusion. Studies have focused on the negative consequences of these experiences. For instance, Li and Gasser (2005) reported that Chinese students reported feeling discriminated against in classroom settings, with Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) identifying academic integration as the most significant acculturative stressor. Even in culturally proximate host countries, these dynamics appear to remain. Xue and Kaur Mehar Singh (2025), who study Chinese students in Malaysia, report that academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation challenges are also present, suggesting that cultural proximity does not eliminate integration strains. While the negative connotations of a lack of integration seem well founded, there is limited research on what the pay-offs of this kind of conational clustering might be (Lai et al., 2023). To explore this behavior, this study explores Mandarin-language interactions.

Theoretical framework

Acculturation theory investigates how individuals from one cultural background adapt to a second cultural environment. It explores the psychological and social changes that occur during this transition (Schwartz et al., 2010). Acculturation theory has been used in many studies on the experiences of international students (e.g., Campbell, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In this study, two key concepts are acculturation stress and acculturation strategies. Stress has been explored in several studies mentioned above (e.g., Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Yang & Du, 2025). This study explores this through content analysis of the concerns students themselves raise, to contrast with the themes identified elsewhere. Acculturation strategies are also key concepts taken from acculturation theory, particularly the apparent choice between integration and separation strategies (Schwartz et al., 2010). Integration strategies involve adapting behaviors from a home culture to those found in the sojourner environment, as outlined in studies such as those of Hendrickson et al. (2011) and Hou and McDowell (2014). Separation strategies refer to students choosing to adhere to the behaviors of their home culture. This is often associated with avoidance and conational clustering, as in Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006). As mentioned, separation is often associated with acculturative stress (Bai, 2016). This study explores this behavior by asking how separation may also benefit international students.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

The study began with a small-scale exploratory online focus group with three Chinese mainland undergraduate students in April 2025. This focus group was used solely for contextual orientation rather than for analytic purposes. The students were recruited through a private hall of residence, and they were attending three different London institutions. In an attempt to understand these students' experiences through researcher-led discussion, the students repeatedly referenced the online community and provided examples of both online and off-

line interactions that were initially brokered via social media. This insight offered by these students informed the decision to prioritize naturally occurring social media discourse as the primary data source. Accordingly, this study focuses on *Xiaohongshu* (RedNote), a Chinese social media platform oriented toward long-form experiential sharing. Although not widely known outside China, *Xiaohongshu* (小红书) has more than 300 million users, predominantly aged 18–35. Unlike WeChat's closed circles or Weibo's news focus, it emphasizes longer-form experiential content (200–2000 characters) and offers rich data (Kozinets, 2020). The platform's search functionality and hashtags create discoverable communities in which students can join and participate or simply read and reflect. The focus group confirmed the relevance of peer-oriented digital platforms in students' everyday academic and practical navigation, providing a starting point for the subsequent analysis.

Data were gathered using *Xiaohongshu*'s search functionality, combining relevant Chinese-language terms such as "伦敦留学" (studying in London), "英国大学" (UK universities), "伦敦生活" (London life), "留学生活" (international student life), and "文化冲击" (cultural shock). These terms were selected for their broad, descriptive usage in Chinese-language discussions of overseas study and daily life, without restricting the dataset to predefined academic or emotional categories. Initial searches yielded 2,420 posts between November 2020 and May 2024. Within this period, posts were included on the basis of explicit mentions of London-based universities and extended reflective content of a minimum of 50 characters. To clean the data, particular posts, such as those promoting educational agents, were removed, as were duplications. The final dataset comprised 1,791 posts from 847 unique users representing 15 London universities. The temporal distribution peaks during academic transition periods. This dataset of user-generated content reflects authentic, first language meaning-making about experiences at London universities (Pink et al., 2016).

Ethical Considerations and Positionality

All the posts analyzed were publicly accessible on *Xiaohongshu*, visible without following individual users or joining closed groups, and were retrieved through noninteractive collection without contact with content creators. In accordance with institutional ethical guidelines, this nonreactive analysis of publicly accessible online content was deemed exempt from formal ethics review. Nonetheless, protective measures have included avoiding identifying details in quotes and analyzing historical messages (minimum one year old) to minimize the impact on current discussions (Pink et al., 2016). The research team's composition inevitably influenced the analytical approach and interpretation. A strength is that the team included native Mandarin speakers with London university experience, as well as a near-native Mandarin speaker with shared study experience. This lived experience and cultural knowledge proved valuable for interpreting linguistic innovations, such as online slang terms, as well as for

sense-checking computer-supported analysis. The analysis of students' meaning-making benefitted from this deep cultural understanding and lived experience, providing perspective that the AI tool lacks. Potential interpretive bias arising from shared linguistic and educational backgrounds was addressed through intercoder comparison and collective review. Human verification was conducted through intercoder checks, internal team presentations of findings and interpretations, and shared translations of the posts and quotes provided here.

Computationally Supported Qualitative Content Analysis—Methodological Approach

The analysis carefully followed the steps presented in Naem et al. (2025), although a different AI tool was used and the steps were adapted to the study's specific context.

Step 1: Familiarization

The first stage involved providing structured prompts and reference materials to Claude (Sonnet 4) with the research context, theoretical frameworks, and systematic thematic analysis process. The Excel dataset containing all 1,791 posts was structured to include details about each post, such as the date and number of likes, as well as the full text, title, and related hashtags. Before the data were uploaded, Claude was provided with contextual materials, including the research questions, a draft literature review section on Chinese international student experiences, and key methodological source materials (Naem et al., 2023; 2025), which explained the stages of the systematic thematic analysis framework. These materials were provided to clarify the analytical scope and procedural expectations rather than to constrain inductive pattern identification. This framework was adapted with the team following only the first four stages from familiarization to theme identification. This occurred because 1,791 posts were insufficient to justify proceeding with the final steps of conceptualization and modeling. Initial prompts were used to verify alignment between the tool's outputs and the specified analytical framework and task constraints (e.g., 'Please summarize your understanding of the first four stages from the six-stage systematic thematic analysis process'). Technical verification confirmed that Claude could access the Excel file structure and correctly identify the relevant data columns.

Step 2: Selection of Keywords

Claude was instructed to conduct a comprehensive scan of all 1,791 posts to identify keywords following the 6 Rs framework (Realness, Richness, Repetition, Rationale, Repartee, and Regal) outlined by Naem et al. (2023). The exact instruction given was 'Please identify keywords from the dataset that meet the following criteria...'. As an initial check, this step was repeated three times, with the second and third requiring Claude to reflect on its own previous output. This led to changes as the research team fed back on the fit between the keywords, the research questions, and the framework. This process resulted in a refined list of

50 core keywords. These keywords included high-frequency terms such as 生活 (life, 823 occurrences) and 申请 (application, 1,383 mentions), experience-related terms such as 焦虑 (anxiety) and 适应 (adaptation), and contextual markers such as 英本 (UK undergraduate) and references to specific institutions and university groups.

Step 3: Coding

Claude was instructed to cluster the 50 identified keywords and their associated quotations into conceptual codes, following the 6 Rs of coding proposed by Naeem et al. (2025). These are ‘Robust, Reflective, Resplendent, Relevant, Radical, Righteous’. Claude was specifically directed to use abductive reasoning, moving between data patterns, research questions and studies on student experience. Claude's initial output generated 19 potential codes. The research team reviewed these codes by asking Claude to provide posts that exemplified this classification. The example posts were read to assess fit between the code and the post's predominant topic. Three rounds of refinement occurred, and this iterative process confirmed the 19 distinct codes outlined in Table 2.

Step 4: Theme Development

The 19 codes were then organized into broader themes following Naeem et al.'s (2023) 4 ‘R’s framework: Reciprocal (meaningfully connecting codes), Recognizable (identifiable from data), Responsive (addressing research questions), and Resourceful (narratively rich). The exact instruction given was ‘Please organize the 19 codes into broader thematic categories that reflect the research questions and utilize the Step 4 process.’ Claude's thematic organization suggested the six themes summarized in Table 1 below. This step, as with those taken before, was repeated with the tool asked to reflect on and verify its working.

Verification of Humans

To validate the AI-assisted analysis, the research team conducted systematic human coding following Nowell et al. (2017), with a close reading of 514 posts (28.6%) for fit to the themes from the computerized allocation. Each post in the sample was independently coded by at least two of the human coders. Coders classified each post according to its predominant theme on the basis of the primary topic discussed. This was initially performed individually, with the coders then agreeing on the allocation between them and justifying this agreement in presentations to the principal investigator. Agreement between AI-generated and human classifications was calculated at 84.2% by comparing human and computer coding and calculating agreement as a simple percentage. Instances of disagreement primarily involved posts engaging in multiple thematic domains, reflecting the overlapping and relational nature of students' sense-making rather than systematic classification error. This level of agreement aligns with the validation results reported in Naeem et al. (2025) and was deemed sufficient to

confirm that the themes accurately reflected the issues students found most salient.

FINDINGS

Overview

Table 1 provides an overview of the six themes, followed by Table 2 of the 19 associated codes.

Table 1: Overview and proportion of themes

Theme	Posts (N)	% of Total
Community & social life	528	29.5%
Identity & belonging	450	25.1%
Academic adaptation	309	17.3%
Future planning & uncertainty	260	14.5%
Management of daily life	163	9.1%
Structural & institutional navigation	81	4.5%

Table 2: Overview of the Themes and ‘Codes’

Theme	Codes
Community & social life	Emotional Vulnerability, Peer Knowledge Economy, Social Network Construction
Identity & belonging	Institutional Identity, Application-centric Identity, Authentic Self-Expression and Status Anxiety
Academic adaptation	Academic Performance, Learning Strategies and Institutional Knowledge and Collective Resilience
Future planning & uncertainty	Future Career Anxiety, Transnational Mobility and Future Planning
Management of daily life	Daily Survival Skills and Financial Strategies
Structural & institutional navigation	Discrimination and Microaggressions, Visa & Legal Status and Public Services Navigation

These ‘codes’ capture the main topics of posts and discussions that these students shared about and were interested in. Table 2 therefore provides an overview of students’ own interests and preoccupations while studying in London. The sections below present the ways students shared about and discussed these themes, highlighting the ‘collective negotiation’ aspect that emerged as a key finding. As part of this, all the illustrative quotes were chosen because they

received high numbers of ‘likes’ or responses, which was taken as evidence of the salience of the post to the wider community.

Community & Social Life

This most discussed theme emerged from posts foregrounding sociality in adaptation (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). The first code, Emotional Vulnerability, encompasses students’ disclosures of emotional struggles, in which sharing transforms private suffering into public authenticity and collective validation. The second code, peer knowledge economy, captures the systematic sharing of experiences that generate searchable, practical resources (advice, checklists, and strategies), thus enabling peer infrastructures to substitute for and, at times, rival institutional guidance. The third code, social network construction, refers to students’ deliberate efforts to forge meaningful connections across conational and cross-cultural boundaries and to negotiate friendships to counter isolation. Finally, Collective Resilience describes posts that narrate resilience as a collective achievement or shared experience, thereby transforming individual hardship into communal recognition and fostering solidarity within the community.

As an illustration of this process of sharing that built collective resonance, the post below transforms personal struggles into collective narratives and reframes hardship as shared endurance.

#留子的命也是命[话题]#/倒计时了·回家倒计时了/我现在是肖申克等待雷雨冲出下水管道的安迪
(#InternationalStudentsLivesMatter[topic]#/The countdown has begun, the countdown to go home./Right now, I am Andy from The Shawshank Redemption, waiting for the thunderstorm to break free through the sewer pipe.)

The hashtag is a good illustration of how these international students consistently reframed their identity through language. The term 留子 condenses 留学生 (international student) into a diminutive, self-deprecating form. In Mandarin, the suffix 子 (*zi*) carries connotations of smallness, dependency, or lowered status. Used here, 子 strips away the prestige attached to studying abroad, reframing students as vulnerable and ordinary. This linguistic shift transforms privileged identity into one marked by fragility. By calling themselves 留子, students resist stereotypes of a cosmopolitan global elite, instead aligning with online self-mockery seen in terms such as 社畜 (corporate livestock). The hashtag “留子的命也是命” (“the life of a study-abroad kid is also a life”) asserts value through irony. This use of humor to position the self is ubiquitous in the data, as follows:

04留子dd搭子/社交是件好难的事·我一个e人被硬生生逼
了,为什么留子好多不正常人?想交一些真诚的朋友。(04
Chinese student waiting for partner/Socializing is such a

difficult thing. I, an “e” person, have been forcibly pushed into becoming an “i.” Why are so many Chinese overseas students so abnormal? I just want to make some genuine friends.)

The post stages a micro-confession, that socializing is hard, then compresses identity into peer-legible code, recasting exhaustion as an MBTI flip from extrovert (e) to introvert (i). The personality test provides shorthand functioning as social-cultural capital. The word choice of "搭子" (partner) over "朋友" (friend) is meaningful. Whereas "朋友" has moral weight and long-term obligation, "搭子" names a lighter, pragmatic arrangement, someone to eat with, study with, and attend events with. For international students negotiating unfamiliar environments, "搭子" lowers the intimacy threshold, providing immediate companionship without enduring loyalty pressure. This vocabulary redefines sociality as modular and functional. This post is an offer to other students based in London to share this kind of ‘low maintenance’ relationship. From the responses, this was accepted.

These posts reveal social support mechanisms that are absent from the literature on Chinese student integration. While Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) document persistent difficulties with non-Chinese peer interaction, *Xiaohongshu* shows students creating alternative social infrastructures through hashtags that transform individual vulnerability into collective identity through linguistic innovation or by replacing friendships with pragmatic partnerships. This challenges the emphasis of Hendrickson et al. (2011) on meaningful friendships as prerequisites for adaptation. Instead, students build modular support networks that provide immediate practical assistance without demanding cultural intimacy. For instance, the peer knowledge economy threads systematically replace institutional guidance with crowd-sourced wisdom. These mechanisms constitute ‘collective navigation’ by transforming isolation into solidarity through shared vulnerability. Unlike integration models that assume gradual assimilation, these students created parallel social systems that validate perpetual foreignness.

Identity & Belonging

This theme comprises four codes: Institutional Identity, Application-centric Identity, Authentic Self-expression, and Status Anxiety. Posts coded as institutional identity reveal students' active negotiation of university hierarchies and affiliations, where educational status is central to self-worth. Application-centric identity encompasses posts where application processes serve as the main framework for self-understanding and social positioning within competitive hierarchies. Authentic self-expression refers to posts reflecting on overseas experiences, often in contrast with the polished self-presentations seen in the previous codes. Status anxiety captures expressions of insecurity as students juggle Chinese, international, and achiever/struggler roles. Consistent with Peng (2025), self-worth is frequently linked to institutional affiliation, prestige, and application outcomes, revealing a persistent tension between achievement,

comparison, and insecurity. Collectively, these codes demonstrate how educational and cultural contexts shape both academic trajectories and broader senses of self and belonging.

As an example of more polished, institution-centric identity work:

LSE再也不是我的梦校了😭/因为LSE是我的学校👉🏻/所以对LSE的蕉可能只属于我这种还没开始上课的新生📖 希望在被reading压的喘不过气来的时候我还能这么松弛[皱眉R] (LSE is no longer my dream school 😭/Because LSE is now my school 👉🏻/So maybe my love for LSE only belongs to people who have not started classes yet. I just hope that when the reading starts to overwhelm me, I can still feel this relaxed [frowning emoji].)

By juxtaposing 梦校 (dream school) with 我的学校 (my school), the student moves from an application-centric identity toward lived institutional membership. The rhetorical progression (provocative title, identity reframing, cautious hope) demonstrates how students often narrate shifting positions, inviting others to acknowledge their own success, or share their own hopes and experiences.

There are many such polished examples of positioning work through institutional belonging. However, an alternative positioning strategy is to address both challenges and difficulties. The following example of a much ‘liked’ post illustrates a far less aspirational message:

宝宝，你是一个孤独的留子/中秋节·端午节·圣诞节·感恩节迁·不管是国内还是国外的节日·看着朋友圈里别人一群人特别热闹·你安安静静给自己点了个外卖·一边委屈着一边适应着·告诉自己·一个人也可以好好的。家有儿女、甄/ (During the Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Christmas, Thanksgiving—whether Chinese or Western holidays—you watched others celebrate in groups, while you quietly ordered takeout, telling yourself you could still be fine alone. Old TV shows like Home With Kids, Empresses in the Palace, and Crayon Shin-chan became your mealtime companions.)

The text employs a second-person address that is intimate and self-reflective, positioning loneliness as almost inevitable for Chinese students abroad. The diminutive “宝宝” (“Baby”) functions as both self-address and a gesture of intimacy, softening the gravity of topics such as isolation and academic uncertainty. It signals a desire for care within the student community, where adopting the role of a childlike figure allows vulnerability to be voiced without shame. Beyond lexical play, the post weaves cultural anchors functioning as affective lifelines. Home with Kids is a family sitcom set in a Beijing household

that is widely seen by Chinese millennials during their formative years. Analogous to the U.S., *The Wonder Years* portrays everyday domestic warmth and intergenerational negotiation. These shows evoke students' childhoods and the home they left behind. For students living alone in a foreign country, these shows offer an emotional bridge back to the rhythms, speech patterns, and social scripts of home. However, these shows represent cultural capital unavailable in making connections beyond conationals (Hou & McDowell, 2014).

Students' identity construction diverges significantly from patterns documented in existing acculturation research. Yang and Du (2025) describe reconciliation between home and host cultures as primary identity work. However, these *Xiaohongshu* posts reveal that students create entirely new identity categories through linguistic innovation. This may be aspirational, as with the transformation from “梦校” (dream school) to “我的学校” (my school), which indicates institutional belonging without claiming cultural assimilation. Alternatively, self-deprecating terms such as ‘Baby’ generate agency by rejecting external expectations of what international students should become. These students’ cultural capital is a barrier to outsiders (as in Hou & McDowell, 2014), but it is also a collective reference point. The use of second-person narrative voice in posts transforms individual experience into collective experience, with responses citing identities and events from these shows. These mechanisms show identity formation here as a collaborative rather than an individual psychological process.

Academic Adaptation

This theme addresses course learning and performance, with posts frequently expressing anxiety (see Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Students described negotiating the gap between established Chinese educational practices and the demands of UK higher education (Bai & Wang, 2024). The Academic Performance Code reflects persistent concerns over meeting academic standards and maintaining achievement across systems, encompassing both fears of inadequacy and the psychological strain of high expectations. Learning Strategies pertain to students' critical evaluation of the limits of familiar methods and the adaptive work required to develop approaches appropriate for the UK context. Institutional knowledge captures students' acquisition and strategic deployment of insights into UK university systems, including hierarchies and unwritten rules, which, when shared with peers, facilitated the collective navigation of academic structures and fostered a sense of shared endeavor.

As an illustration of a resonant example (given the number of responses), the quotation below illustrates a common adaptation challenge:

辛辛苦苦写论文，每次都比上次努力一点/最后出分永远60
出头/考试也是平均分不超过65.../想搞点课外的丰富一下简
历，结果时间安排不当差点出大事情/大一快结束了，怎么
办啊? (I work so hard on my essays, each time putting in more

effort than before, but the marks are always just a little over 60. In exams too, my average never goes above 65... I tried doing some extracurricular activities to develop my CV, but because of poor time management, it nearly caused a disaster. My first year is nearly over—what should I do?)

In addition to differences in academic pressure, many Chinese students face challenges adapting to grading expectations across systems (Constantine et al., 2004). A mark in the low 60s is respectable in the UK context, where in Chinese universities, this would be pass grade. This post expresses frustration, and there is a sense of not knowing how to win in this system. As an example of the kinds of responses students offered this post, the following post reflects many with advice on learning strategies:

上学期末A4纸学习法效果还蛮好的/所以这学期的复习

打算继续采用这种方式/稳稳地在考前记牢很安心 (Last semester the A4 paper study method worked pretty well, so this term I plan to use it again for revision. It feels reassuring to memorize everything firmly before the exam.)

The “A4 paper study method” is a familiar Chinese revision strategy that relies heavily on condensing information into manageable summaries for memorization. Its reuse shows how students draw on established routines to create a sense of control. Moreover, the writer went on to acknowledge the limits of rote learning in the UK context, noting elsewhere that success requires “flexibility” in applying knowledge. Students’ posts in this theme challenge the idea that language proficiency is the primary adaptation barrier (Constantine et al., 2004), with students recognizing that success requires abandoning familiar strategies such as the A4 paper method. Bai and Wang's (2024) framework of divergent academic traditions only partially captures this experience. Posts about academic adaptation consistently frame difficulty not as linguistic deficiency but as requiring the collective recalibration of achievement norms, strategies, and institutional expectations. Students narrate academic struggle as structurally produced, and responses focus on participants collectively navigating challenge through sharing tactics and later outcomes. This online behavior transformed academic culture shock from personal failure into a structural challenge requiring a collective response.

Management of Daily Life

Although not typically discussed in studies of student experience, these students frequently discuss mundane tasks alongside academic challenges (Yan & Berliner, 2013). The code Daily Survival Skills encompasses posts detailing practical competencies essential for everyday life, and the Financial Strategies code reflects students’ management of economic pressures through cost-sharing, discount-seeking, and side incomes. Collectively, these posts can be taken at facial value as advice seeking and sharing. However, they also serve as symbolic

markers of shared experience and resilience. An illustrative quotation that reflects this combination is as follows:

🇬🇧英国独自吃饭系列孜然土豆牛肉/真的超级超级好吃😊

米饭/食材：/-short ribs/-土豆/-孜然/-辣椒粉（选择性）(🇬🇧)

UK Solo Dining Series Cumin Potato and Beef/So delicious 😊

I ate two big bowls of rice with it./Ingredients: Short ribs/Potatoes/Cumin/Chili powder (optional)

This post is more than a simple recipe. It illustrates how food mediates cultural continuity and adaptation for students abroad. By framing the entry as ‘UK Solo Dining Series’, the writer acknowledges solitude but also ritualizes it into repeatable cultural practice. The dish, cumin potato with short beef ribs, is a classic Chinese flavor profile that is rich in spice and warmth and contrasts sharply with the blandness often associated with British student meals. To declare, it was “so delicious I ate two bowls of rice” that it was not just about appetite but subtle affirmation of Chineseness in an environment where staple food and seasoning habits diverged from home.

Daily survival narratives are often absent from studies investigating student experience. While Yan and Berliner (2013) mention overlapping challenges, the proportion of posts related to this theme here suggests that material struggles have greater symbolic significance for these students. Cooking Chinese food represents cultural continuity rather than mere sustenance, and what students call ‘daily survival skills’ can be complex—for instance, financial strategies extend beyond budgeting to complex transnational calculations of currency, visa restrictions, and family expectations. Ward et al.’s (2001) culture shock stages do not reflect the commonality of these daily material negotiations or the resonance they seem to hold for students. Daily life posts exhibit a consistent pattern in which mundane practices are elevated into symbolic markers of adaptation and autonomy. By sharing and discussing them on *Xiaohongshu*, their collective navigation provides practical wisdom but also a sense of belonging.

Future Planning & Uncertainty

The fifth theme encompasses posts oriented toward the future. Future career anxiety captures persistent concerns regarding employment prospects, including the challenges of securing graduate roles, navigating sectoral barriers, and obtaining visa sponsorship. Transnational mobility addresses students’ discussions of cross-border movement and multiple national affiliations, ranging from practical matters such as ticket costs and legal restrictions to more philosophical reflections. Future planning comprises posts reflecting uncertain life trajectories, as students weigh options and reconcile personal aspirations with family expectations. Across these codes, students engaged extensively in dialog about employment, mobility, and existential uncertainty. However, as mentioned above, this is both practical and symbolic.

📦【大二Year2冲刺期】/💎申研党：/- 狂卷成绩/- 抱紧教授大腿（推荐信有着落了）/- 暑假前搞定GRE/GMAT 📦 [Year 2 Sprint Stage]/💎 For postgrad applicants:/Push hard on grades/Secure professors' support (for recommendation letters)/Finish GRE/GMAT before summer)

Each term in this apparently pragmatic vocabulary has layered cultural connotations. For instance, “抱紧教授大腿” literally means “cling tightly to the professor’s thigh”. In colloquial Chinese, this is a metaphor for attaching oneself to a powerful figure for protection or benefit. Its imagery is almost childlike (physically holding onto someone’s leg for support), yet in online slang, it signals strategic dependency and recognition that survival often requires proximity to authority. In fact, students’ future-oriented posts and responses reveal an aspect of study abroad experiences that other studies do not yet capture. ‘Clinging to professor’s thigh’ acknowledges structural dependency in a way that allows those on this thread to discuss this without shame or pretense. These expressions reveal sophisticated understandings of the precarious positioning between home and host countries, which is also captured in Peng’s (2025) work on credential devaluation. In these posts, these students share advice but also reflect collectively on this precarity in the form of shared endeavour and planning.

Structural & Institutional Navigation

This final theme relates to wider experiences of culture shock (Ward et al., 2001). It was identified because some posts specifically describe friction from encountering new bureaucratic systems and structural barriers. This post reflects this as well as the combination mentioned above of a practical, literal message with additional symbolism.

这边看医生是^{FREE}的！因为我记得之前缴了£1,035 (约 🐎6000) 的 immigration health surcharge (IHS), 这是 mandatory fee每个人都需要给的😞 (Seeing a doctor here is ^{FREE}! Because I remember I previously paid £1,035 (about 🐎6000) for the immigration health surcharge (IHS). This is a mandatory fee everyone has to pay😞.)

The extensive use of emojis in this post (📦, 🐎, 😞 and elsewhere 🏠, 💰, 🍌) serves multiple communicative functions beyond decoration. Some are literal, as in the crying face emoji. The horse emoji, however, is not literal. It represents the RMB currency through a visual pun (马/mǎ sounds similar to 吗/ma). This emoji literacy reflects students’ hybrid communicative forms blending languages, scripts, and visual symbols to express ideas that only other Mandarin speakers are likely to understand. Collective navigation via social media provides these students with practical information but also, and perhaps more so, shared belonging and resilience in the face of such challenges. This is a student-generated

system of knowledge sharing and community building that is separate from the support systems offered by UK universities.

DISCUSSION

International Student Experience as Interconnected Experiences

Students' most frequent discussions centered on community (29.5%) and identity (25.1%) rather than purely academic matters (17.3%). This differs from frameworks that have found academic adaptation as a primary concern (Bai & Wang, 2024; Constantine et al., 2004) but is more consistent with recent research, such as that of Yang and Du (2025), which focuses on three institutional, cultural and psychological themes. Therefore, and following Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), who identified academic integration as one of a range of stressors, our data reveal interactions between academic challenges, social isolation, identity negotiation, and practical survival. This extends Xue and Kaur Mehar Singh's (2025) observation about intertwined challenges by showing *how* students construct these connections. In addition, this analysis offers insights into the value to these students of the acculturation strategy of withdrawal (Schwartz et al., 2010). This withdrawal offered *Xiaohongshu* participants communities within which they could collectively make sense of their experiences and of themselves.

As the illustrative quotes demonstrate, students' use of *Xiaohongshu* as a digital peer community carries multiple levels of meaning and particular communicative acts that broker understanding and solidarity on the basis of shared cultural capital. Examples of this, as demonstrated above, include diminutive solidarity, the creation of pragmatic support networks, and the use of considerable cultural anchoring to create searchable online content and in actual interactions. In addition to reference points such as TV shows, there is also philosophical reframing within a Chinese worldview. In this way, the students' use of *Xiaohongshu* means that it serves as an alternative educational infrastructure, enabling code-switching and culturally embedded expression that is probably impossible in formal settings. This peer knowledge economy systematically substitutes for institutional guidance with superior, or perhaps just more salient, practical utility and communal belonging. This extends the work of Zhou and Yin (2025) and Duan et al. (2025) by showing how platforms actively generate new forms of social capital specific to international student experience. In fact, the 1,791 posts are best understood as constituting a collectively authored survival manual evolving in real time. This idea of 'collective navigation' challenges individualistic acculturation models (Campbell, 2015), positioning adaptation as fundamentally social, collaborative meaning-making. This extends Xu's (2025) work on family influence by revealing how peer networks create alternative structures that operate through different types of generational cultural capital.

CONCLUSION

In this study, 1,791 *Xiaohongshu* posts were analyzed to examine the academic adaptation and experiences of Chinese international students. Students organize challenges as interconnected struggles rather than discrete problems. They transform individual difficulties into collective resources through diminutive self-labeling, pragmatic partnerships, and cultural anchoring. Their ‘collective navigation’ of their time abroad using social media emerged as the primary theoretical contribution, as they repositioned academic culture shock from an individual response to a distributed social process. These findings reveal fundamental misalignment between compartmentalized university services and integrated student experiences. As an example of how universities could develop holistic support models, multilingual digital spaces could enable peer knowledge exchange alongside formal services. Future research should examine collective navigation across other populations and platforms to explore how this generation of sojourners actively constructs collective responses to adaptation challenges.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

Chinese Term	Pinyin	Literal Translation	Contextual Meaning
留子	liúzi	study-abroad kid	Diminutive, self-deprecating term for international student
留学生	liúxuéshēng	international student	Standard formal term
搭子	dāzi	partner/companion	Functional, task-specific companion
社畜	shèchù	corporate livestock	Self-deprecating corporate employee term
英本	yīngběn	UK undergrad	UK undergraduate degree/student
梦校	mèngxào	dream school	Aspirational university
抱大腿	bào dàtuǐ	hug thigh	Strategic attachment to powerful figure
生命之流	shēngmìng zhī liú	flow of life	Philosophical acceptance of uncertainty

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In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for analysis, as described in the methodology section. In addition, AI tools were used to review and copyedit the text. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and academic integrity guidelines. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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