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Agency in the Nexus of Identity and Social Network: Understanding the Second Language Socialization Experiences of International Students in China

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ABSTRACT

Studying abroad entails international students' identity (trans)formation and social network development, but individuals' decisions and choices while engaging in these processes remain underexplored. Informed by the notion of agency in second language socialization theory, this longitudinal case study examined the interplay of identity and social network in the socialization experiences of three international students learning Chinese as an additional language in China. Analysis of ethnographic interviews, a Study Abroad Network Questionnaire, observational field notes, and supplementary data revealed the role of individual agency in mediating the students' heterogeneous ways of mobilizing linguistic and cultural resources to construct identities and build social ties. The study also illustrated that agency was not readily or equally accessible to all participants, but it was negotiated in the nexus of their identity and social network. Finally, the study discussed the issues that surfaced in students' distinctive learning trajectories, and offered implications to inform potential stakeholders.

Largely driven by the significant interest in identity work in multilingual and multicultural interactions in transnational experiences, research on learner identity in the context of study abroad (SA) has been thriving over the past few decades (Block, 2007; Diao & Trentman, 2021; Tullock, 2018). Meanwhile, emergent educational hubs have reshaped the global landscape of student mobility, drawing attention to academic experiences and the identity transformation of learners of languages other than English in non-traditional SA settings (Gong, Gao et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2022). Among these hubs, China is ranked as the third SA destination in the world, witnessing an exponential growth of international students pursuing academic qualifications and learning Chinese as an additional language (CAL) (Gong et al., 2018, 2020).

Against this backdrop, a burgeoning literature on CAL learner identity is offering a wealth of findings on international students' identity challenges in China (Li & Li, 2020), but it is aligned with wider SA research in that it is focused predominantly on privileged American or European students, investigating how identity issues are negotiated in relation to exotic experiences, race and ethnicity, and cultural heritage (Diao, 2021; Mu, 2016). This preoccupation might fail to capture the broader picture of international students in China, the majority of whom come from economically and sociopolitically underprivileged contexts such as Asia and Africa (Gao & Zhu, 2021).

Identity construction is central to international students' border-crossing experiences, as it involves the "negotiation of difference" in nationality, gender, and power, and produces a destabilization of self with discomfort, conflicts, and ambivalence (Block, 2007, p. 864). This requires students' constant investment in semiotic resources for identity representation and active participation in the new

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sociocultural context in order to negotiate social relationships (Tullock, 2018). While recent studies have referenced exploring international students' identity challenges in relation to the communities or social networks they (wish to) partake in (e.g., Diao, 2021), there is insufficient evidence regarding how various identity features affect students' disposition and interactions in different socialization settings (Kinginger & Wu, 2018).

For international students, who generally have "limited access to social networks, difficulties with self-representation through the second language (L2) and with establishing equitable relations with interlocutors, and a tendency to adopt ethnocentric stances rather than negotiate cultural differences" (Tullock, 2018, p. 270), social networks play a significant role in shaping their identity construction, because they provide a social locale that determines their exposure to information, participation in social events, and knowledge construction (Li, 2019). This accentuates the importance of examining the interplay between identity and social network to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the academic challenges faced by international students in China. To this end, we wish to draw on second language socialization theory to explore the intersection between identity transformation and social network development during international students' academic journeys in China.

Identity and social network in language learning in study abroad contexts

Identity is defined as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013, p. 45). This conceptualization not only underscores the spatial and temporal nature of identity, but also captures the centrality of social relationships in the formation and transformation of self. In line with this recognition, empirical investigations have been dedicated to examining the development of social networks or "informal social relationships" (Milroy, 1987, p. 178) in order to better understand L2 learners' identity (trans)formation processes (e.g., Hasegawa, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2017; Umino & Benson, 2016). This concurs with the ongoing discussion related to language learners and the wider social world (Diao & Trentman, 2021), and contributes to the recent scholarly interest in the link between identity and social network in L2 learners' social lives in SA contexts (Carhill-Poza & Kurata, 2021).

Research has confirmed the importance of the intersection between identity transformation and social network development among language learners in a range of SA contexts (Carhill-Poza & Kurata, 2021). How students position themselves in their host contexts has been found to be contingent on their opportunities to engage in meaningful, in-depth interactions and establish social relationships with local people (Coleman, 2015; Gautier, 2019). For example, a Turkish student Erol struggled with his foreigner identity in the United States and felt demotivated to learn English for lack of meaningful relationships with both his co-nationals and local American students (Ortaçtepe, 2013), while an Indonesian student Iwan experienced identity transformation from being a *tourist* in Japan to being a confident *language learner* as he increasingly engaged himself in individual and institutional activities (Umino & Benson, 2016).

At the same time, individuals can negotiate identity to shape their interpersonal relationships and access language learning opportunities. Trentman (2015) reported how five female American students negotiated a range of gendered identities to access local Egyptian networks, while Mitchell et al. (2017) observed that British undergraduates who developed an ideal multilingual self were more capable of building broad and strong network ties to benefit their L2 French or Spanish learning. Quite a few studies have foregrounded the importance of understanding international students' identities in relation to their social networks in the Chinese SA context (e.g., Diao, 2021), but there is limited empirical evidence to substantiate this. Therefore, more investigations are needed to capture a broader picture of how identity and social network intersect in wider SA settings, and in the Chinese context in particular (Gong, Guo et al., 2021).

Notably, the prevalent use of the term "community" in most studies (e.g., Umino & Benson, 2016) seems to indicate a dichotomized view of "international students" and "local community members" as two culturally different groups, which could potentially mask the diversified and complex nature of social networks in international students' lives abroad (Holliday & Macdonald, 2020). The broad definition of the word "community," as well as its metaphorical connotations, also preclude the clear delineation of the particular connections that individuals construct, which points to the need to analyze students' personal networks in more depth (Hasegawa, 2019; Li, 2019). Furthermore, while existing studies have revealed the connections between learner identity and social network in SA contexts, the underlying mechanism that accounts for this connection remains under-explored. As decisions about engaging in identity transformation processes or participating in relationship-building activities involve the enactment and performance of agency (van Lier, 2008), interrogating why and how some individuals are more or less capable of using agentive resources is pivotal to our understanding of the relationship between identity and social network in SA contexts.

Agency in second language socialization

Agency has gained considerable currency in contemporary applied linguistics research acknowledging individuals' agentive role in shaping their learning contexts and regulating learning trajectories (Deters et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the field has started to show cognizance of agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112), problematizing the tendency to view agency as free will/choice and highlighting the need to situate it in the nexus of multiple historical, economic, and social factors (Miller, 2016). This renewed understanding of agency offers fertile ground for SA research to understand learners' desire to learn a foreign language, and their specific dialogic negotiation between identity and social influences in the learning process (Diao, 2021).

From a second language socialization perspective, agency is theorized as the capacity to make choices, take control, and self-regulate behaviors to achieve personal or social transformation (Duff, 2012), which is individualized, contextual, and subject to the interplay between learner identity and the larger social network. The theory seeks to explicate how and why certain individuals are able to leverage their agentive resources for creating learning opportunities and whether agency is transferable across contexts (Duff & Doherty, 2015, 2018). As such, it offers a heuristic lens to interpret L2 learners' decisions and behaviors while they are engaging in identity construction and social network development during SA.

Second language socialization theory posits that learner agency fundamentally mediates identity transformation and social network development, and that its availability or absence leads to divergent language and culture learning outcomes (Duff, 2012). For example, Sauer and Ellis (2019) found that two German high school students studying in New Zealand demonstrated varying degrees of agency to exert their identities, which resulted in differential entry to local networks and English learning opportunities. On the other hand, such choice-making agency is neither equally nor readily accessible as an inborn human property; rather, it is negotiated between individuals and their social worlds and thus mediated by identity and social network (Fogle, 2012; Miller, 2016). In particular, research on language socialization has emphasized the role of interpersonal connections and interactions in the development of agency, revealing that social interactions in various contexts (e.g., home stay, residence hall, social networking sites) are associated with learners' awareness of agency in relation to the linguistic and literacy resources available for identity (re)creation (Diao, 2017; Jin, 2018; Kinginger & Wu, 2018).

Identity is also a fundamental driver that shapes learners' self positionings and efforts to negotiate the structural limitations of their agency (Fogle, 2012; Hasegawa, 2019, 2021). For instance, in Fogle (2012) study of three adoptive families in the United States, the adopted Russian- or Ukrainian-speaking children were observed to perform resistance, questioning, and code-switching in family interactions, which were identified as their agentive strategies for seeking connections to their past identities and histories and establishing their membership of the new family. Similarly, Hasegawa (2021) reported that while a Japanese-only policy and accommodation arrangements with Japanese-speaking roommates provided

international students with exposure to the target language and to local students, these measures also reduced their access to a wider range of friends and sociocultural interactions. Motivated by the desire to feel connected, students broke the language pledge to seek more socializing opportunities.

A view of agency in the nexus of identity and social network has therefore emerged from extant research on second language socialization, which points to the mediating role of agency as well as its socioculturally mediated nature in language socialization (Ahearn, 2001; Duff & Doherty, 2015, 2018). In light of our research aims and the aforementioned gaps in the literature, we wish to draw on the notion of agency in second language socialization theory to examine the intersection between identity transformation and social network development in the SA experiences of international students in China. Specifically, the present study aims to address the following two research questions:

(1) How did identity and social network intersect in international students' L2 Chinese socialization experiences?
(2) How did the students develop and exercise agency in negotiating the interactions between identity and social network while studying in China?

The study

This study was part of a larger multiple case study (Li et al., 2021; Li, 2020) that investigated the L2 Chinese pragmatic socialization experiences of eight international students in China, and examined how their identities, social networks, and pragmatic choices were interwoven in the process. The main goal of the present study was to garner a more in-depth understanding of the intersection between identity and social network in L2 Chinese socialization processes. It was conducted at Innis University[1] (IU), which is a national key university in China and an internationally recognized institution offering diversity in its language programs (over 46 types) and international student profiles (from 121 countries and regions).[2] The multilingualism and multiculturalism in the university makes it a unique research context conducive to exploring multilingual international students' L2 socialization experiences.

In particular, Asian students constituted the largest number ($N = 1,651$) and percentage (47.5%) of the total population of international students at IU.[3] This aligns with statistics related to international students in most Chinese universities, where the majority of students come from Asian and African backgrounds (MOE, 2019). As discussed earlier, most extant studies on international students in China have placed a predominant focus on students from American backgrounds, and have thereby failed to generate findings that are transferable to wider populations. This study will therefore focus on Asian international students in China.

Participants

Of the eight participants in the larger study, three were chosen as focal cases in the present study because they (1) constituted information-rich cases with thematically prominent data about identity and social network, (2) presented intriguing contrasts in terms of SA experiences and mobility histories, and (3) demonstrated salient individual agency in their accounts about socialization experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Among these three cases, two were from Thailand and one from Kyrgyzstan. They varied in their programs, majors, language background, and prior study abroad experiences (see Table 1). This profile variation may benefit the documentation of diversity and commonality in participants' experiences, and improve the transferability of data by allowing readers to apply findings to their situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Before the study commenced, ethical approval was obtained from the university and informed consent was sought from all the participants.

Table 1. Focal participants' profiles.

	Lamai	Thong	Roza
Sex	F	F	F
Age	23	22	20
Nationality	Thailand	Thailand	Kyrgyzstan
Program	Master	Master	Undergraduate
Major	International Business	Diplomacy	TCSOL*
First language**	Thai	Thai	Kirghiz
Second language(s) and proficiency**	English (intermediate), Chinese (HSK*** 6)	English (advanced), Chinese (HSK 5)	Russian (advanced), English (advanced), Chinese (HSK 5)
Years of learning Chinese	4	3	3
Prior experiences in China	Exchange programs in Chongqing****(2016); Language programs in Taipei (2017) and Shanghai****(2017)	Exchange programs in Guilin****(2015), Guangzhou****(2016) and Shanghai (2017)	Primary education in Beijing**** (2005); Preparatory studies in Xinjiang*****(2015) and Shanghai (2016)

*TCSOL = Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages. **Self-reported information by participants. ***HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) is a standardized Chinese proficiency test for non-native speakers of Chinese. Among the six levels, HSK 6 indicates the highest proficiency. ****Cities in mainland China. *****Xingjiang is officially the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China.

Data collection

The study adopted a longitudinal and ethnographic design (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Multiple data from different sources were collected at three time points at intervals of around three to four months from June 2018 to July 2019. These included ethnographic interviews, responses to the Study Abroad Network Questionnaire, observational field notes, and other supplementary data. The multiplicity of the data corpus will allow us to triangulate findings to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Ethnographic interviews were conducted twice with each participant in their preferred language (Chinese or English) at the first and third time points. Following the convention of ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 2016), we asked participants three types of questions, including descriptive questions (e.g., What is your typical day at the student office like? What are some of the experiences you have had with the Chinese professors?), structural questions (e.g., Are there different kinds of social groups in your social network? What are the different kinds?), and contrast questions (e.g., How are you engaged with these two different groups? What differences in the Chinese language inputs are there between these two groups?). The concurrent use of these different types of questions could shed light upon two areas of knowledge, namely the ways in which students constructed and negotiated identity and social network while studying in China, and the ways in which they perceived and addressed the challenges of Chinese learning.

The Study Abroad Network Questionnaire was administered at the second time point of data collection. It was designed to collect three types of information from participants, namely their biographical information and linguistic background (ego information), the names of 20 people with whom they had been in regular contact during their sojourn in China (name generator), and further information about the 20 contacts (name interpreter). The combined use of the social network questionnaire and interviews formed an interview-questionnaire-interview cycle and followed the "ethnographic sandwich" network design (Borgatti et al., 2018), with the pre-questionnaire interview facilitating the framing of appropriate questionnaire items and increasing respondents' sense of engagement, and the post-questionnaire one eliciting respondents' emic explanations about patterns and changes in their social networks.

With the participants' permission, observational field notes and other supplementary data were collected from their real-life situations. The first author observed participants' linguistic behaviors and socializing activities by shadowing the participants during academic interactions (e.g., discussions

during course sessions) and extra-curricular events (e.g., service encounters; talks at the student affairs office). Naturalistic data were also collected, including participants' lecture notes, homework, WeChat posts, email interactions and so on. Field notes were taken, and important interactions were audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Data analysis

Following qualitative and ethnographic research conventions, the data analysis process was inductive and recursive, with multiple sources analyzed in a holistic manner (Creswell, 2013). Different analytic methods were employed in accordance with particular data types (Table 2).

In line with the principles of analyzing ethnographic interviews, domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis were applied to address the descriptive questions, structural questions, and contrast questions asked in the interviews (Spradley, 2016). We began with domain analysis to locate and organize cultural information about participants' reported experiences in the home and host contexts, which resulted in a list of domains such as roles and identities (e.g., tourist, diplomat, foreigner), social relationships (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships), mobility options (e.g., Shanghai, Chongqing, Guangzhou), among others. Then we conducted taxonomic analysis, in which we identified the similarities among these domains. Lastly, in the componential analysis we examined differences between the domains, focusing on how participants ascribed value to them and how this information could be organized to illuminate participants' views of their socialization experiences in China.

The social network data was analyzed using Qualitative Structural Analysis (Herz et al., 2015). Qualitative Structural Analysis not only follows a structural approach to analyzing such network dimensions as ego (the focal node in the network), alter (other nodes), and ties, but attends to actors' intentions and the interpretation of meaning-laden relational structures (Herz et al., 2015). This facilitated our analysis of the participants' social network development, and how their identities and social networks became intertwined in the process.

We first performed a standard network analysis via E-Net (Borgatti, 2006) to analyze network composition and structure. Composition was measured by heterogeneity (i.e., alter diversity) and we focused on the diversity of alters with respect to nationality, whereas structure was represented by density (i.e. the number of alters that are connected) (Borgatti et al., 2018). High heterogeneity value indicates great diversity in alters' national backgrounds, while high density value means that alters are highly connected. In addition to generating statistics about network heterogeneity and density, E-Net also automatically produced a sociogram to visualize how the ego was connected to alters and how ego's alters were distributed within the network. To enhance the readability of data, annotations were added to the sociograms by providing the proportion of alters by nationality and highlighting network clusters in different colors when necessary. We then explored the network configurations case-by-case and developed structure-, actor- and tie-focused questions (e.g., Why are there different clusters in the ego's network, and what roles do they play in the ego's social life?). Finally, guided by these analytical questions, we read the interviews closely to draw on the participants' own accounts to qualitatively interpret the network data and foreground the actors' beliefs, values, and normative commitments in the relationship-building process; these are often neglected in traditional social network analysis (Herz et al., 2015).

Table 2. Data corpus and analytic methods.

Data Corpus		Analytic Methods
Ethnographic interviews	Descriptive questions	Domain analysis
	Structural questions	Taxonomic analysis
	Contrast questions	Componential analysis
Study Abroad Network Questionnaires, ethnographic interviews		Qualitative structural analysis
Observational fieldnotes, supplementary data		Content analysis

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) was used for the analysis of observational field notes and other supplementary data including documents, social media posts, email interactions, and so on. They were interpreted and analyzed in an integrated manner in order to identify recurring words, ideas, themes, and patterns, and validate and triangulate the other data sources (Creswell, 2013). Within-case analysis was conducted to delve into each case and understand individuals' socialization experiences and was followed by cross-case analysis that sought to build abstractions across cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Findings

Our findings are presented in a case-by-case manner to provide a descriptive and analytic account of the L2 Chinese socialization processes experienced by the three international students. Overall, mobility experiences helped Lamai accumulate numerous types of social connections that were conducive to her identity construction, which empowered her to enact and transfer the agency to overcome emergent academic challenges. Thong experienced identity transformation that fueled her decision to enroll in a Chinese medium program, where she established extensive connections and was socialized into local pop culture. For Roza, although her identity crisis as a Chinese heritage learner resulted in difficulties in making both local and international friends and accessing Chinese learning opportunities, the struggle nevertheless offered an alternative understanding of her identity, enabling her to express identity flexibly and initiate self-regulated socialization.

Lamai

Prior to coming to China, Lamai already had rich experience of communicating with Chinese people during her Business Chinese degree in Thailand. During her undergraduate study she had not only strived to achieve high scores in school subjects but also dedicated herself to internships in hotels and transnational companies, where she provided translation services for Chinese clients or colleagues. Her excellent academic performance and practical experiences made her one of the top students in the university, and brought opportunities to exchange in universities in mainland China and Taiwan. These internship and exchange experiences, according to Lamai, were crucial to her Chinese learning and fueled her decision to undertake a further degree.

Positive identity forged in cumulative interpersonal connections

In comparing sojourns in different host cities, Lamai highlighted Chongqing as a site that provided the most profound SA experience, in which she garnered a genuine sense of the Chinese lifestyle by interacting with local people and experiencing their everyday life:

> Chongqing is incomparable. I compared whichever city I visited with it. It was vibrant, prosperous and yet quite down-to-earth. The hospitable people there brought me close to their culture and lifestyle (*First interview, 6 September 2018*).

In addition to offering considerable exposure to local culture and lifestyles, studying in Chongqing also brought many changes in Lamai, who managed to build nascent friendships with local Chinese people, improve her Chinese proficiency significantly, and develop an increased sense of belonging to the city:

> My many friendships started here. I made local friends I still keep in touch with. Back then I was so bad in English that I had to rely on my broken Chinese, but they were always so kind and tolerant to me. . . . In Chongqing, I met interesting people, improved my Chinese, and most importantly, I didn't feel foreign at all (*First interview, 6 September 2018*).

It was also in Chongqing that Lamai met her boyfriend Zhao, who had been her former classmate. She shared how this romantic relationship with a local Chinese person led to improved confidence in using Chinese and identity construction:

At first I was upset because I had to check nearly every single sentence he said, but with his help I made progress and became more confident. He really made a difference. Not just on my Chinese, but how I see myself. I realized this when Chinese words kept popping out when calling my mom (*Second interview, 2 June 2019*).

Past social relationships in Chongqing, especially the romantic relationship with her boyfriend there, brought substantial opportunities for Lamai's Chinese language development and identity construction as a competent Chinese speaker, as was indicated by her WeChat name (Figure 1) in which she used three modifiers for identity exertion, namely 可爱 (*cute*), 卖萌 (*acting-cute*),[4] and 中文六 (*excellent Chinese*).[5] On the one hand, Lamai demonstrated great confidence in her Chinese proficiency by proclaiming herself as being good at Chinese. On the other hand, the sociolinguistic use of internet terms to index persona indicated her successful socialization into meaning-laden language practices (Diao, 2017). Thus, the way in which Lamai nicknamed herself on WeChat could suggest her self-identification and Chinese sociolinguistic competence, while the use of WeChat, the most commonly used social media platform in China, also indicated her active engagement in the local mainstream community (Jin, 2018).

To illustrate her positive identity development, Lamai shared an interesting anecdote about her trip to Taipei to attend a summer school, during which she was mistakenly thought to be a student from the mainland by locals. She took this positively and viewed it as a compliment to her accent and Chinese proficiency:

Once at a local market, the shopkeeper noticed my accent and asked how I could speak Chinese so fluently. My teacher even called me 大陆来的妹子 (*a girl from the mainland*). . . . I came here to study Chinese with the hope of not being seen as a 老外 (*foreigner*). I knew I had made it and I was so proud.(*Second interview, 2 June 2019*)
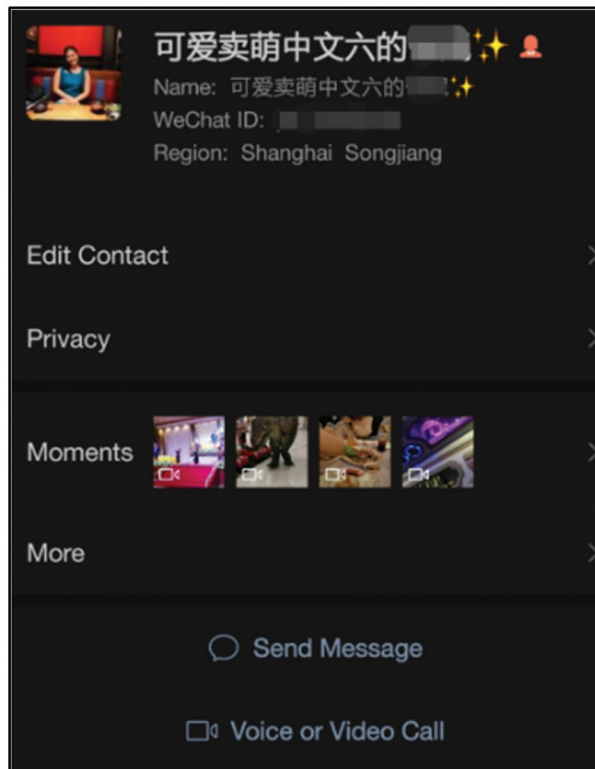

Figure 1. Lamai's WeChat profile.

老师!
您好!
我是来自泰国的 ███。我本科毕业于泰国 ███ 商务汉语专业。目前就读于 ███ 国际贸易专业硕士研究生。
在我很小的时候我们家就开了一家小卖铺，我每天都会帮家里人卖东西，就有了当老板的梦想，也考虑到了学习中文的重要性。所以高三毕业后我选择考入 ███ 的商务汉语专业，并且拿到了我们学校的励志奖学金！
大学本科期间，我参加了学校组织的各种与经济有关的活动和讲座，也出色地完成了学院安排的实习任务。本科期间，我就对经济和贸易有了浓厚的兴趣，所以研究生阶段选择了现在这个专业。现在我才发现现在所学知识比我想象的复杂很多，但是我不会轻易放弃这个来之不易的机会。

> I realize that what I'm learning is far more complicated than I imagined, but I'll not give up this precious opportunity easily.

我通过学长学姐和同学的推荐，认识了老师，大家都说老师很好，很温柔很温和，对学术上最有点严格。开学以来，不瞒老师说，我很寂寞很孤独，没有朋友，

> Since the new semester began, honestly, I've been very lonely. I had no friends.

上课也不是全部都能听懂，去跟本科生插班旁听也听不懂，以前在我身上的学霸气质完全不见了，我心里很失落。给家里打电话也就只能说上课有点困难，不敢在他们面前哭。

> I couldn't understand the lesson a hundred percent. Neither could I understand the undergraduate course I audited. The Straight-A Student image I used to have disappeared completely. I was so upset.

我就只能用这六个字来安慰自己，同时也在鼓励自己：“既来之，则安之”。既然我已经飘洋过海来到这里，我已经下决心了，非常渴望得到这次宝贵的机会，我一定不辱使命。在往后的这三年我会好好努力学习，扎扎实实地学习新的知识，认认真真地完成老师给的任务，也完成我的研究论文，见贤思齐，励志笃行！

> I can only use these six words to comfort and encourage myself. That is, to take things as they come. Now that I cross the border to be here, I've made up my mind — I am desperate for this valuable chance. I shall not dishonor my goals.

以便老师更多地了解我本科所学过的课程，供您参考的文件如下：
1. 个人简历；
2. 本科成绩单；
3. 本科预计毕业证书。
文件已附上

此致，
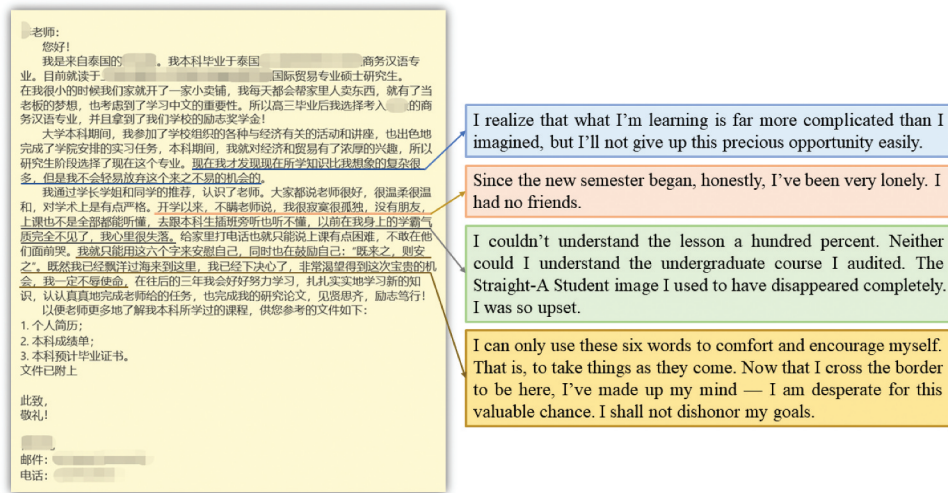敬礼！

███

邮件：███
电话：███

Figure 2. Screenshot of Lamai's letter.

### Social network development empowered by positive identity and agency

According to Lamai, the cumulative and layered experiences of building interpersonal connections with locals and constructing positive identity also empowered her to cope with emerging challenges in the new context (Gautier, 2019), such as taking Chinese medium courses and making new friends. These were captured in a letter Lamai wrote to her MA supervisor when the new semester started, in which she narrated her experiences and explicitly expressed her determination to address obstacles during her study (Figure 2).

The letter encapsulates the challenges faced by Lamai in terms of subject knowledge ("couldn't understand the lesson"), interpersonal relationships ("very lonely," "no friends"), self-perception (upset about the disappearance of the "Straight-A-Student image"), among others. However, by using a Chinese idiom 既来之，则安之 (*to take things as they come*), she forcefully articulated her determination to cope with these emergent challenges. This agency was also reflected in her personal network (Figure 3); while maintaining the connections with her families and Thai friends (see clusters [May-Koi-Zhao-Patcher-Mom-Dad-Brother] and [Fuji-Noon-Ning-Rong-Parn]), Lamai also managed to extend her network and befriend quite a few Chinese classmates despite her unfamiliarity with the new environment.

In Lamai's case we can see that the accumulation of social ties (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships) during her stay in China facilitated the development of her agency in creating and re-creating identity with sociolinguistic resources, which foregrounds the mediating role of individual agency (van Lier, 2008). The agency involved in projecting her positive identity as a proficient Chinese speaker was also transferred to the new academic context and benefited her network development, revealing the reciprocity between agency enactment and identity and social network development.

Thong

Similar to Lamai, Thong had numerous exchange experiences in China. During her undergraduate studies she participated in exchange programs in three prestigious universities in the Chinese cities of Guilin, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. While these exchanges allowed her to explore life in different cities in China, Thong regarded them as rather limited because they involved English medium programs with insufficient exposure to local language and cultures. She therefore decided to explore Chinese language and cultures in more depth by pursuing an academic degree in China.
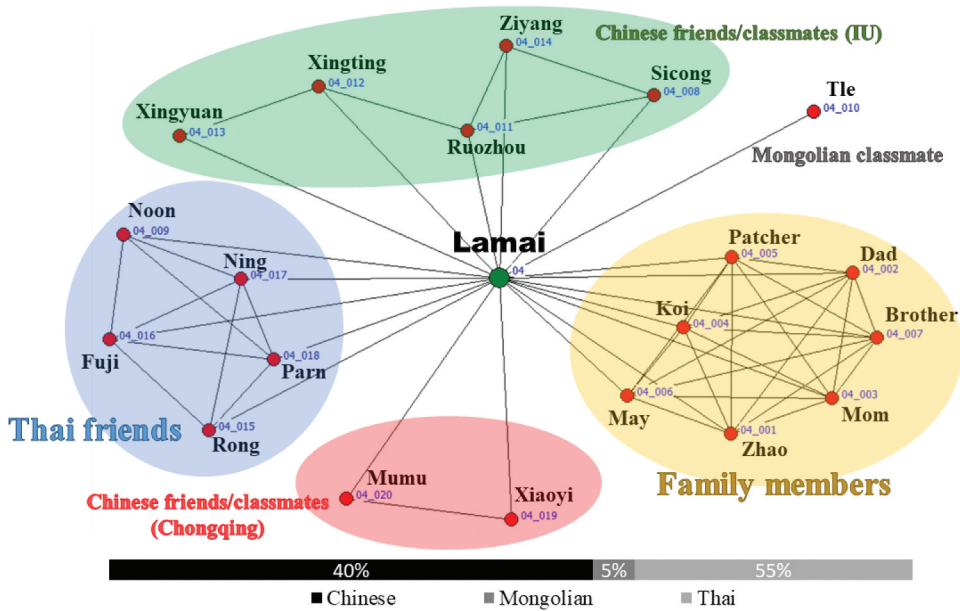
Figure 3. Lamai's personal network (with annotations). All participants' sociograms were developed at around the same time point, representing their social relationships at the midpoint of their sojourn.

From being a tourist to becoming a diplomat

Thong revealed in the interview that her initial decision to exchange in Chinese universities was driven solely by curiosity about real everyday life in China:

> Before coming here, my major source of information about China is international news, which is fraught with negative reports. Majoring in Global Trade in China, I got curious about the difference between what was reported and what it was really like.
>
> *(First interview, 7 September 2018)*

After several exchange experiences she had not only changed her views about this exotic land, but also developed a renewed understanding of her own roles. Specifically, she explained how her self-positioning had transformed from being a tourist to being a diplomat:

> My view changed after several visits. They were superficial indeed, but they did bring a glimpse of life here. Since I saw many positives, like some friendly policies and incentives, I was no longer pleased with being just a tourist. I decided to go for a degree and become a diplomat to bridge some misunderstandings.
>
> *(First interview, 7 September 2018)*

Thong's vision of herself as a diplomat fueled her decision to pursue a Master's degree in diplomacy. Among the two tracks offered in the program, she chose the Chinese medium track even though all her prior exchanges had been undertaken in English medium programs. She accounted for her choice as follows:

> It's not uncommon to choose the English track because it's easier to take courses in a familiar language. Stepping out of the comfort zone is difficult, but for me I really want to have a real understanding of this place.
>
> *(First interview, 7 September 2018)*

Cultural affordances embedded in extended networks

Unlike her previous exchanges in which Thong had socialized mostly with co-nationals, there were remarkable changes in her personal network after joining the Chinese medium program. She managed to develop a cohesive network featuring a balanced composition of Thai students (35%), Chinese students (30%), and other international students (35%) (Figure 4). According to her, this network configuration contributed to her sense of belonging and cultural integration in the local community:

> In the past, I hung around mostly with Thai or other international students. Now I made local friends who introduced more friends and invited me to join various activities. . . . I used to think that IU was like one of the many universities where I'd stayed and was just a place for study. But my friends make it home to me.
>
> *(Second interview, 31 May 2019)*

Better integration experience in the local community also provided Thong with more exposure to local pop culture and language practices. This was achieved by socialization into the use of different local social networking platforms and participation in online discussions. As an example, she shared how she was introduced to Bilibili, a popular Chinese video-sharing platform, which allowed her to update herself with popular online topics as well as learn and practice Chinese by interacting with video-makers and other video-viewers.

Figure 5 shows a screenshot of Thong's favorite Bilibili video. The video maker (the woman) was challenging an expatriate (the man) to use proper pauses when reading the Chinese sentence 用毒毒毒蛇会不会被毒毒死啊 (*Will one get poisoned to death by the poison if using poison to poison a poisonous snake?*), in which the character 毒 appeared several times but with different meanings. Simultaneously appearing on the screen were *danmu*,[6] or superimposed comments made by anonymous video viewers for interactions (Zhang & Cassany, 2020). In this example Thong noted that cultural learning opportunities were embedded in these videos, and explained how she utilized these opportunities to interact and connect with international video-makers, thereby benefitting her Chinese language and cultural learning:

> I love videos about expats' experiences of living in China, because I can relate to them easily and find useful insights. Like this video, I often join discussions on interesting topics by sending *danmu* to comment. It's interactive and fun!
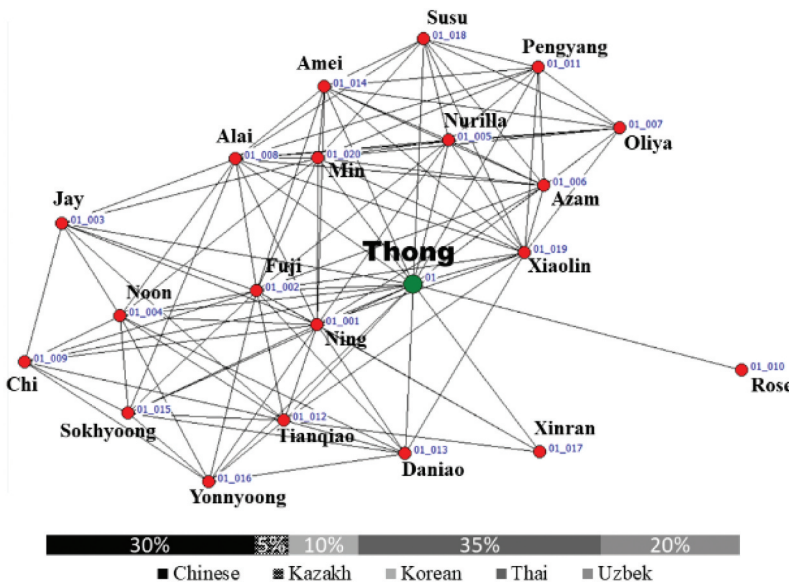>
> *(Second interview, 31 May 2019)*

Figure 4. Thong's personal network.

Figure 5. Bilibili video screenshot.

While it is hard to ignore the importance of numerous short-term SA exchanges in offering chances for cultural exploration in different cities, in Thong's case her degree study in a Chinese medium program appeared to entail relatively more profound affordances. In combination with Thong's identity transformation from a cultural tourist to a foreign diplomat, these manifested in the form of wider access to local networks, language, and (pop) culture, which in turn facilitated her L2 Chinese socialization.

Roza

Roza described her academic trajectory in China as a "bumpy journey" because she had been to a number of different localities in the country to study. In 2005 she studied at a primary school in Beijing, but a year later she moved back to Kyrgyzstan due to family reasons. After graduation from high school she enrolled in preparatory programs in Xinjiang (her father's hometown) and Shanghai to learn Chinese and prepare for university studies. Over this two-year period, Roza not only improved her Chinese proficiency significantly, but was also admitted to a Chinese Government Scholarship-funded program in IU to study Arabic. However, it turned out that learning Arabic in the medium of Chinese was too demanding, so she shifted to the TCSOL program after one year. While Roza's prior experiences and her relatively high Chinese proficiency helped to familiarize her with the learning context, they did not automatically translate into successful socialization in the local networks.

Few local and international friends in personal network
Roza's personal network (Figure 6) indicated that she had made few local friends. Except for family members (i.e., Dad, Aunt, and Tianqiao), the only Chinese friend she had was JingJing, who was a former classmate in the Arabic program. This limited friendship with local Chinese was unexpected given her advanced Chinese proficiency, and it also led to a difficult socialization experience due to her unfamiliarity with local pop culture.

> It's just hard to blend in. It's hard to strike up conversations with them or understand jokes. They discussed issues like celebrities, pop songs, etc. I tried to follow but failed many times because common topics were hard to find.
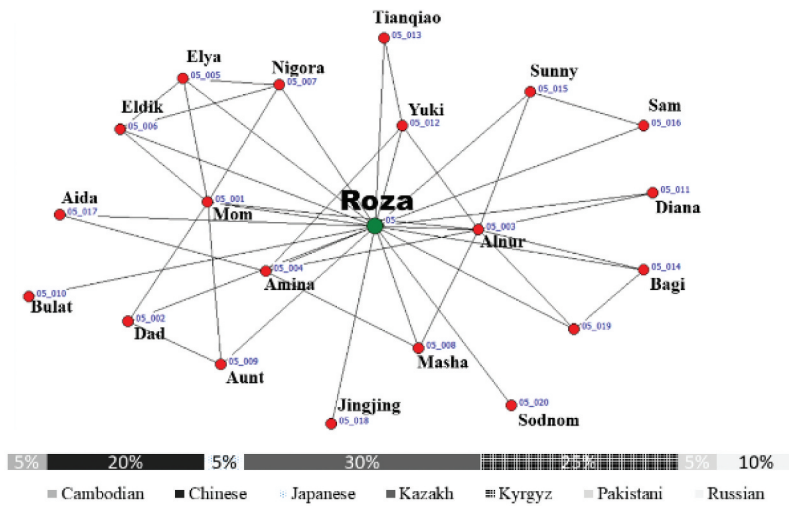> *(First interview, 12 September 2018)*

Figure 6. Roza's personal network.

Another challenge faced by Roza after transitioning to the TCSOL program was interpersonal relationships with her new classmates who were also international students, because the program did not recruit local students. As the sociogram shows, Roza's friends mainly came from Russian-speaking countries (e.g., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia) and none were her classmates. Most of her classmates seemed to prefer staying with their co-nationals, which could be an important factor preventing socialization between students from different national backgrounds (Coleman, 2015). As an example, Roza noted that the solidarity among her Pakistani classmates impeded others from socializing with them:

> We have 30 students. 17 are from Pakistan. They sit together, study together, and stay together after class. . . .
> I mean, it's good, but it's difficult to approach them.   (First interview, 12 September 2018)

Given that there were no local students in the program, the major Chinese language input for students would to a large extent come from the Chinese instructors or their international peers. However, Roza complained that students from the same countries preferred discussing questions in their mother tongues, which was detrimental to the Chinese learning of the whole class.

> Discussing in our own languages or in English is fine, but doing it often does no good to our learning, right? After all, we come here to learn Chinese. . . . Some Pakistani classmates just discussed in Urdu, which was quite embarrassing.   (First interview, 12 September 2018)

Limited out-of-class ties with local students and in-class ties with international classmates therefore posed challenges to Roza's Chinese learning. However, despite this Roza managed to adopt a transformed self-positioning in her personal network and initiate self-regulated Chinese socialization, which will be described next.

Between-local-and-international identity and self-regulated Chinese socialization

Apart from social network development, another challenge faced by Roza concerned identity construction and negotiation. She shared how she experienced identity crisis in the early stages of studying in China, when she and her foreign friends were treated differently by the locals:

> Years ago, I noticed people seemed more curious about my friends who are white or black and preferred chatting with them. Oftentimes they would mistake me as a local due to my look, so they either ignored me and walked away, or talked to me really fast assuming I spoke Chinese well. It was quite upsetting.
>   (First interview, 12 September 2018)

The narration revealed Roza's heritage identity construction and echoed previous literature on heritage Chinese learner identity (Mu, 2016). That is, due to her "looking Chinese" local people had high expectations of her Chinese proficiency and she did not receive as much "foreigner gaze," or attention to her foreigner identity, as did her international friends who were more racially visible (Mu, 2016). This negative experience related to the perceived differential attention from the local community to some extent contributed to a devaluation of her heritage identity.

However, challenges in social network development and identity construction in the local community did not result in Roza's dys-socialization or resistance to socialization (Atkinson, 2003); rather, she adopted an alternative view of her identity and made agentive attempts to create Chinese learning opportunities. She offered some reflections regarding the enactment of agency to improve her Chinese proficiency:

> You need to create your own opportunities. I was crazy enough to take spam calls and use them for practice because that was how I could learn authentic Chinese. ... Many other students often came to me for help with food ordering or package delivery. It's okay but you can't always rely on others. The key is to be self-reliant.
> *(Second interview, 3 June 2019)*

Her self-positioning as an independent individual seemed to help Roza transcend the boundaries of structural ties and other-ascribed identity, facilitating her self-regulated L2 Chinese socialization (Duff & Doherty, 2015). In her second interview Roza shared how this self positioning fueled changes in her mindset, which allowed her to transform from seeing her heritage identity as a disadvantage to embracing her personal history and expressing her identity flexibly:

> I was envious because it seemed easier for other students to socialize with locals. But my mindset changed after seeing the surprised look of a Chinese student, who happened to know I was a foreigner. She became interested in my experiences and we had nice conversations. ... I realized I should embrace them as part of me. It's like I can choose either side, local or international, and share my histories freely.   *(Second interview, 3 June 2019)*

Unlike the other two cases, Roza faced challenges in both her identity construction and her social network development. However, her perceived lack of agency over social network constraints and ascribed identities (e.g., local Chinese, advanced Chinese speaker) did not result in negative responsive strategies; rather, it fueled the development of renewed agency in self-regulating her Chinese socialization (Duff & Doherty, 2015), as well as a refined understanding of her heritage identity and personal history.

In sum, within-case analysis revealed the individualized socialization trajectories of the three focal cases. It demonstrated how positive identity and cumulative interpersonal connections contributed to Lamai's agency to overcome challenges in the new academic environment, how richer cultural learning opportunities were afforded in a Chinese medium degree program as Thong shifted her identity and established wider connections, and how self-directed L2 Chinese socialization was initiated when Roza faced limited network access and heritage identity crisis. Cross-case analysis further pointed out that these distinctive socialization paths were shaped by individuals' personal histories and identities and structured by the available socializing opportunities in their situated environment. More importantly, the cases have collectively highlighted L2 socialization not as a linear process but a "bumpy" journey which did not unfold in an entirely positive or negative direction and was subject to the mediation of agency (Hasegawa, 2019).

Discussion and concluding remarks

This longitudinal case study has investigated the identity construction, social network development, and language learning processes of three international students who were learning Chinese as an additional language at a Chinese university. Drawing on the theoretical notion of agency, this research identified the intersection between identity and social network as a salient and consistent theme in the sojourners' L2 socialization experiences, while the extent to which the two constructs interacted varied and was subject to the mediation of individual agency (Carhill-Poza & Kurata, 2021; Sauer & Ellis, 2019). Specifically, the participants' perceived availability or lack of agency contributed to the divergent ways in which they mobilized social, cultural, and linguistic resources to realize personal or social transformations (Duff &

Doherty, 2015; Duff, 2012). Lamai's conscientious use of Chinese internet language and traditional idioms to index her proficient Chinese speaker identity, Thong's investment in the Chinese-medium diplomacy program to increase local network ties and enhance intercultural understanding, and Roza's self-initiated Chinese learning in the face of her heritage identity crisis and network constraints were all choices, decisions, and strategies illustrative of these individuals' agency in mediating identity construction and social network development.

By putting individual cases under scrutiny, the study argued that agency was neither readily nor equally accessible to all individuals; their capacity to use agentive resources was contingent on the structural and contextual affordances that shaped their options in coping with challenges in relation to language socialization (Duff & Doherty, 2018; van Lier, 2008). A comparison of the cases illuminated that despite the extensive SA experiences they shared, affordances and constraints varied and contributed to their distinctive socialization paths. Using her cumulative interpersonal connections, Lamai was able to develop an active identity and express positive volition towards emergent learning obstacles as indicated by her agentive use of sociolinguistic resources. The identity shift from a tourist to a diplomat, combined with a welcoming host community, afforded Thong entry to local practices and benefitted her uptake of cultural affordances. In contrast, Roza received disproportionate attention to her heritage identity and was afforded limited access to both local and other international students, and thus experienced greater difficulty in obtaining L2 Chinese learning opportunities. Therefore, previously established interpersonal relationships, host community receptivity, and the availability of different types of social ties were among the major forces that differentiated the students' enactment of agency in acting upon the learning resources in their situated environments (Duff & Doherty, 2015; Hasegawa, 2019).

Situating agency in the nexus of identity and social network, the study further suggested that individual agency was enacted and exercised in the process of negotiating identity (trans)formation and social network development in L2 socialization (Duff & Doherty, 2018; Fogle, 2012). Central to this process was the role of power, which operated to facilitate or hinder newcomers' entry and connection to new networks/communities and their languages and cultures (Eckert & Wenger, 2005; van Lier, 2008). Roza presented a notable case where socialization trajectory was subject to impacts by a number of power dynamics. First, she was not granted sufficient entry to local pop culture and thus had difficulty establishing local connections. Second, other international students' preferences for co-national networks impeded her attempts to build multi-national network ties (Coleman, 2015). Third, local community members' high expectations of her language ability but low attention to her existence resulted in her heritage identity crisis (Mu, 2016). However, the challenges of identity crisis and network constraints did not reduce Roza's willingness to engage with the target community; rather, they inspired her to construct a flexible "between-local-and-international" identity and strategically adopt self-regulated socialization, where she sought out Chinese learning opportunities to cope with insufficient other-initiated socialization (Duff & Doherty, 2015, 2018). The findings thus foreground the socioculturally mediated nature of agency while recognizing the fluidity of power dynamics in communities of practice (Ahearn, 2001; Eckert & Wenger, 2005).

These findings invite us to revisit and problematize misconceptions about learner agency in order to reach a more refined understanding of its nature. First, findings about agency in the nexus of identity and social network provide a counter-narrative to the circulating discourse that emphasizes human agency over social structure, which may mask the complexity of situated contexts and the plurality of challenges posed by various sociocultural forces (Deters et al., 2015; Miller, 2016). More research efforts should be devoted to exploring the individual and social factors shaping international students' access to their agentive resources, such as their prior SA experiences, social relationships, and local pop culture, among others. Second, findings about students' different learning and engagement patterns in different spheres of their lives bring to the fore the multifaceted and malleable features of learner agency (Hasegawa, 2019). We argue that researchers should move away from imposing rigid agentive categories on students, instead directing more attention to changes in individual agency under different circumstances over time (Duff & Doherty, 2015). Third, the study highlights changes and variations in international students'

social networks in SA. It concurs with previous findings (Li et al., 2021) in suggesting that by conceptualizing L2 socialization as diversification of the social network, researchers could better document the affordances and constraints in learners' SA trajectories and capture the nuances of their social lives, thereby harnessing the power of learner agency to provide scaffolding favorable to L2 socialization.

The study also calls for joint efforts from different stakeholders to maximize international students' access to their agentive resources and facilitate their L2 Chinese socialization. As evidenced by the case participants, SA experiences and networks can generate mobility capital (Gautier, 2019), leading to qualitatively distinctive Chinese learning trajectories. It is therefore pivotal for researchers to acknowledge international students' personal histories and guide them to appreciate and capitalize on these resources to foster positive identities in the new academic context. For teachers in SA programs, it is advisable to design and incorporate collaboration tasks/projects that aim to promote both in-class and out-of-class communication and interactions between international and local students. Pop culture elements such as social networking tools, songs, drama, and so on, which can be perceived as hurdles to socialization into local networks, can also be integrated in classroom teaching to empower international students with nonmainstream talents to promote their Chinese language and culture learning (Lin, 2007). Last but not least, there needs to be program- and institution-level support that creates favorable socializing conditions for international students, in a way that dissolves the dichotomy of "international students" versus "local students" (Holliday & Macdonald, 2020) and opens up possibilities for students to explore personal interests and develop a sense of belonging to multiple communities in SA life.

The study is subject to limitations. While it depicted the divergent socialization trajectories of three international students in China, it would be desirable to include participants with more diversified backgrounds (e.g., nationality, learning and mobility history), in order to provide a fuller understanding of the complexity of identity, social network, and agency in language socialization. Furthermore, while the participants could choose whether to use either Chinese or English for the interviews, they did not necessarily supply the most authentic information about critical issues such as identity and social relationships (Cortazzi et al., 2011). It is suggested that future research should include multilingual investigators to conduct interviews in the participants' first language to help them convey their ideas more effectively. The study mainly presented the international students' emic perspectives on their social lives, and it would also be insightful to incorporate the voices of alters in students' networks (e.g., classmates, friends, teachers, etc.). This would enrich the interpretation and analysis of second language socialization processes characterized by multidirectional interactions, multiparty engagement, and co-construction (Duff, 2012; Hasegawa, 2019).

Notes

1. All the names and organizations in this study are pseudonyms.
2. Statistics were retrieved from the university website by the time of data collection in 2018.
3. Statistics were retrieved from the university website by the time of data collection in 2018.
4. The sociolinguistic use of the word 萌 (*cute*) to indicate cuteness originates from Japanese animated culture. It is used together with 卖 (*selling*) to form the phrase 卖萌 to indicate the behavior of acting cute.
5. The word 六 (*liù*) indicates the number six. As its pronunciation resembles 溜 (*liù*; *fluent and smooth*) and 牛 (*niú*; *extraordinary*) in Chinese, it is used in oral communication to describe someone as being capable and excellent at doing something.
6. Readers are directed to Zhang and Cassany (2020) for a more detailed discussion of the functions and development of *danmu*.

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