



Familiar yet distant: Cultural proximity and the role of social media in the acculturation of Malaysian-Chinese students in China

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the acculturation experience of Malaysian-Chinese students in China through the lens of cultural proximity, with a specific focus on their social media practices. Based on semi-structured interviews with 17 Malaysian-Chinese international students, the study reveals a core finding: while cultural proximity facilitated daily adaptation, it did not translate into deep intercultural integration. Instead, most students adopted a separation strategy, maintaining a dual-set of social media use that reflects their divided social circles. Meanwhile, language proficiency also showed a limited effect, supporting only functional adjustment without fostering meaningful interaction with the locals. Social media proved instrumental for pre- and post-arrival preparation, academic support and mental well-being, yet its effectiveness also remained at a surface level, offering little help in expanding host-country social circles.

Introduction

According to the statistics on internationally mobile students from the [Institution of International Education \(2024\)](#), despite the dominance of traditional Western countries in the global higher education market, many students are choosing non-Western countries for further studies. Among these, China has emerged as an increasingly popular study destination. According to data from the [Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China \(2023\)](#), there were 114,112 entrants and 253,177 enrollments for international students in China in 2023. For international students, social media platforms are critical for navigating acculturation stress in a foreign country, offering social support and maintaining connections with their home-country communities ([Kristiana et al., 2022](#); [Li & Peng, 2019](#)). These platforms are also indispensable in managing the psychological and emotional challenges of cross-cultural adaptation, contributing to better relationships ([Pang & Wang, 2020](#); [Yu et al., 2018](#)). Therefore, international students studying in China and their use of social media have become increasingly important research areas with regard to international students' acculturation and have garnered attention from researchers worldwide. According to the latest available data, 9479 Malaysian students were studying in China in 2018, ranking as the 15th largest international student population in the country ([Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018](#)). Malaysia itself is multiethnic, comprising mainly Malays (58.1 %), Chinese (22.4 %), Other Bumiputera (12.3 %), and Indians (6.5 %) ([Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025](#)). Among them, Malaysian-Chinese represent a significant ethnic minority that retains ancestral and cultural ties with China. In this study, we use the term "Malaysian-Chinese" to refer to Malaysian nationals of Chinese ethnic heritage, in keeping with the convention in studies on Chinese diasporic identity in Malaysia ([Chai & Hamid, 2024](#); [Nonini, 2003](#); [Su, 2024](#)). Therefore, compared with other Malaysian students in China, Malaysian-Chinese

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students arrive with an intrinsic sense of familiarity despite being classified as international students, and they face challenges in balancing their Malaysian identity with integration into Chinese society.

This study addresses current scholarly interest and recognises the unique position of Malaysian-Chinese students as culturally proximate within the Chinese context. Through in-depth interviews, this study explores the role of social media in the acculturation of Malaysian-Chinese students in China through the lens of cultural proximity, focusing on their experiences adapting and platform usage patterns.

Literature review

Acculturation strategies of international students

The concept of acculturation has been central in theories seeking to explore and explain how individuals and communities adapt to an unfamiliar cultural environment. Initially defined as the “phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield et al., 1936), it gradually developed into a systematic and interdisciplinary field of study. Acculturation studies initially conceptualised acculturation as unidimensional, viewing it as a linear transition from the heritage culture to full assimilation into the host society (Gordon, 1964). However, this model was widely criticised for ignoring cultural maintenance and its oversimplification (Berry, 2005; Nguyen et al., 1999; Ryder et al., 2000). In response, Berry (2005) specified four types of acculturation strategies under the framework of the bidimensional model, describing how sojourners conceptualise their home and host countries based on two dimensions: maintaining the original culture and adopting the host culture. The four acculturation strategies are integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalisation. Integration refers to the situation in which individuals maintain their home culture while simultaneously engaging with and adopting aspects of the host culture. Separation occurs when individuals preserve their home culture but deliberately avoid participation in the host cultural environment. Assimilation describes the process by which individuals assimilate into the host society by adopting its culture and gradually abandoning their home culture. Finally, marginalisation happens when individuals reject both their home and host country culture, leading to individuals’ bidimensional exclusion (Berry, 2005).

Building upon Berry’s widely acknowledged framework, acculturation studies have gradually focused on specific diasporic populations, among which international students stand out as a rapidly growing body of the world’s mobile population. These students are inevitably confronted with challenges when adapting to a new country, such as language barriers, academic difficulties, discrimination, and psychological pressure (including homesickness and loneliness), as well as practical issues like financial problems (Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Gong et al., 2021). In the Western context, the choice of acculturation strategies depends on language proficiency, interpersonal connections, race, and gender (Cao et al., 2017). Additionally, cultural distance and social support are also considered influential factors in their acculturation and offer comprehensive insights for cross-cultural adaptation research (English et al., 2021). According to previous research, Chinese students often prefer separation, as seen in the U.S. and Germany, due to cultural and social differences that discourage integration. (Lai et al., 2023; Nam & English, 2025; Yu & Wang, 2011;). However, Zheng et al. (2004) noted that students who integrate more successfully have better subjective well-being than those who adopt separation, assimilation, and marginalisation as the main acculturation strategies, highlighting the benefits of this acculturation strategy.

In recent decades, a growing research corpus has examined the experience and acculturation of international students in China (An & Chiang, 2015; Li, 2015; Jiang et al., 2018; Yu & Wright, 2024), thus broadening the scope of existing cross-cultural research and elucidating the experience and behaviour of international students in a non-Western context. Most international students studying in China reported adopting integration the most (Luo et al., 2021; Zhang & Zeng, 2023). This contrasts with the wide adoption of separation among overseas Chinese students, as previously mentioned. According to Luo et al. (2021), the duration in China, attachment to the locals, and language proficiency exert a key influence on students’ choice of acculturation strategies. A higher level of English proficiency was typically connected with the marginalisation strategy, whereas a higher level of Chinese proficiency was positively connected with the integration strategy. Yu and Wright (2024) found that limited Cantonese proficiency hindered international students’ integration in Hong Kong, leading them to rely on familiar cultural groups. Even mainland Chinese students experienced similar challenges (Wang & Nam, 2025). This further highlights language proficiency as a key factor of acculturation. In turn, the choice of acculturation strategy affected international students’ language learning and improvement (Mao & Ji, 2024). These studies have verified the importance of language in influencing acculturation strategy adoption and explored the complex relationship between language and acculturation.

Acculturation and international students’ social media use

The rapid development of digital technology has led to extensive social media use globally, transforming connection, communication, and cultural engagement among individuals (Nguyen et al., 2022). Social media also increasingly reshapes cultural adaptation (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). For international students, social media enables them to maintain ties with their heritage culture while simultaneously engaging with the host country’s social media to mediate acculturation experience (Gomes et al., 2014). For international students in China, studies have demonstrated that frequent social media use facilitates their social and emotional adjustment, thereby promoting their engagement in academic and interpersonal life (Hassan et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2023).

Some studies have also illustrated social media’s effect on the relationship between reductions in the mental strain of international students and their academic engagement and performance (Sandel, 2014; Dwumah Manu et al., 2023; Park & Noh, 2018). Dwumah Manu et al. (2023) suggested that social media usage improved international students’ psychological and behavioural adaptation,

which was significantly linked with students' academic engagement. Pang (2020a) further distinguished the active and passive use of social media platforms among Chinese international students in Germany. He concluded that active social media use (e.g. commenting and messaging), was positively associated with students' social support and promoted their adaptation, whereas passive social media use (e.g. browsing) had limited effects. This indicates the conditionality of social media's positive role in the acculturation process. Researchers have also argued that despite social media's role in maintaining local relations, individuals cannot rely exclusively on it for building and maintaining deeper relationships; instead, social media should complement direct offline communication (Rui & Wang, 2015).

Furthermore, existing studies have also highlighted the inconsistency between international students' use of home- and host-country social media, exploring how international students navigate between the two (Lee & Ranta, 2014; Rahman, 2014; Tian, 2016). These studies also acknowledge the potential challenges and limitations posed by this phenomenon during acculturation. Sleeman et al. (2016) systematically reviewed previous studies and concluded that the various patterns of social media use could build both bridges and boundaries between international students' home countries and the host country. Therefore, social media connections can alleviate the pressure students encounter during acculturation. However, such connections can also restrain them from further engagement with the host society due to overdependence on home-country social media platforms and original social circles. Studies have reported that reliance on home social media platforms can hinder international students' communication with the host country nationals, causing disconnection from the host culture and increasing acculturation stress (Sandel, 2014; Xiong, 2017). By contrast, host country platforms provide greater support and promote social integration (Hofhuis et al., 2023; Li & Peng, 2019). Social media preference was also reflective of international students' acculturation, with strong reliance on home-country social media suggesting higher levels of emotional pressure and acculturation stress (Park et al., 2014).

Cultural Proximity

Straubhaar (1991) initially introduced the concept of cultural proximity in media studies and argued that global audiences prefer media content that reflects their own cultural norms, linguistic style, and social values. The idea of cultural proximity was later extended to various fields, including international economics, with researchers finding that countries with higher cultural affinity (usually measured by shared religion, language, and customs) tend to have stronger bilateral trade relations (Felbermayr & Toubal, 2010).

Recently, cultural proximity has been increasingly adopted in studies on immigration and intercultural adaptation, being analysed through multiple key dimensions, including linguistic similarity, religious alignment, shared customs, and broader cultural heritage (Dribe & Lundh, 2011; Safdar et al., 2023; Qvist & Qvist, 2025). These dimensions often correlate with improved adaptation outcomes. Notably, perceived proximity, rather than objective similarity, more decisively shapes migrants' experiences. Lam and Catto (2023) demonstrated that second-generation immigrants experiencing linguistic proximity to the host culture experienced lower adaptation stress and were more likely to develop dual cultural identities. Specifically, cultural proximity acts as a psychological buffer and motivates participation in local culture. Meanwhile, a study on Venezuelan refugees in Colombia found that cultural similarity, particularly in language and religion, reinforced national identity and promoted psychological well-being (Safdar et al., 2023). However, the author recommended interpreting this relationship cautiously, as further research is needed in different sociocultural contexts to determine whether proximity consistently leads to positive adaptation outcomes. Furthermore, perceived cultural proximity influences host society expectations. Tejada et al. (2012) found that, in several Spanish regions, locals were more likely to expect linguistic integration from migrants perceived as culturally close. However, Sáenz-Hernández et al. (2020) observed no such correlation in Catalonia, arguing that other variables, including educational background, religion, and political attitudes, have greater influence over integration expectations. These studies underscore the importance of treating cultural proximity as one of many factors influencing acculturation, providing a suitable framework for cross-cultural adaptation and resonate with our study to uncover the complexities of Malaysian Chinese students' acculturation in China.

Current study

While existing literature has examined multifaceted aspects of international students' acculturation process, both in Western and non-Western contexts, the majority of studies tend to conceptualise international students as a homogeneous group, usually unfamiliar with the language and culture of the host country. This generalisation risks overlooking the cultural differences between populations of various cultural backgrounds, which might contribute to shaping distinct acculturation behaviours and strategies. It also neglects the possibility that even for groups sharing ethnic and cultural similarities, such as Malaysian-Chinese, acculturation challenges might still exist, calling for further empirical investigation. Therefore, for Malaysian-Chinese students in China, their unique cultural adaptation situations have not been adequately explored.

Moreover, while existing literature has acknowledged the critical role of social media in acculturation and the separate use of home- and host-country social media platforms, the potential influence of cultural proximity on social media use remains unexplored, which provides another perspective for the research on acculturation and social media use. To address these research gaps, this research draws upon the theoretical framework of Berry's acculturation strategies and cultural proximity to examine how shared cultural backgrounds shape both acculturation experience and social media usage patterns of Malaysian Chinese students in China. This perspective helps illuminate how cultural familiarity can both support and possibly complicate adaptation in the host context. Moreover, this research elucidates and further explores the nuanced interplay between social media use and acculturation processes. By examining how these students utilise both home- and host-country social media platforms, this research illuminates how social

media influences their academic, social, and psychological adaptation in China. Specifically, this study investigates the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Malaysian Chinese students adapt to life in China, and how does cultural proximity shape their acculturation?

RQ2. How do Malaysian Chinese students perceive and experience the influence of cultural proximity on shaping their social media usage patterns?

RQ3. How do Malaysian Chinese students use social media to cope with acculturation-related challenges, and how do they evaluate its effectiveness?

Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore Malaysian-Chinese students' acculturation experiences in detail, offering opportunities for in-depth data analysis. A semi-structured interview formed the core of the research, as it allows participants to share their experiences, emotions, and reflections with considerable flexibility (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview freed the participants from the rigid format of traditional Q&A questions and allowed them to share their lived experiences through detailed narrative, which could also provide new insight into existing literature (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Participants

The participants were Malaysian-Chinese students studying in China. Except for one participant who had just graduated, the others were either studying as undergraduates or pursuing master's degrees in Chinese universities. Among 17 participants (7 males and 10 females), the majority (13 participants) are students from universities in Zhejiang province (located in China's southeast coastal areas), with the rest being from universities in Shanghai and Wuhan (a city in central China). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 25, with the average being 21. Moreover, their classes varied, generally consisting of classes made up entirely of international students, classes made up entirely of Chinese students, and mixed classes comprising both international and local Chinese students. The table describes the demographic characteristics of the research participants.

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Type and year of Degree	Time in China	Major	Class type	Cities (provinces)
1	Lim	Male	20	Undergraduate-first year	1 year	International Business	International Students	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
2	Tan	Female	22	Graduate-second year	2 years	Management Science	Mixed Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
3	Wong	Female	25	Graduate-first year	2 years	International Business	Mixed Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
4	Ng	Female	18	Undergraduate-first year	1 month	International Business	International Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
5	Teoh	Female	22	Undergraduate-graduated	2 years	International Business	Mixed Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
6	Lee	Male	18	Undergraduate-first year	1 month	Computer Science & Technology	Mixed Student	Wuhan (Hubei)
7	Choo	Female	22	Undergraduate-second year	2 years	Computer Science & Technology	Mixed Student	Wuhan (Hubei)
8	Goh	Female	22	Undergraduate-second year	1 year	Chinese Language & Literature	International Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
9	Chong	Male	23	Undergraduate-second year	2 years	Computer Science & Technology	International Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
10	Ong	Male	20	Undergraduate-second-year	2 years	International Economics & Trade	International Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
11	Liew	Female	20	Undergraduate-first-year	1 year	Chinese Language & Literature	International Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
12	Yeo	Female	23	Graduate-first year	2 years	Cultural Management	Mixed Student	Shanghai
13	Foo	Male	24	Graduate-second year	2 years	Materials Science	Mixed Student	Shanghai
14	Sim	Female	21	Undergraduate-second year	2 years	Business Administration	Mixed Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
15	Gan	Female	20	Undergraduate-first year	1 year	Landscape Architecture	Mixed Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
16	Hew	Male	18	Undergraduate-first year	1 month	Computer Science and Technology	Mixed Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
17	Fong	Male	20	Undergraduate-first year	1 year	Environmental Construction	Mixed Student	Hangzhou (Zhejiang)

Recruitment began by identifying several initial participants through the author's connection to the Universities in Zhejiang

province. Thereafter, a snowball sampling method was applied, in which participants helped introduce other potential participants. Snowball sampling is widely adopted in qualitative research involving international students and acculturation in the host countries (Bhat et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022; Hsu & Chen, 2021; Muganga et al., 2025; Park, 2022).

After signing an informed consent document, each participant was asked about their experience through an open-ended interview ranging from 31 to 69 min. Iterative thematic analyses did not reveal new codes or concepts after approximately the 14th interview, suggesting that data saturation had been reached (Guest et al., 2006). Most interviews were face-to-face at two universities in Zhejiang, China (11), and the remainder (6) were conducted through WeChat calls.

Interview Procedure and Protocol

The interview process started on 11th September 2024 and ended on 24th October 2024. First, four students were invited to take a pilot interview, and the final version of the interview protocol with core questions was then revised according to the participants' responses and feedback. Pilot studies are a common and useful method to test interview protocols (Chenail, 2011). Besides answering the questions, further elaboration and descriptions of their personal experiences were also strongly encouraged. The interviews were conducted in Chinese due to the participants' native level of Chinese proficiency. Each interview lasted approximately 40 min and was recorded for further data analysis. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, with participants being fully aware of the research purpose, recording, and the corresponding transcription. The interview was completely voluntary, and participants' privacy was strictly protected, with pseudonyms replacing identifiable information. After the interview, each participant received a gift worth 100 RMB as a token of appreciation for their time and contribution.

The interview protocol included the following primary aspects: (1) demographic questions, (2) previous experience and perception about China, (3) personal experience during acculturation, (4) perceptions of self-identity and perceived changes, (5) social media usage patterns, and (6) social media's effect on acculturation from various aspects. The entire interview protocol was designed to explore Malaysian-Chinese students' acculturation experiences in China, with a focus on their social media usage and its role in their adaptation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is key in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the study (Horton et al., 2004). Following a systematic and structured process to ensure the accurate interpretation of the interview, the audio-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim and later translated into English. The transcripts were later cross-checked to ensure accuracy. Any informal language, errors, or colloquialisms were retained to preserve the participants' original expressions. Moreover, a demographic chart was created to summarise participants' age, gender, major, and other relevant characteristics.

Thematic analysis was conducted based on the six-phase framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo 12 software assisted in coding and organising the qualitative data. Coding was performed inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data. Two researchers independently completed the initial round of coding, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion to establish a shared coding framework. Accordingly, a set of main themes and sub-themes that captured the participants' acculturation experiences and social media use emerged. The results were then presented.

Findings

The data analysis provided valuable insight into the comprehensive interplay between Malaysian-Chinese students' acculturation and their social media use. The research findings are structured around the research questions and divided into three sections:

Similar but distant: The paradox of Malaysian-Chinese international students' acculturation

To address the first research question, this section explores Malaysian-Chinese students' acculturation experience and the acculturation strategies, focusing on cultural proximity, language proficiency, and broader structural conditions. Researchers have demonstrated the positive influence of cultural proximity on acculturation—reducing intercultural stress and promoting interactions (Lam & Catto, 2023; Safdar et al., 2023). According to the data, no participant reported experiencing any type of culture shock or confusion during their first arrival in China. Instead, many participants attributed their sense of cultural familiarity to their perceived "Chinese roots". Some also highlighted cultural proximity through their experience of traditional festivals and cultural customs, as they celebrated the same Chinese traditional festivals back in Malaysia, including the Chinese New Year and the Dragon Boat Festival. In international students' acculturation, language proficiency was also widely considered a significant influencing factor (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Rui & Wang, 2015; Yu et al., 2024). The demographic information collected from the participants pointed to a native level of Chinese proficiency among participants due to their Chinese educational background or daily communication with family members in Chinese. This freed them from the pressure of daily life caused by language barriers compared to other international students, as one participant mentioned during the interview, "We have an advantage. Since we can understand and use Chinese, it's easy for us to adapt if we encounter something unfamiliar or don't know how to operate." This linguistic advantage allowed them to communicate with locals using Chinese platforms and adapt to various aspects of daily life. Even though some participants mentioned the differences between the accents of local Chinese and Malaysian-Chinese, they had no problems understanding and adapting to Chinese people's

accents and could adjust their accents while speaking Chinese to adapt to different interlocutors. These findings highlight that cultural proximity and language proficiency eased the pressure of participants' everyday adjustment.

However, these advantages did not contribute to deeper interpersonal integration or a genuine sense of social belonging within the host society, as participants reported detached relationships with Chinese students and limited involvement in local communities. When asked about their attitude toward making friends with Chinese students, most of the participants expressed a strong desire to build a connection with their Chinese schoolmates and become a member of their circles. For instance, Foo mentioned her original wish of "getting to know more Chinese people", and Sim's idea was "participating in more student clubs to expand connections with Chinese students."

Notwithstanding, several factors directly or indirectly hindered their integration, causing their exclusion from the mainstream community. Among them, international students' accommodation policy and class arrangement were reported the most. In Chinese universities, international students usually have designated residences, which are separated from other buildings for native Chinese students (An & Chiang, 2015). Lee stated, "Our dormitories for international students are separate from theirs, and they already have their own group of friends in their dorms. So, they always go to class in groups." Meanwhile, international students usually have different course schedules and teaching objectives. Due to their limited language skills, they often have special curricula and classes separate from those of domestic students, which reduces their opportunities to get to know their Chinese counterparts (Ding, 2016).

When asked about the effect of such class arrangement on their interpersonal relationships with local Chinese students, Teoh replied, "I feel that we don't have much interaction in daily life. We don't attend classes together and don't have many shared topics to talk about." Wong also reported similar experiences of limited interaction when she first started having classes with other Chinese students. Therefore, most participants interacted frequently with other international students due to spatial proximity, though such connections were reported as "just so-so". Forming relationships with other Malaysian-Chinese or those also from Malaysia remained a common preference. One of the participants even reported having problems making friends because of the small population of Malaysian students. This social distance from others also contributed to emotional challenges, including isolation and loneliness. Other factors, including pandemic-caused online classes and missed opportunities to join student clubs, were also identified as hampering Malaysian-Chinese students' integration into the Chinese community. As reported, close cross-group friendships were limited to those few involved in organised activities, such as student clubs and campus-based martial arts teams. For instance, one participant serving as president of the International Student Association attributed his broader network to his leadership role.

Apart from structural reasons preventing integration, participants' attitudes towards their identity also shaped their sense of inclusiveness. Many reported being frequently mistaken for local Chinese due to fluency in Mandarin and their Chinese appearance.

While they acknowledged cultural proximity with local Chinese, most participants held firm convictions of their self-identity as national Malaysians. As Ong said,

I was born in Malaysia, and technically speaking, China has nothing to do with me. I'm a native-born Malaysian, and it's just that my ancestry traces back to China. So, I wouldn't say that China is my homeland. I would only say that my nationality is Malaysian.

Participants also stated that they would immediately clarify their identity when being misunderstood, but would not be emotionally affected or offended even if the interlocutor persisted. Only one participant reported "feeling sad" when he was misunderstood and accused of "abandoning China as his roots". This further demonstrates that cultural proximity based on shared ethnicity is not strong enough to promote interpersonal engagement (Berceanu et al., 2023). Rather than facilitating integration, this situation obscured their international student status without enabling full local inclusion, potentially limiting their social integration.

Overall, participants reported relatively smooth adaptation in China with no cultural shock, due to their language proficiency and familiarity with Chinese culture. However, structural barriers continued to prevent their further integration with the locals, leading most to remain in their own circles. Meanwhile, frequently being mistaken for locals emphasised their Malaysian national identity, which further weakened their sense of belonging in China.

Navigating digital borders: The evolving use of social media among Malaysian-Chinese international students

This section delves into Malaysian-Chinese students' social media use before and after arrival in China. While encountering new media environments and navigating the acculturation process, they retained certain using habits. By tracing these shifts, this part examines how cultural proximity influences their pre-arrival preferences and how students balance their home- and host-country social media use during cross-cultural adaptation.

Pre-arrival social media use: Before they arrived in China, Malaysian-Chinese students primarily relied on their home country's social media platforms to stay connected with family and friends, share personal lives, and get entertainment. Commonly used platforms included Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, which offered them a familiar digital environment. Due to differences in internet policies, instead of the platforms widely used in Malaysia, China has a set of mainstream social media platforms, including WeChat, Xiaohongshu (known as Rednote), Bilibili (a Chinese video-sharing platform), and Douyin (China's domestic version of TikTok). However, as audiences tend to gravitate towards media products that reflect cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991), most of the participants were quite familiar with these Chinese social media platforms and reported that they had already been using them when they were still back in Malaysia. Some of them also used WeChat for communication, although WhatsApp was the most commonly used to maintain connections with Chinese-speaking acquaintances. Meanwhile, other Chinese social media platforms were mentioned as being used for seeking information and entertainment. For example, Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of X (Twitter), was mentioned by some participants for "following Chinese celebrities" when they were still in middle school.

Apart from shaping their early media usage preferences, the sense of cultural proximity also helped participants keep in touch with trending topics in China, among which internet slang and memes were typical examples. As a participant mentioned, “I think nowadays social media is developing fast. For example, some memes or trends on platforms like Douyin are familiar to us as well, which helps us communicate more easily with local people (in China).” Another participant also highlighted this high level of synchronisation, “And it seems like the internet slang here, whatever becomes popular here (in China), they will use the same memes and jokes over there (in Malaysia).”

Before arriving in China, participants reported primary use of home-country platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. But, cultural and language familiarity had led many to engage with Chinese platforms and keep up with trends, memes, and internet slang, which facilitated early familiarity with the host-country digital environment.

Post-arrival social media use: Participants reported changes in their social media usage patterns after arrival in China, with the most notable change being the increasing use of WeChat. As a dominant Chinese mobile messaging app, WeChat has now become one of the leading social networks, ranking sixth globally with over 1.38 billion monthly active users (Thomala, 2025). One student highlighted its prevalence, “It seems that WeChat is used even more frequently here. It was already a commonly used platform, but after coming here, its usage has increased significantly.” Some students even reported that WeChat was the “most frequently used” social media during their stay in China. Participants also mentioned the common use of “group chat”, with which they could obtain information ranging from class content to student club activities, notices, and other instructions for international students. WeChat was also used to maintain connections in the university, including keeping in touch with classmates, friends, and teachers. However, the use of WeChat and the contact groups on it were mainly campus-related. For contact with family and friends in Malaysia, WhatsApp remained dominant, highlighting a clear functional division between host- and home-country social media use.

Regarding posting and daily-life sharing, participants’ usage of host and home country media also differed significantly. Most participants continued to post updates on Instagram, sharing their daily activities with their close friends and family members back in Malaysia. Meanwhile, they browsed through Instagram for their friends’ updates and interacted with them through comments and messages. However, WeChat was rarely used for posting updates by most Malaysian-Chinese international students. Some participants mentioned using WeChat Moments merely as a “memoir”, recording events only visible to themselves. Others said that they only post “complaints” on WeChat Moment, regarding it as an emotional vent instead of a place for self-presentation. One participant also mentioned that the engagement on Instagram was “much closer” than that on WeChat. As Choo reported, “The entire online circle of close social interactions is actually centred on Instagram.”

Participants also reported the challenges encountered when using social media platforms in China. One was access to their home country’s social media platform. Because Instagram is blocked in China by the government, Malaysian-Chinese students need to access Instagram using a VPN (virtual protocol network). However, some participants mentioned the inconvenience posed by this mode of access, which reduced their use of their home-country platforms. Ong also mentioned a VPN-caused reduction in the desire to share:

Posting about daily life has decreased. On WeChat Moments, for me, I only post about significant events, like when I participated in a competition last year. I wouldn’t post something like just having a cup of coffee today. In the past, I would share these kinds of things on Instagram.

Moreover, participants mentioned a blurred sense of personal boundaries as they adapted to the Chinese social media environment. For example, Ong talked about his experience using WeChat to navigate interpersonal connections, emphasising his reluctance towards China’s communication style:

WeChat is too inclusive. For example, in daily life, students add their teachers on WeChat, or you might need to friend your boss. We use WeChat to communicate, which means you can directly see your boss’s Moments or your teacher’s Moments. At first, I wasn’t exactly against it, but I didn’t really like it either.

He later mentioned that despite his unwillingness, he was compelled to adapt to this during his stay in China, “Yeah, but ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do.’ You can’t avoid getting used to it.” This overlap of formal and informal conversation on the same platform created a sense of discomfort and restrained participants’ free self-presentation.

After arrival, participants relied heavily on WeChat for campus and daily communication, while WhatsApp and Instagram remained central for connections with family and close friends in Malaysia. Cultural proximity gave students initial familiarity with Chinese platforms, yet their actual use in China was highly selective, leading to the separation between home- and host-country media usage patterns. Despite this familiarity, they still faced difficulties such as platform restrictions and differing digital norms, which required ongoing adaptation.

Perceptions of social media’s effect in navigating acculturation challenges

To address the third research question, this section examines participants’ perceptions of social media’s multifaceted effect on their adaptation in China, revealing the nuanced connection between Malaysian-Chinese students’ social media use and their acculturation.

Initial preparation: As mentioned in the previous sections, Malaysian-Chinese students had already been using Chinese social media when they were in Malaysia. Therefore, this pre-arrival Chinese social media access contributed to their preparation for their overseas studies. One participant mentioned Xiaohongshu’s significant role in enlightening her more about China in advance. During their first arrival in China, social media also helped in their initial preparation, giving new arrivals indispensable information. WeChat group chats were mentioned the most by participants as offering support during their first arrival in China. Participants mentioned two types of chat groups: the university-organised chat groups for official information and the chat groups organised by senior students

(Malaysian-Chinese students or other international students), which provided peer support by sharing experiences and answering questions. One participant explained how it worked:

The teachers from the International Relations Office send us everything we need to pay attention to in the group, and we handle it accordingly. If there's anything we don't understand, we can also ask the seniors in the group.

One participant highlighted the effect of peer support by sharing his experience of being helped with entry procedures at the airport:

And there were a lot of procedures. It took us more than three hours to leave the airport. If it weren't for the seniors who informed us in advance about what to apply for, what to register, and what documents to submit, we might have been stuck at the airport for five hours or even longer.

Some chat groups were also organised before their arrival in China, providing them with not only the information needed for their further studies but also offering them opportunities to know their senior peers. The support provided by social media connections was conspicuous, especially at the initial stage of their studies, as one participant noted: "The group's support was mainly helpful during the preparation stage at the beginning."

Academic adaptation: According to the interview, social media platforms were frequently helpful to Malaysian-Chinese students in addressing their academic performance. Compared to their experience back in Malaysia, Malaysian students generally reported experiencing higher academic pressure and a more intense competitive atmosphere in China. Therefore, they tended to work harder to keep up and adapt to the relatively rigorous academic environment. In this context, social media is key in helping Malaysian-Chinese students manage their studies. The majority of the participants shared their experience searching for online classes and complementary materials through social media platforms, including Bilibili and YouTube, which helped them keep up with the academic pace at school. For example, Choo mentioned her experience using Bilibili for complementary studying, suggesting that online courses and video explanations were more helpful to her than textbook content. Lee also mentioned searching on Bilibili for new courses that "he had not learned before". One participant coined the phrase "Bilibili University", which meant that they often used Bilibili for online studying and information searching, as though the platform played the same role as a real university, highlighting their dependence on social media platforms for academic support. Besides searching for resources online, group chats organised for each course at the university also provided them with a platform for information exchange and solutions to the problems, as Choo continued, "These study group chats are really convenient because you can ask questions directly there, without having to wait until the class to ask the teacher. If you post a question, the teaching assistants or other members will respond."

Mental well-being: Social media has been found to significantly support international students' emotional well-being, particularly by offering channels for maintaining distant relationships and coping with negative feelings, including loneliness (Sandel, 2014; Guo, 2024). When asked if social media had a positive effect on their mental conditions, most participants mentioned that using social media as a communication tool to contact family members and friends helped them deal with pressure and loneliness. For instance, Ong talked about having a WeChat phone call with his mother when under the pressure of final exams:

For example, during my final exams last year, I was under a lot of pressure, so I would just call home, and maybe do a video call with my mom. I didn't necessarily talk about how stressed I was, but just having a normal chat with her helped relieve the pressure.

Another participant mentioned reducing loneliness by chatting online with friends: "I think chatting with friends is probably the best. When you feel lonely, you reach out to a friend, and it makes you feel less lonely, like it's not so bad anymore." Besides communicating online, browsing through social media platforms for video clips and content they were interested in was also helpful for Malaysian-Chinese students in overcoming loneliness and stress, thus facilitating their acculturation. However, few participants mentioned social media's effect on expanding social circles and promoting interpersonal relationships, as most participants remained strongly connected to their old friends and social circles, which have been substituted with online communication due to geographical distance. Social media effectively supported students' emotional well-being by maintaining transnational connections and providing entertainment; its role in fostering new interpersonal relationships within the host society remained limited.

Social media was perceived as highly supportive in most aspects of acculturation. Pre-arrival familiarity with Chinese platforms and chat groups facilitated initial preparation and information gathering, reflecting the role of cultural proximity in easing early adjustment. During studies, social media platforms and course-related group chats helped students manage academic demands, while online contact with family and friends supported emotional well-being and reduced loneliness. However, social media's role in expanding new interpersonal relationships within the host society remained limited, as most connections centred on familiar networks.

Discussion

The study explored the real acculturation experiences and social media use of Malaysian-Chinese students in China. By acknowledging the population's cultural proximity with the host country as a specific factor, this research examined its possible effect on participants' acculturation process and their social media usage patterns to further elucidate the dynamic of cross-cultural adaptation.

The first research question explored Malaysian-Chinese students' current acculturation situation and the role of cultural proximity in the adaptation process. The findings indicate that cultural proximity facilitated Malaysian-Chinese adjustment to their daily life in China. Participants experienced low cultural shock and reported a sense of familiarity due to shared cultural traditions with China. This

echoes existing research that acknowledged cultural proximity's positive role in supporting cross-cultural adaptation (Lam & Catto, 2023; Jones & Kim, 2013). However, this similarity alone did not lead to deeper social integration as structural barriers, such as separate dormitories, different class schedules from the locals and limited access to shared activities, continued to restrict meaningful interactions. The restrictive influence of these systemic barriers was also widely acknowledged by other research on international students in China (An & Chiang, 2015; Ding, 2016). This finding further agrees with Safdar et al.'s (2023) argument that while cultural proximity is indeed influential in acculturation, its influence is not necessarily positive or direct and might be shaped and often constrained by a range of contextual, structural, and interpersonal factors that jointly determine adaptation outcomes.

Meanwhile, despite participants' high level of Mandarin proficiency that facilitated practical communication and daily life, most continued to interact primarily with other international students or fellow Malaysians. This finding challenges the results of Swami et al. (2010)'s research in the Western context: that students' language proficiency was positively correlated with more interactions with the locals and promoted their integration. As for acculturation strategies adopted, Yu and Wright (2024) concluded that insufficient language proficiency led to international students' adoption of the separation strategy. This study illustrates a paradox: language proficiency improved functional adaptation but did not promote deeper interactions with the locals, and separation remained the dominant acculturation strategy for Malaysian-Chinese students. This result is against the existing studies that integration, rather than separation, was the most preferred acculturation strategy adopted by international students studying in China (Luo et al., 2021; Zhang & Zeng, 2023). This difference underscored the unique presence of Malaysian-Chinese within the broader international student community in China. Findings also reported that with the combination of cultural proximity, language proficiency and physical resemblance to local Chinese, participants were frequently mistaken for locals. This led to another paradox that, rather than promoting inclusion, such misidentification reinforced participants' affirmation of their Malaysian-Chinese identity and strengthened the tendency towards further separation, leading to a "familiar yet distant" situation.

Overall, the findings above suggest that cultural proximity is the only factor among many that shapes acculturation. While providing familiarity and reducing cultural shock, it doesn't guarantee integration. Meanwhile, language proficiency also does not necessarily correlate with integration. From the perspective of motivation, these familiarities reduce acculturation stress, creating a "non-problematic" situation in which individuals may lack the necessity to further engage with the locals. This tends to lead to surface-level behavioural shifts rather than deeper cultural change (Berry, 2005). In this case, structural, social, and identity-related factors are directly reported to reshape the acculturation process. As Berry (2005) notes, acculturation strategies are not determined solely by the preferences of non-dominant groups but are also constrained, and sometimes reshaped, by the dominant society's practices, policies and attitudes. This led to the explanation from the perspective of the host country, that structural barriers, such as separated dormitories and different class schedules, function as restrictions that limit fuller engagement. These two reasons prevented Malaysian-Chinese students' integration, leading to their preference for separation.

Cultural proximity provided them with a pre-arrival understanding of China and gave them a sense of familiarity when engaging with Chinese social media. However, despite their prior exposure to Chinese platforms, using them in real-life contexts still involved adjustment. This leads to the second research question, delving into Malaysian-Chinese students' social media usage patterns and the changes that happened after they arrived in China.

Upon arriving in China, the cultural proximity effect was proved to be limited. Participants developed a hybrid pattern of use, where home-country and host-country platforms were used separately for different purposes. Chinese social media serve only as functional tools, while home-country social media remains central for intimacy and emotional connection. New communication norms, access restrictions, and unexpected inconvenience reinforce this division, underscoring cultural proximity's limited role in promoting deeper engagement. This dual-set use of social media platforms mirrors the emotional and relational separation participants experienced, as they navigate between different social circles and create their social personas. As existing literature has demonstrated, international students often navigate between home-country and host-country platforms, building bridges or reinforcing boundaries depending on how they use each (Lee & Ranta, 2014; Olding, 2013; Rahman, 2014; Tian, 2016). In China, the regulatory environment and the need for a VPN to access platforms, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, create infrastructural separation for domestic and international platforms. Yet such a platform usage pattern is not a merely regulatory outcome. Our findings suggest that it is often a reflection of users' functional need (e.g. academic vs. personal use), emotional distance, and cultural familiarity. Similar patterns also appear without such restriction. For example, Xiong found that Chinese students in America maintained separate social media use, preferring WeChat to form communities, which limited their engagement with the host society. Moreover, the inconvenience caused by blurred personal boundaries on social media reinforces the separation, highlighting the challenge described by Marwick and Boyd (2011) as "context collapse". As students manage both formal and informal conversations within the same space on WeChat, personal boundaries are blurred, and self-presentation becomes more cautious. Instead of promoting interaction, this overlap keeps students away from real social integration into the host society and restrains the development of meaningful relationships.

These phenomena reveal the gap between perceived familiarity and lived experience. In summary, cultural proximity influences students' social media usage patterns, but only at a surface level. Rather than merging into the host-country social media environment, students maintain a dual-set of social media use, treating Chinese social media primarily as functional tools while relying on home-country platforms for intimate emotional support. This parallel usage can be seen as a form of "behavioural shift", sufficient for practical purposes, but has limited effect on deeper integration, proving cultural proximity's limited impact on deeper integration.

The last research question focused on Malaysian-Chinese students' perceptions of social media's effect on multiple aspects of their acculturation. Findings clearly demonstrate social media's positive role in helping Malaysian-Chinese students' acculturation. It provided practical support both during their preparation and arrival, making them quickly familiar with daily life in the host country. This agrees with Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) research findings that the pre-departure usage of social media platforms improved international students' adaptation. Regarding academic adaptation, social media also provided crucial support, providing

students with academic advice and resources, and facilitating their academic adaptation (Guo, 2024).

Specifically, course-specific study groups built on social media encouraged students' peer interaction, which is supportive of the learning process. This aligned with Pang's (2020b) findings that the active use of social media promoted social interactions and the acquisition of academic resources, which significantly improved international students' academic integration. Findings also illustrate social media's instrumental support for students' emotional well-being, as they managed psychological challenges through entertainment content and online communication with family and friends. As Jiang et al. (2020) mentioned, this social support from the home country was vital in alleviating cross-cultural stress and improving life satisfaction. However, despite the numerous benefits, its contribution to expanding social circles and fostering new interpersonal relationships was limited. As mentioned in the previous section, the dual-use of social media platforms, where home country platforms remained central for deep connection and host-country merely functional, restricted broader social integration.

Overall, the findings unveiled the truth that social media's effectiveness is more evident at a surface level, with its role mainly confined to basic adaptation needs, such as information acquisition, social network maintenance and necessary connections. Its functions rarely extend to reshaping students' existing core networks or fostering a sense of belonging.

Conclusions and Limitations

This study explored Malaysian-Chinese students' acculturation and social media use in China through the lens of cultural proximity. While cultural proximity, language proficiency, and digital familiarity clearly supported surface-level adaptation, helping students reduce initial cultural shock, manage everyday tasks, and maintain practical communication, these advantages proved insufficient for fostering deeper intercultural integration. Structural barriers, identity-related dynamics, and separate social media practices all constrained the potential benefits of familiarity, leaving adaptation largely functional rather than relational. Across the three research questions, cultural proximity reduced strangeness but not distance; language proficiency enabled communication but not integration; and social media offered support yet remained limited to surface-level functions. Together, these patterns positioned Malaysian-Chinese students as "familiar yet distant", close enough to navigate life in China with ease but still detached from fuller social and cultural inclusion.

Despite these insights, several limitations of the research need to be acknowledged. First, the sample has limitations that may restrict generalisability. Geographically, it's mainly concentrated on southeast coastal universities, which may present a "best-case scenario" due to a larger international student cohort and greater access to social media support. The sample is also relatively small and mainly comprises undergraduate students, which further narrows the scope of the conclusion. Future research should include students from diverse educational backgrounds and regions to capture a more comprehensive picture of their acculturation experiences. Second, self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants may consciously or unconsciously withhold certain aspects of their lived experience. Participants may also respond in a way that they believe the interviewer expects or to prove that they are socially desirable (Bispo, 2022). Third, the interviewer's Chinese identity, while fostering a smooth environment, may at the same time lead to an assumed understanding or projection of the researcher's own experiences, thus limiting exploration of specific cultural nuance (Berger, 2015). While reflexive strategies were used to minimise such bias, future studies may consider involving a more diverse research team or conducting follow-up interviews to enhance interpretive rigour. Lastly, the research does not consider the impact of participants' personalities on acculturation. Future research could further explore this direction through multiple quantitative approaches.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Liang He: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Yuxin Fei:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this study.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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