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# Guanxi 2.0: social capital within a cultural context revealed by the use of social media by Chinese international students

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# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

**GUANXI 2.0: SOCIAL CAPITAL WITHIN A CULTURAL CONTEXT  
REVEALED BY THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY CHINESE  
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

by

**XU ZHANG**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

School of Art, Design and Architecture

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## **Abstract**

### **Guanxi 2.0: social capital within a cultural context revealed by the use of social media by Chinese international students**

**Xu Zhang**

The group of Chinese overseas students has become a very important part of the cross-border communication group. The number of Chinese students studying in the UK continues to increase. For foreign students from other countries, constructing a new social network is a key step for them to obtain necessary help and support to carry out their new study and life. This thesis takes Chinese international students studying at the University of Plymouth in the United Kingdom as an example, using the ethnographic research methods of participatory observation and in-depth interviews to explore the process of Chinese international students building their social networks through social media (WeChat) in a cross-cultural environment, and through thematic analysis to decode their behaviour strategies to reveal the characteristic of social capital within a cultural context.

The thesis points out the three stages of the construction of the social network of Chinese international students at Plymouth University: establishing their new network through direct and indirect methods, selectively developing and maintaining guanxi, obtaining necessary helps and supports by mobilising social resources in the network.

In the process of network construction, the specific behavioural strategies of Chinese students are a mixture of instrumental and emotional motivations. In order to better adapt to the local society, the guanxi model of Chinese international students shown new features to accessing and mobilising social resources through social media. In the author's view, this new guanxi model present the characteristic of social capital within guanxi context, which namely: guanxi 2.0

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## Author's declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Master of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

### Publications:

- Zhang, X (2017) *Small-world network: decoding the transient communities in digital platforms*. International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Science Studies. Vol.3, p10, pp.93-104.

DOI: <https://sites.google.com/a/flelearning.co.uk/publication/ijisss/ijisss-2017>

- Zhang, X (2017). *The quality of virtual communities: a case study of Chinese overseas students in WeChat groups*. The Global Studies Journal, Common Ground Research Networks. Vol.10 (3), pp.19-26.

DOI:<https://doi.org/10.18848/1835-4432/CGP/v10i03/19-26>

**Signed:**

**Date: 30/09/2021**



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This introductory chapter aims to provide an outline of the research undertaken for this thesis. It discusses the reasons for the research and how it may help to develop an understanding about the importance and necessity of social capital within a cultural context and the reason why select Chinese international students as the research target. The research aims and objectives, research process, methodology and the significances of the study are put forward. Finally, the structure of the thesis is outlined to provide a brief introduction to all the other chapters.

### **1.2 The need of doing this research**

As globalisation accelerates, people from different cultural backgrounds interact more and more frequently with each other. Overseas students have naturally become a significant part of the transnational community. According to the "Blue Book" published by the Chinese Ministry of Education in March of 2021, it shown that the number of Chinese students studying abroad is increasing, and the group of Chinese students are the number one of international students in countries such as the UK and the US.

For international students, the process of studying in a foreign country is not only a process of receiving advanced academic knowledge, but also a process of overcoming cultural barriers and shocks, and building new social networks in an unfamiliar environment. An individual's social network has an impact on his or her life, emotions and even major decisions. Through their networks, individuals receive important information, material and spiritual help (Bleeker, 2016; Wang and Miao, 2017; UKCISA, 2021).

For international students in a foreign country, the social networks they build up in a cross-cultural environment help them to adapt to the unfamiliar society and to carry on with their studies and life as soon as possible. The social networks of international students have distinctive cross-cultural characteristics: on the one hand, the communication and behaviour of Chinese students reflect the influence

of guanxi (Chinese style relationships); on the other hand, individuals are influenced by new environment, and the different behavioural norms in cross-cultural environments may also affect the quality of their network construction (Wang and Miao, 2017).

Therefore, the social networks constructed by international students through social media in the cross-cultural environment and the way they access and mobilise social resources can reflect new characteristics of social capital within a cultural context. This new model (guanxi 2.0) requires further observation and exploration.

### **1.3 Research aims and objectives**

This project continues my personal research and practice in the field of social capital, guanxi and social media with the i-DAT research group. The Chinese overseas students of Plymouth University will be treated as the research target. This study aims to explore the process of Chinese international students building their social networks through social media, and to decode their behaviour strategies under cultural influence. To achieve this goal, two research aims are sought and presented in Table 1.1:

Table 1.1 Research aims and objectives

<b>Aim 1</b>	<b>To produce an understanding of the motivations of Chinese international students in establishing social networks and discovering the meaning of guanxi and social capital for international students</b>
Objective 1.1	To analytically discuss the current situation of Chinese international students and their use of social media
Objective 1.2	To critically review the theories regarding “Social Capital” and “Guanxi” through online and offline standpoints
<b>Aim 2</b>	<b>To decode the characteristics of social capital within a cultural context through online and offline aspects</b>
Objective 2.1	To observe and analyse the performances of online and offline communities created by Chinese students based on Plymouth University
Objective 2.2	To provide recommendations for enhancing the level of international students’ participations and the cross-cultural adaptations

(Source: the author’s own data)

#### 1.4 Methodology

As the focus of this article is on the analysis of the process, the author believes that the establishing process and characteristics of the social network can be better presented through the participatory observation and in-depth interviews. Therefore, the author adopted ethnography as a qualitative research approach in order to understand the behaviour and meaning construction of the research subjects.

The author lives and studies in the UK and is a member of this group. Being a compatriot in a foreign country gives the author access to the group and makes it easier to conduct participatory observation. The author's methods of observation and in-depth interviews were through cluster sampling and snowballing with acquaintances, while at the same time taking into account the wide distribution of the sample, the offline field sampling was accompanied by online interaction on social media platforms (WeChat). In the research process, the author was careful to maintain a "value-neutral" stance and tried to conduct the research as an objective outsider, not to analyse the interaction situation of

other international students with preconceived ideas, but to summarise them according to their narratives. This ensures the objectivity of the research findings.

### **1.5 The significances of this study**

The author explores how Chinese students construct a new social network in a cross-cultural environment in order to understand the characteristics of that network and the influence of cultural factors in it. It further dissects the similarities and differences between social capital and guanxi (Chinese-style relationship) theory by summarising existing researches. The author attempts to fill the research gap of social capital under the influence of cultural factor on the basis of the previous studies.

In addition, from a sociological perspective, to explore a dynamic social network can provide a clearer picture of international students' lives abroad. Compared with previous studies, observing and analysing the process of constructing social networks among Chinese international students provides further additional clarification in terms of their personal social resource acquisition and mobilisation. Subsequently some recommendations for the cultural adaptation of international students can be provided at the end.

In terms of research methodology, the author used a combination of online and offline ethnography. A two-way examination of the actual impact on the cross-cultural lives of Chinese international students through the use of social media. This study also reflects on the understanding of social capital in the context of guanxi through the differences in behaviour between online and offline. In this way, the characteristics of the social capital within a guanxi context can be better summarised.

### **1.6 Outline of the thesis**

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction of this whole research from the rationales of this study, the research aims and objectives, research process, briefly introduce the methodology and highlighted the significance of this research. A broad outline of each chapter is listed at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 2 is a background research of Chinese international students in the UK and at Plymouth University, then a general introduction of current Chinese society and the use of social media by them are illustrated.

Chapter 3 reviews existing literatures of guanxi and social capital through definition, measurements, online aspect and summarized current researches of guanxi and social capital. The quality of guanxi and the importance of social capital to communities also have been discussed. After that, by combining the literature reviews and comparing the similarities and differences between guanxi and social capital, the research questions of this study are conducted in at the end.

Chapter 4 aims to introduce the rationale of the research methodology and data collection methods. The chapter begins by identifying the philosophical position of the study, and a discussion of interpretivism shows the relationship between ontological and epistemological concerns in the study. Next, the author discusses the approach and strategy of qualitative research. A critical discussion of ethnography as a basis is presented and used to show the rationale and development of this research.

Chapter 5 presents the findings and discussions. Firstly, it reveals two modes of establishing social network by Chinese international students, then discusses the way of developing and maintaining guanxi and mobilising social capital in the network. Afterward, the author further discusses the willingness and restriction of establishing social network, adaptation of communication strategies to the development and maintenance of guanxi in the network, and evasion of renqing dilemma to increase the mobilisation of social capital in the network.

Chapter 6 reviews and summarises the key findings of the research, and indicates several limitations. Subsequently, the author provides particular recommendations to the universities in the UK based on the criterion of this research.

## **Chapter 2: Background Research on Chinese international students**

### **2.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter focus on Chinese student studying in the UK and Plymouth University. It is a background overview of the research target of the thesis, which can help the author to better find research questions and select research methods that the study is suitable for.

Studying in the UK can be traced back to 1978 (Bleeker, 2016). As of today, China is the world's largest source of students. The number of Chinese students studying in the UK for higher education has reached 141,870 in academic year 2019/20 (HESA,2021). Business is still the preferred subject (HESA, 2021; Universitiesuk.ac.uk, 2021). According to the Chinese ministry of education (MoE) published Blue Book Report in 2021, Chinese students spend an average of 21.47 months studying abroad, including undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students. "To develop international vision and contacts", "to establish a more Complete personality through the experience", and "to accomplish better academic achievements" are the three main reasons for Chinese students studying abroad.

The biggest problem facing by Chinese students is the weak communication and expression skills in English, and the lack of understanding of local culture and participate in local events (Wang and Miao, 2017; UKCISA, 2021). From the academic year of 2014/15 to 2019/20, the number of Chinese students enrolled at Plymouth University has remained around 500, a slight decreases each year (HESA, 2021). The Plymouth Chinese Student and Scholar Association (Plymouth CSSA) is the main international student community. In addition to offline culture activities, the community also keenly promotes the interaction of social networking platforms, it has established Facebook homepage, Sina Weibo account, QQ groups, WeChat official account, and WeChat groups. With the use habits of Chinese social users, WeChat has gradually become to the dominant of Chinese students' social platform (Plymouth CSSA QQ groups, 2021; Plymouth CSSA WeChat, 2021; Plymouth CSSA Sina Weibo, 2021; CSSA-Plymouth, 2021; Plymouth Chinese Society, 2021).

### **2.2 The facts of Chinese students studying in the UK**

Since 1978, China has sent international students to the UK, the number of Chinese students has increased and continued to expand every year. According

to the "Blue Book" published by the Chinese Ministry of Education in March of 2021, the total number of Chinese students studying abroad in 2019 was 703,500, an increase of 41,400 or 6.25% over the previous year, while the total number of all types of students returning to China was 580,300, an increase of 60,900 or 11.73% over the previous year. The five countries with the highest number of international students from China were the United States (369,548), Australia (153,822), the United Kingdom (109,180), Canada (96,195) and Japan (86,439).

In terms of the age of study abroad, the largest number of Chinese students are be aged 18-21. The number of Chinese studying in the UK with 34% for high school; 33% for undergraduate studies; and 46% for postgraduate studies. In terms of region of application, Chinese students are more likely to choose colleges and universities in the London region, which is related to the number of institutions, employment opportunities and the economic activity (UKCISA, 2020; CCG,2021).

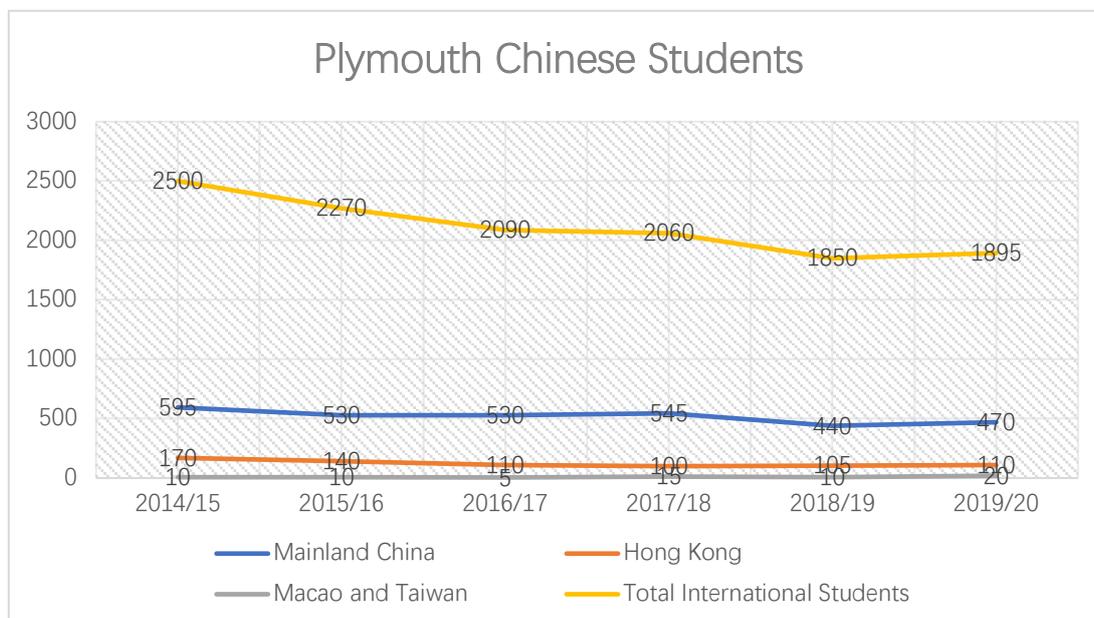
In addition, the report also investigates and analyses the cultural adaptability of international students. The mean socio-cultural adjustment score of young Chinese international students is  $3.83 \pm 0.65$ , close to 4 "with a little difficulty". Wang and Miao (2017) indicated that "to develop international vision and contacts", "to establish a more complete personality through the experience", and "to accomplish better academic achievements" are the three main reasons for Chinese students studying abroad, accounting for 20.66%, 19.39 %, 17.60%. Only 10.46% of the students focus on enhancing a fluent foreign language ability, and fewer students (7.14%) will consider how to better integrate into Western society. At present, weak language skills and inability to integrate local cultural practices are the practical difficulties encountered by Chinese students. They often take three to six months or even longer to adapt to studying abroad. Compared with other international students, Chinese students have better performance in academic essay level and research ability, but their performance in social ability, personality activity and expression ability are still weak (Wang and Miao, 2017; UKCISA, 2020; CCG,2021).

### **2.3 Chinese students at Plymouth University**

According to the records of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), there were 595 mainland Chinese students, 170 Hong Kong students, 5 Macao and 5 Taiwan students were register in Plymouth University in academic year 2014/15, the total number of international students was 2,500 in that year. It was slightly

drop down started from academic year 2015/16, the number of students came from mainland China was decreased 11%, Hong Kong students were dropped 18%, students came from Macao and Taiwan were keep the same, and the total number of international students went down to 9.2%. Similarly, the total number continued to decline in the next academic year, which was 2,090. However, the number of mainland Chinese students and Taiwan students were kept the same, students from Hong Kong decreased to 110, and there were no students came from Macao at the academic year 2016/17. The number of Mainland Chinese students enrolling at Plymouth University began to decline from the 2018 academic year and has slightly increased for the 2019 academic year. In contrast, students from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are steadily increased. (HESA, 2021).

Figure 2.1 Plymouth Chinese students in academic years 2014/15 to 2019/20



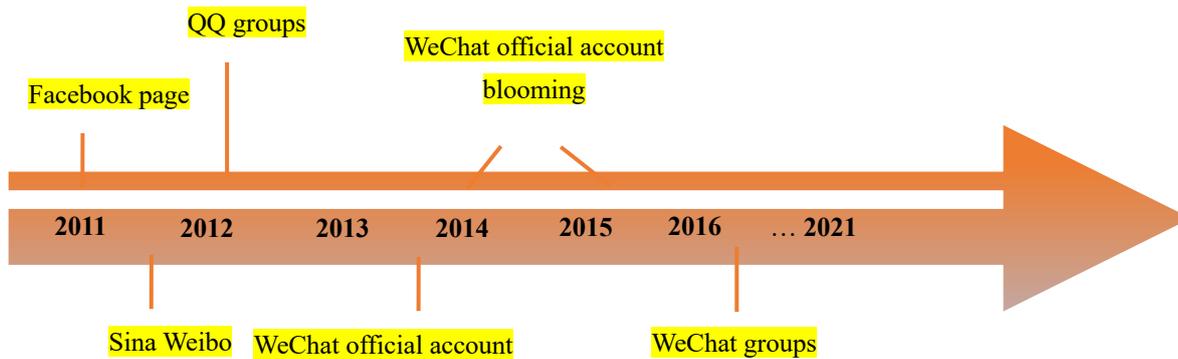
(Source: HESA, 2021)

## 2.4 Plymouth Chinese society and the use of social media

The Plymouth Chinese Student and Scholar Association (Plymouth CSSA) as known as Plymouth Chinese Society, is a non-profit student organization under the guidance of the Chinese Embassy and Plymouth University Student Union (UPSU) in the United Kingdom. Its mission is to serve all Chinese students and scholars in Plymouth to provide them with the information and help they need to learn and live, such as holding social events, parties and trips (Plymouth Chinese Society, 2021; Chinese Society, 2021). With the rise of social media, Plymouth CSSA has established its own social accounts. Its Facebook account was the

first to be created, which was built in February 2011 as named CSSA-Plymouth (CSSA-Plymouth, 2021). The related content accounts Plymouth CSSA and Plymouth Chinese Society was created in October of the same year and November of the following year. Until 2021, the followers of those three accounts were 125, 649 and 288. However, the usage rate of these 3 Facebook homepages was not high, and the content update was very slow. From the content analysis, Plymouth CSSA started to gradually drain users to other social platforms, such as promoting their Sina Weibo and WeChat accounts from 2012 (CSSA-Plymouth,2021; Plymouth Chinese Society, 2021). Sina Weibo account of Plymouth CSSA was created in September of 2011, there were 1,625 followers on this platform by 2021. Although this platform has been used to promote learning and life issues related to Plymouth, its activity was also decreasing year by year. Until August 2021, Plymouth CSSA's Sina Weibo account has only 386 tweets, The number of comments and the number of likes was also very low. It can be seen that students are mainly engaged in information on this platform and lack of interactivity (Plymouth CSSA Sina Weibo, 2021). QQ group was another social app for congregating new students and current students lived at Plymouth. However, it just active around 18 months and was gradually replaced by WeChat from 2014 (Plymouth CSSA QQ groups, 2021). WeChat official account of Plymouth CSSA was launched out by the end of 2013 and was promoted from 2014. From 2013 to 2021, there were 316 articles about Plymouth's study and life was pushed here. Compared to the Sina Weibo account, because it could be pushed to users more conveniently and in time, the number of hits per article was much larger than the Sina Weibo account (Plymouth CSSA WeChat, 2021). The WeChat group was a more efficient and interactive function. Followed with the social media usage habits of Chinese users, QQ was gradually replaced by WeChat. International students were more acceptable and actively participate in the interaction when the WeChat group function was promoted at 2016 by Plymouth CSSA (Plymouth CSSA WeChat, 2021). In short, comparing with Facebook, QQ groups and Sina Weibo, WeChat platform has higher active users and user's retention.

Figure 2.2 The timeline of Plymouth CSSA social media with keystones



(Source: data adapted Plymouth CSSA QQ groups,2021; Plymouth CSSA WeChat, 2021; Plymouth CSSA Sina Weibo, 2021; CSSA-Plymouth, 2021; Plymouth Chinese Society, 2021)

In summary, starting from the academic year 2014/15, more than 500 Chinese student study at Plymouth University each year. Among them, students from mainland China are the majority. The Chinese student community in Plymouth is dominated by CSSA. In addition to offline activities, this community also focuses on social media interaction. With the development of the media and Chinese user habits, Plymouth CSSA has established Facebook homepage, Sina Weibo account, QQ groups, WeChat official account and WeChat groups. And WeChat groups gradually occupied the main position of Chinese students to obtain and exchange information (Plymouth CSSA QQ groups,2021; Plymouth CSSA WeChat, 2021; Plymouth CSSA Sina Weibo, 2021; CSSA-Plymouth, 2021; Plymouth Chinese Society, 2021)

## 2.5 Chapter summary

This chapter first introduced the overall overview of Chinese students in the UK and then summarized the situation of Chinese students at Plymouth University in the academic year of 2014/15 to 2019/20. It was found that the number of students studying in the UK has far exceeded that of other countries. The average length of study abroad was 21.47 months. Students were mainly studying business subject (Wang and Miao, 2017; Universitiesuk.ac.uk, 2021). The main purposes of studying abroad were to develop international vision and contacts, to establish a more Complete personality through the experience, and to achieve better academic achievements. The weakness of Chinese students was weak on language communication ability, not understanding local culture and customs, and lack of enthusiasm for participating in local activities (Wang and Miao, 2017;

UKCISA, 2021). The Plymouth Chinese Student and Scholar Association (Plymouth CSSA) as the main international student community, is committed to helping international students better understand local Culture, better adapt to study abroad. In addition to offline activities, Plymouth CSSA is also committed to spreading information on social media to help students study abroad, such as Facebook homepage, Sina Weibo account, QQ groups, WeChat official account, and WeChat groups.

It can be seen that WeChat groups has gradually become the main social media platform for Chinese overseas students (Plymouth CSSA QQ groups, 2021; Plymouth CSSA WeChat, 2021; Plymouth CSSA Sina Weibo, 2021; CSSA-Plymouth, 2021; Plymouth Chinese Society, 2021).

## **Chapter 3: Literature review of guanxi and social capital**

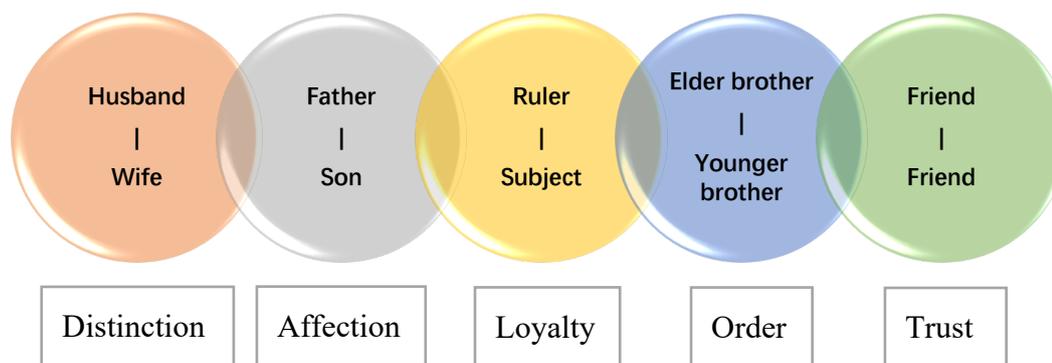
### **3.1 Chapter overview**

In this section, the author reviews existing literatures of guanxi and social capital through definition, measurements, online aspect and summarized current researches of guanxi and social capital. The quality of guanxi and the importance of social capital to communities also have been discussed. After that, by combining the literature reviews and comparing the similarities and differences between guanxi and social capital, the research questions of this study are conducted in at the end.

### **3.2 Definitions of Guanxi**

In Chinese, the word “guanxi” has been used for thousands of years to describe the relationships between people. According to the textual research, “guanxi” first appeared in the latter context in 1978 (Yang, 1994), it originates from Asian Confucianism (Pablos, 2006). The term appears in the Confucian discussion which talks concerning its five major frameworks for relationships; which focus on the distinction between husband and wife, the family affection between father and son, the loyalty between monarch and minister, the order between elder and younger brothers, and the trust between friends (Lee and Humphreys, 2006). Hwang (1987) pointed that the nature of the Confucian frameworks for relationships (guanxi) is to do with social resource allocation, and the principles whereby the five relationships are dealt with rely on degrees of respect and closeness. “*Respect*” indicates levels of status, the degree of “*closeness*” is related to the distance of relationship. In interpersonal activities, who the resource dominator is should be decided by the level of status (from high to low), and the social resources should be allocated according to the distance of the relationship (from close to distant). Confucianism emphasised social ties in its rules, and it formed the modes of thinking and ways of behaving which have been deeply embedded in the Chinese people’s mindset for centuries (Alston,1989).

Figure 3.1 Confucianism “Rules in Five Relationships”



(Source: Pablos, 2006)

On the other hand, the Chinese characters of “guanxi” (关系) have different meanings when this word is separated into a phrase of two words. The first character, guan (关), as a noun, literally means “relation”. As a verb, it indicates “close”. Moreover, the second character Xi (系) as a noun represents “knot” and as a verb means to “tie up”. The phrase, “guanxi” in Chinese as a noun, usually needs a verb to be added such as pull, engage, go, run, set, etc. In comparison with the word “relationship” in English, which points to a common attribute of two people, the terms “to engage guanxi” or “to set guanxi” indicate that the guanxi concept relates to a dynamic process rather than a static state (Fan, 2002). And the term guanxi may refer to the relationships which already exist between people, but can also refer to actual (but perhaps not recognized) connections created by frequent contacts between people, or connections that exist because of indirect interactions (Bian, 1994).

In Western literature, guanxi is usually defined as a special relationship or as existing through particular ties, connections, exchanges, social resources, social capitals, or as a process (Pye, 1982; Butterfield, 1983; Alston, 1989; Fan, 2002).

Jacobson (1979) stated that “guanxi” is a special relationship which exists between two persons. The degree of their intimacy depends on the whether the relationship exists via birth or blood (family, relatives or marriage), is of a social nature (between fellow students, teachers and students, colleagues, neighbours, and so on), or is an acquired relationship (friend’s friend, or acquaintances). In contrast, Tsang (1998) argued that guanxi is produced by purposes: “relationship”

is not guanxi. Affinity relationships which already exist via nature are called “guanxi base”; these only do not involve an action taken for a specific purpose.

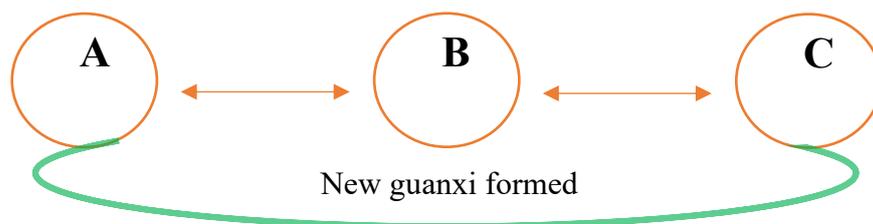
Liu (1983) indicated that guanxi is dynamic and active. If a person obtains a connection with another person, this may be static and remote. Such relationships may be disconnected at any time. Guanxi is different; it facilitates access to wider and stronger network connections and the ability to reach more resources in order for people involved can achieve their purposes. Therefore, the word “connection” does not explain guanxi properly.

Can guanxi be treated as an exchange? Hwang (1987) argued that “guanxi is reciprocal exchange between two persons in relation to a specific purpose.” And there are three channels through which for exchange can take place: *qinqing* (family affection), *ganqing* (emotion evoked by friendship) or *renqing* (favour to acquaintances). Exchanges can be in the form of intangible or tangible resources: information, help, or gifts, products etc.

Butterfield (1983) considered guanxi as a kind of social investment or social capital, encompassing forms of assets and liabilities which can be used to help a person to obtain support when they need it. However, there is a lack clear evidence which supports this view that guanxi is an asset or resource which can be owned by individuals and which can thus be transferred (Fan, 2000).

The following is a new definition provided by Fan (2000). Guanxi is a social interaction process which occurs between two people. For instance, “A” has a problem and requires help from “B”. If “B” can directly help “A”, then the problem is solved and the process is complete. If “B” cannot offer to help directly, and introduces “C”, then a new process will be initiated between “A” and “C”. Although “C” may find others to help “A”, guanxi has already been set up between them.

Figure 3.2 How guanxi works



(Source: Fan, 2002)

These definitions describe guanxi from various perspectives and via certain of its features, but no single description can generalize to the extent that it can cover the whole phenomenon of guanxi (Fan, 2002). Through the above discussion, the author agrees that “guanxi” is an individual ability to access and mobilise social network resources, it is dynamic and pluralistic and based on the dynamic distribution of the individual’ social network and the Chinese-style ethical values in the network. Although most researches focused on the benefits gained through “guanxi” (Fan, 2002), but the author wishes to examine the role and significance of “guanxi” at the level of accessing and mobilising social resources through social networks.

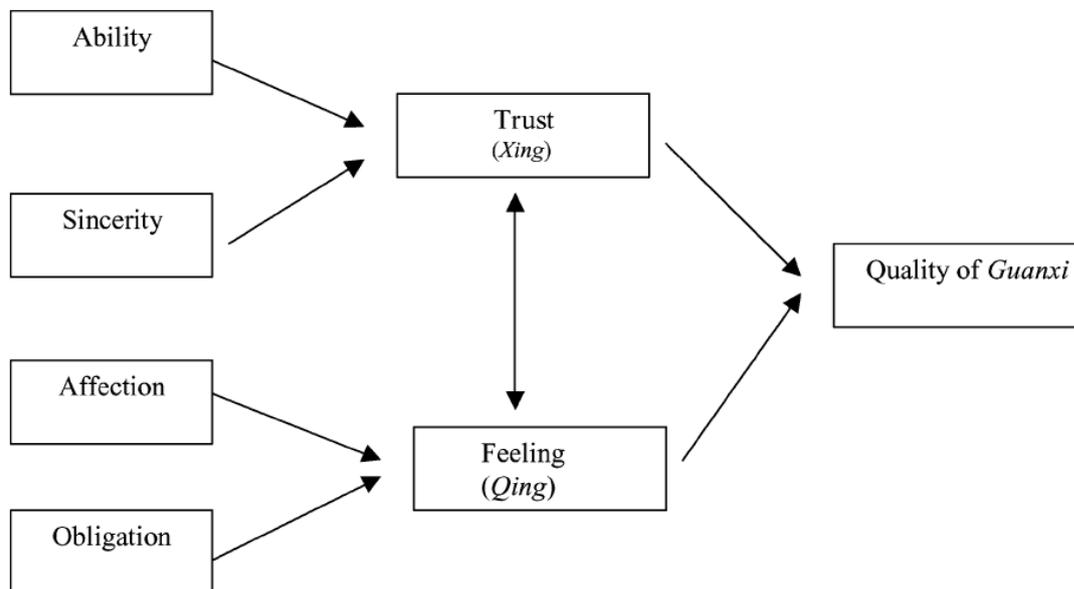
### 3.3 The quality of guanxi

The quality of guanxi is a neutral qualitative value which can be characterized using general descriptive terms such as good/bad and deep/light. Social network researchers measure the strength of social relationships through interaction frequency or stability (duration) (Brass, 1995), and social psychologists often include trust, satisfaction, and commitment as values which can be used to measure guanxi (Bejou, Wray and Ingram, 1996; Berscheid, Snyder and Omoto, 1989b; Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990; Smith, 1998).

To determine the predictors of guanxi quality, Chen and Chen (2004) turned to two closely related Chinese concepts, trust (xin) and feeling (qing). Trust mainly refers to the credibility of another relationship party, and feeling reflects the way in which a given relationship satisfies the mutual emotional and functional needs of all parties. In turn, human credibility is composed of ability and sincerity, while

feeling is composed of obligations (jiaoqing) and affection (ganqing). Figure 3.3 depicts the relationship between relationship intimacy, trust and feeling.

Figure 3.3 Guanxi quality



(Source: data adapted from Chen and Chen, 2004)

Chinese society is described as supporting special forms of trust, such as trust between family members, but a low degree of general trust within larger groups (Fukuyama, 1996; Gudykunst et al., 1996; Redding, 1993). Interpersonal trust is critical to building quality relationships. In other words, trust is the basis of differentiated order in a network: the higher the level of trust between two people, the higher guanxi quality they have (Chen and Chen 2014).

Trust needs to be emphasized from two points of view. Firstly, trust (xin) mainly refers to sincerity (cheng) rather than to ability. According to Yang (2001a, 2001b), sincerity (cheng xin /cheng yi) means that a person has an authentic intention (yi) to enter into and stay within a relationship, and is significantly concerned about you (xin). Following the social norms of relationships, a person's sincerity is reflected in their reliability. Although, in Chinese society, sincerity is considered an important feature of trustworthiness, nevertheless ability is still important. In fact, when the English word "trust" is translated into Chinese, it requires a compound word (xing ren), which means that a person is both trustworthy and

ability. Furthermore, ability emphasises the competence of a person in relation to a particular expertise or in certain areas. It is clear that ability-based trust is domain-specific, while sincerity-based trust is more centred on the person (partner) as a whole. Since guanxi quality is an overall judgment of the relationship between two people, trust based on sincerity may be more important than ability-based trust in developing of close relationships (Chen and Chen, 2004).

Qing in itself means feeling but it has somewhat different meanings in different contexts: affection (ganqing) and obligation (jiaoqing). Affection refers to a degree of emotional understanding and connection, as well as the feeling of shared happiness or fear, etc. In addition, it refers to a sense of loyalty and solidarity, and the willingness to take care of each other under any circumstances. On the other hand, obligation involves the sense of obligation and debt generated by social and economic transactions which are undertaken to meet the pragmatic needs of work and life. It is related to the degree of debt experienced, which is often described in terms of quantity and depth, meaning long-term exchange or extensive communication (Tibaut and Kelly, 1959).

The accumulation of affection (ganqing) and obligation (jiaoqing) will increase the intimacy between two related parties. Obviously, trust and feeling are closely related. In particular, trust based on sincerity is closely related to affection whereas trust based on ability (or cognition) is more closely linked to obligation. However, trust and feeling are two distinct concepts that both contribute to increased guanxi intimacy (Chen and Chen, 2004).

In short, to exam the quality of guanxi requires to use multi-dimensions; the proper evaluation of guanxi cannot be done via just a single layer. Therefore, in the practical research part, the author needs to refer to more indicators.

### **3.4 Online Guanxi**

When digital media becomes integrated into people's daily life, guanxi can also be cultivated online in order to obtain instrumental and emotional support from

families, friends, acquaintances and strangers (Liu, 2013). Chinese trust is built on the intensity of *guanxi*, which is closing to the affinity, and progressively diminishing to acquaintances and strangers. Under *guanxi*'s system, trust is hard to spread to strangers and the whole society (Luo, 2011). Liu (2013) found that gender, personality, and network usage were impacted by network trust. In turn, network trust also affected the forming of the new of type of online *guanxi*. Furthermore, context was another important factor which influenced individual online *guanxi*. Virtual communities have different types of relationships, such as relatives, friends, classmates, and colleagues. In different situations, people have different rules of communication and play diverse roles; when these situations are mixed, the characters will be adjusted (Bian, 1997).

Generally speaking, kinship relationship and close friends are linked to a higher intensity of instrumental and emotional support in real life (offline). However, with the development of digital social networks, the types of personal *guanxi* have gradually changed (Li, 2014). Facebook users mainly use SNS to maintain and consolidate existing offline relationships rather than using it to develop new relationships online (Ellison, Stenfield and Lampe, 2007). In contrast, Chinese users are more likely to dig into the potential relationship (friends' friend) through social media platforms. In China, "latent *guanxi*" is different from the strangers, because it exists based on bridging *guanxi*; moreover, it is also distinct from the acquaintances, which may make it easier for it to be developed into a strong tie when compared to the bridging *guanxi*. Put briefly, latent *guanxi* is based on friends and acquaintances' social relations, the purpose of which is to expand the number of individuals' weak ties continuously. This intermediary has a better foundation for trust than strangers, and is easier to grasp online (Huang and Hwang, 2011).

In a word, compared with the traditional Chinese *guanxi*, online interaction with acquaintances, latent friends and strangers had no significant effect on the exchange of benefits; moreover, the interaction of the "*guanxi*" structure was omnidirectional, which mixed the instrumental and expressive purposes. Thus, it can be concluded that the digital platform provides a new opportunity for

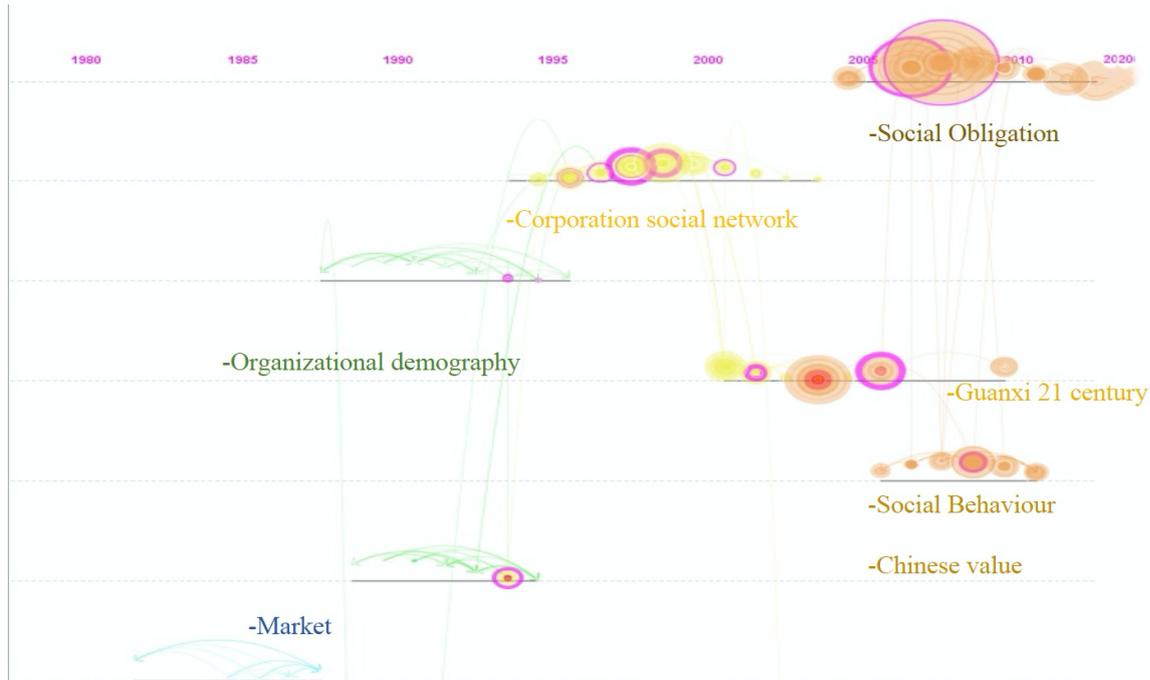
emotional support; the users are more frequently promoting emotional exchanges and talking to online strangers.

### **3.5 Research on guanxi**

Based on the papers which could be found in English languages from the Web of Science, there are 1,636 papers relevant to guanxi which have been published from 1970 until 2020. The earliest research started in the 1980s; this focused on making a comparison between Japanese and Chinese culture. Guanxi at that period did not receive much more attention than this. An interesting facet is that, from the 1990s onwards, a few researchers did begin to investigate related contemporary issues and tried to find some connections between social capital and guanxi. The most famous early paper is "*Guanxi: connections as substitutes of formal institutional support*" from Xin and Pearce (1996), which had a profound influence on the researchers who followed. The period in which guanxi research really took off was in 2000; the topics covered then were those of affectivity, the transition economy, turnover intentions and the Chinese business context. It is easily seen that more and more western scholars paid attention to the functions and implications of guanxi in the business area. Park and Luo (2001) are representative of this activity; they made significant contributions to research into guanxi and organizational dynamics, as reflected in the networking within and across Chinese firms. Recently, investigations into guanxi have taken in a wider research area, and have not only focused on the business networking, but have also looked at the social side: social obligations, social networking, social behaviour and culture values.

In a word, following the development of guanxi, scholars have realised that guanxi does not just describe certain aspects of Chinese culture and behaviours. It is a dynamic phenomenon immersed in social networks. Trends in existing research suggest that the social meaning of guanxi is a worthwhile topic to explore. Therefore, the author believes that the Chinese international student community would be a good sample of this research to explore in depth the value and meaning of guanxi in social networks.

Figure 3.4 “Guanxi” research, timeline from 1970-2020



(Source: data adapted from the Web of Science, 2020)

Guanxi can be changed not only through digital social networks, but also with the external environment. How do international students’ guanxi change when they are away from their home and in a different cultural environment? Will they be westernised? What is the embodiment of “guanxi” in Western culture? With these thoughts in mind, the author does a further review on the concept of social capital.

### 3.6 Definitions of Social Capital

The term "social capital" originally came from an economic point of view. When we talk about “social capital”, the first word we have to understand is “capital”, which is a core term in economics that refers to the exchange of something in a specific material form with an economic value. Marx (1999) gave the definition of capital as “An investment of resources with expected returns in the marketplace”. In Marxist economics, capital is defined as a productive attribute, it is not a material thing, it relates to a production taking place within social relations; here, the essence of capital is the accumulating and preserving of labour in order to

increase its exchange value. In other words, capital is a factor of production: all factors that can be used for this production are known as “capital”.

In Marx's work, social capital is a concept which is related to individual capital. In his point of view, the circulations of capitals of each unit are intertwined; each is the prerequisite and condition for the other and social capital is formed in the process. It can be seen that social capital is an accumulation of a kind of capital. In the classical sociological literature, social capital has four theoretical prototypes (Portes, 1998): (1) the “limited solidarity” of Marx and Engels, which indicated that adverse circumstances can contribute to collective cohesion; (2) Simmel's perspective of “reciprocal transactions, norms, and contracts” which emerge through personal communication networks; (3) Durkheim and Parsons explored the concepts of “value fusion” and “collective consciousness” — they argued that values and moral principles exist before personal goals; and (4) The “mandatory trust” concept introduced by Weber whereby formal institutions and various particular groups use differing mechanisms to ensure compliance with established rules of conduct, such as bureaucrats, who use legal and rational mechanisms, or families, who use ethical or social mechanisms.

The term social capital has been around for decades, and the discussion in the academic area still based on Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988, 1990) and Putnam (1993, 1995)'s standpoints. Although their research areas were different, they all conclude with a very similar outcome – “social relations are an important social resource”. Bourdieu (1986) argued that identifying social capital is a primary variable in determining social mobilisation and how hierarchical relations are produced. Social capital is “a continuous network that links more or less familiarity with real or potential resources or understands institutional relationships, and provides the context for each member's collective ownership of capital.” (Bourdieu, 1986). Through network connection, individuals can access other types of capital (such as cultural or economic) which enables them to enter other social classes. Bourdieu (1986) pointed that when social capital is to be established as an important concept in research, it should be regarded as a strength, in terms of linking to other forms of capital. In relation to this argument, Schuller, Baron, and Field (2000) pointed out that the concept is still somewhat

enigmatic and has not been developed, particularly in terms of empirical research; it is not easy to demonstrate the concept's attributes or explain social capital.

Social network research emerged in the 1960s; it is an important topic which is very relevant to social capital research. The economist, Loury (1977), argued that social capital expresses the social relationships which promote or facilitate valuable skills in the marketplace. From this point of view, social capital is one of the resources which exists in family relations and in the social organisation of communities; such resources are essential for children's and youths' psychological and social development, and provide positive opportunities for them to develop their human capital.

Coleman is the sociologist who has made the most contributions to social capital research. He stated that every person has three kinds of capital from birth: first, genetic talent forms their human capital; second, congenital material conditions constitute their physical capital; and third, the social environment creates their social capital. He implied that social capital is where individuals have capital property which performs on social structural resources, and that the definition of social capital should be determined by its function. Social capital consists of elements that frame the social structure; these mainly exist in the structures of interpersonal relationships, and they facilitate individuals within such structures. As with other forms of capital, social capital is productive; it makes possible the attainment of certain ends, and if it is absent, the outcomes cannot be achieved (Coleman, 1990).

In "Structural Holes", Burt (1992) argues that social capital signifies the opportunities which exist to use other types of capital through friends, colleagues, and more general relationships. Relationships between firms and other firms is also said to involve social capital, and this is the ultimate determinant of business success. In short, Burt considered social capital as an extension which can provide resources and control resources for each node in a network structure.

Putnam (1993) defined social capital, in the book "*Making Democracy Work*", as follows: social capital comprises the characteristics of social organisations, such

as trust, norms, and networks, which can promote coordinated action to improve the efficiency of the society in question. In Putnam's view, there are two forms of social capital: first, the type of social capital, which is acquired when people who are already familiar with each other have a strong social tie — this is called a “bound” connection; and the other type is acquired via the association of people or groups who do not know each other — these may form a “bridge” connection.

Portes (2000) argued that social capital is the ability of individuals to mobilise scarce resources in networks or broader social structures. He specified that there is a growing consensus in the existing social capital literature, which is that social capital represents the ability of actors to assure benefits through membership of social networks or other social structures.

There is much debate from scholars concerning this topic. However, an accurate definition of social capital has not yet been confirmed. Social capital is a broad concept that refers to a structure of social relations inherited between actors (Coleman, 1988). It is valued for its ability to produce something, such as collective action or the furtherance of personal interests. It may be a resource that an individual has, but it is not determined by individuals. It is a group asset, but it must be conceptualized and measurable. Social capital is often described as a multidimensional concept, but it can be examined via two generalizations. First, social capital can be seen as a personal network — this is based on the conceptualisations of Coleman (1988, 1990) and Putnam (1993, 2000). Second, according to Bourdieu (1986) the social capital comprises a narrative network and the resources embedded within it.

To sum up, there are four representative definitions of social capital:

1. Social Structure:

Coleman (1990) is representative of those who believe that social capital inheres in the structural elements of society. He pointed out that social capital is defined in terms of its function, not as a separate entity but in relation to various different entities in a variety of forms. It has two common characteristics: it consists of elements that help to make up the social structure and it facilitates individual action within this structure. Social capital,

like other forms of capital, is productive and the extent of social capital possessed by someone determines whether they can achieve certain goals.

## 2. Organisational Characteristics:

Putnam (1993) argued that social capital refers to the features of social organisations, such as trust and norms, which can improve the efficiency of society by promoting coordinated action.

## 3. Capacity:

Portes (1995) definition of social capital was that it can be said to be representative of capacity. Potts argued that social capital means the ability of individuals to mobilise scarce resources across networks or broader social structures.

## 4. The Relationship (Network) Resources:

Bourdieu (1986) and Burt (1992) are the prominent representatives of this view, that social capital is a collection of real or potential resources that are inseparable from social networks (Bourdieu, 1997). Burt (1992) specified that social capital is the opportunity to use (other forms of) capital. The relationship between companies is also a form of social capital, it is crucial to the success of business in terms of competition.

From the above definitions by a variety of scholars, the conceptual description of social capital can be formulated as follows: a tight social connection with certain characteristics which is involved with social networks, social structures, norms, trust, authority, consensus of action and social morality. Social capital is different from economic capital and human capital; it exists in the social structure, and is non-material. It enhances the efficiency of society and the degree of social integration possible, through cooperation between people (Lu, 2009). In line with these perspectives on social capital, the author believes that social capital also originates from interpersonal relationships and accumulates as a stable result over time. An individual's social resources may be acquired innately from the family that determines his or her social class status, or they may be accumulated as a result of self-improvement through education, hard work and occupation.

The method and scope of social interaction determines the extent of social capital that an individual can access and mobilise (Portes, 1995; Lu, 2009).

### **3.7 Measurements of social capital**

Researchers have various different understandings of the concept of social capital, so the methods used to measure social capital are also numerous. In this paper, social capital is measured relative to the micro levels which represents external social capital or social private goods in addition to personal relationships (however these relationships also have a resource implication). It also includes the personal network structures which are occupied by these resources (Bian, 1997; Lin, 1999).

At the micro level, the measurement of individual social capital is focused on the measurement of individual social network conditions. The basic idea is that the system of social connection between individuals is regarded as a “network” and that large systems constitute a whole society. Researchers into network analysis have formed a set of mature indicators, concepts and analytical methods (Bian, 1997). In the empirical studies, the measurement of social capital at the individual level has focused on two aspects: (A) the measurement of the total resources embedded in the individual social network, which can be accessed by the individual; and (B) the mobilisation of social capital by individuals for instrumental action, which focuses on the usage of social capital by individuals. (Bian, 1997; Lin, 1999)

#### **A. Measuring the total resources that individuals have acquired**

##### **A.1 The network members’ generation**

A.1 i) Nomination (name-generator)

A.1 ii) Position-generator

##### **A.2 The type of network used**

##### **A.3 The use of network indicators**

A.3 i) Central positions

A.3 ii) Intermediate positions

In short, the structure, the positions within, and the resources embedded in the network should be used as optional measurement indexes when assessing the “owned” social capital of the individuals by using social network analysis methods (Bian, 1997; Lin, 1999)

## B. Measuring the social capital in use

### B.1 The informal network approach

### B.2 The flowing resources

### B.3 The characteristics of the key contacts

#### B.3 i) The strength of relationships

#### B.3 ii) Social status

In the study of social networks and social capital, “The Power of Weak Relationships” has become a classic proposition, Granovetter (1973) pointed out that heterogeneous information is more likely to be accessed via weak ties, so the role of these may be stronger than that of the bond relationships. The following researchers conducted a great deal of empirical research in relation to this matter, although their results did not prove to be consistent. Nevertheless, it is believed that the strength of the relationship between people constitutes an important element which must be taken account of in social capital measurement. Granovetter also indicated that the intensity of a relationship is a multidimensional indicator which involves the amount of time spent on the relationship (by both parties), the emotional intimacy and familiarity (mutual trust) involved and the interactive services offered. This means that a single indicator should not be used to measure the strength of such a relationship. But in fact, most researchers have adopted a single index method for simplicity. Commonly used methods are those based on “interactivity” or “role”. The “interactivity” method is based on the intensity of people’s interactions: the more frequent these are, the stronger the connection which will be formed. The “role” method is based on network members or researchers determining the nature of the relationship: e.g., “friends” represents a strong tie and “acquaintances”, a weak tie. In the relevant research, the “role” method has been the one more widely used (Lin, 2005).

*Table 3.3 The index of social capital measurement*

Levels:	Contents:	Indicators:	Methods:
Micro (individuals)	Social networks of individuals/ Families	-Relational resources, -Relational networks, -Structural positions: (Network size/density/ heterogeneity/ level/ reachability)	-Name generator -Position generator -Case studies -Interviews
	Culture background	-Values and responsibilities	

*(Source: data adapted from Miao, 2006)*

Furthermore, the UK government established five dimensions to measure its social capital in 2005: social participation, civic participation, social networks and support, reciprocity and trust and views of the local area. Nevertheless, there are two main issues in the social capital measurement (SCM): firstly, adults and young persons have different standards for measurement; secondly, different nations have different standards in SCM (ESDS Government, 2005). In other words, the age groups and culture background could influence the quality of social capital.

From the above, we can see that in the measurement of social capital at the individual level, the indicators used by the various researchers focus on resources, positions and networks. So far, the research on the network structure is mainly concerned with social capital as “private goods” rather than “public goods”, but more and more researchers are beginning to realise that it is possible to combine cultural context to analyse social capital in more depth and systematically (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Lin, 2005).

### **3.8 The importance of social capital to communities**

Comprehensive and sustainable community development aims to improve the quality of life, as shown by the associated economic development, social development and environmental development (Taylor, 1992). An improved

quality of life needs both tangible and intangible resources to be created for and by communities, especially intangible resource. Social capital is not only seen as vital for improving the situation of poor communities, but it is also seen as an essential element in enhancing the quality of community life and for sustainable development. Higher levels of social capital can form a better quality of life as a result of elevated degrees of social trust, closer social networks and more established norms of mutual support (the main characteristics of social capital) (Newman & Dale, 2005; Kay, 2006). On the contrary, the lack of social capital may be a cause of community poverty, which results in social exclusion, sporadic social networks, lack of trust and ineffective interaction (Wallace, 2007).

In the context of community development, social capital is not merely a single univariate concept. It may have different levels depending on the identity of the community members and their interaction networks. Gittel and Vidal (1998), who, based on Putnam's (1993) theory, divided social capital into "bonding" and "bridging" types to fit the cases found in community development. These types are similar to Granovetter's (1973) "strong ties" and "weak ties".

Recently, some scholars have been paying more attention to the relations between individuals, communities, and public organisations/groups at different levels, some of these researchers have categorised these community-level relationships as "linking social capital" (Halpern, 2005). In general, if social relations are viewed as a continuum, social capital can be divided into three types from "strong link" to "weak link" (Woolcock, 1998; Newman & Dale, 2005; Middleton et al., 2005):

(A) Bonding social capital:

involves individuals with a unique identity and homogeneous members of the organization. A multi-oriented relationship is formed between members who have close contacts and have strong mutual commitment, such as family, friends and relatives or neighbors.

(B) Bridging social capital

mainly involves heterogeneous individuals who form between them a weaker and wider cross-section of social connections: such as peers, work colleagues, civic organisations or religious groups within the community.

(C) Linking social capital:

indicates linkages between people or organisations which are at a tangent to the existing boundaries or status links. These vertical linkages are mainly motivated by situations which directly or indirectly affect individuals, or community, or public organisations and which drive people or groups to access resources across existing boundaries.

Briefly, this classification of social capital at the community level represents the community as an open system which is able to acquire energies generated by links and interactions. In terms of the degree of network tightness, the bonding social capital is related to informal networks of direct relationships; the bridging type is related to interactions between people across the informal networks and with other people or groups outside the immediate community; the linking social capital highlights the interaction of individuals, groups or organisations that cross social boundaries and go outside the community, which have a significant impact on the community's access to external resources.

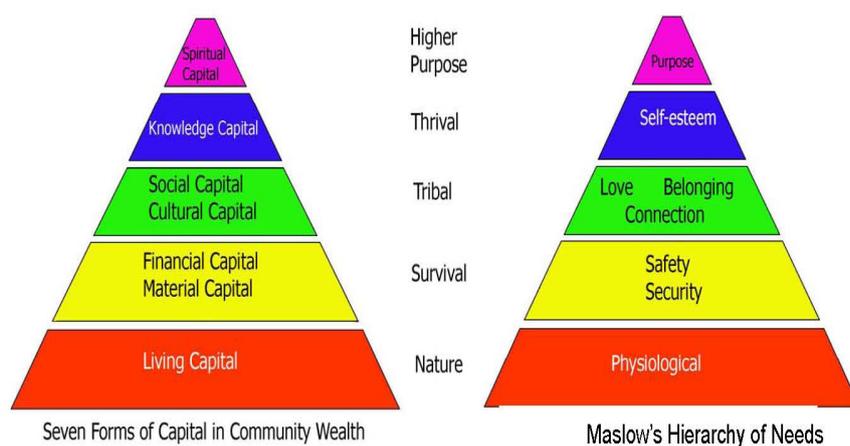
There are some other scholars who have advocated Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and based on this concept have mapped social capital in communities in relation to seven forms (Estin, 2011). Living capital represents the services our ecosystem provides to us and all other living organisms, such as carbon and water, it forms the basic conditions of people's daily lives. A more advanced form of living capital is material capital, which includes natural resources, tools, and infrastructure. Financial capital refers to money, and this complexes to financial instruments and securities. This makes contributions directly to community wealth (Roland and Landua, 2009). Social capital shapes the relationships, connections and influences within people's social networks, its purpose may be similar to those of cultural capital, which is enhancing the life of the social community (Estin, 2011). The difference between knowledge capital and spiritual capital is that the former capital emphasizes skills, ideas, and knowledge, it is a kind of intellectual property which may have a direct effect on economic or social development. Conversely, spiritual capital is formed from faithful and intentional

attainment. It is the highest level in relation to forming community wealth, and not simply in relation to achieving economic growth (Estin, 2011).

*“Whereas economic capital is in people’s bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships.”*

*(Portes, 1998)*

Figure 3.5 Different forms of capital



*(Source: Estin, 2011)*

To put it concisely, social capital is an essential element in building bonds, in communication, and in maintaining cohesion when communities are threatened, and it enables cultures to re-create and protect themselves. However, due to the vague intersections of social capital, it is difficult to define clearly the boundaries of the various types of such capital in practice. Nevertheless, the typing of social capital can help us to understand or grasp its impact on the community, and then adopt more appropriate interventions in order to promote community growth and development (Mel and Jenny, 2007).

### 3.9 Online social capital

Online social capital is another essential research perspective. The concept of online social capital is adapted from Lin’s theory by the author, and she redefine it as follows: “consists of resources embedded in social relations and social

structure through digital social network sites”. Indeed, it can also be divided into three types: bridging, bonding and maintained (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007; Wilson 2006). For instance, Facebook uses a positive association between university campuses and social capital. Students can use this platform more frequently to create a greater connection to trusted parties and support networks in campuses (bonding social capital), search for other wider communities (bridging social capital), or contact old school friends (maintained social capital). Even though users keep Facebook pages for their friends and closer circle of acquaintances, in actual fact this has a deeper effect on weak ties management (Wilson, 2006; William, 2006). Of particular note here is online social capital access to broader sources of information at a lower cost to extend power and influence; this access makes personal social ties between actors solid, although weak ties work much better than strong ties for building up online social capital. To engage in online participation, there is not only a need to offer tangible benefits to online users, but also to satisfy the desire for positive ascriptive identity. The latter involves giving users an opportunity to become the kind of person they want to be (Cottingham and Samuel, 2009).

*“People participate in a particular activity not because they want to say ‘I do this’, but because they want to say ‘I’m the kind of person who does this’”*

*(Cottingham and Samuel, 2009)*

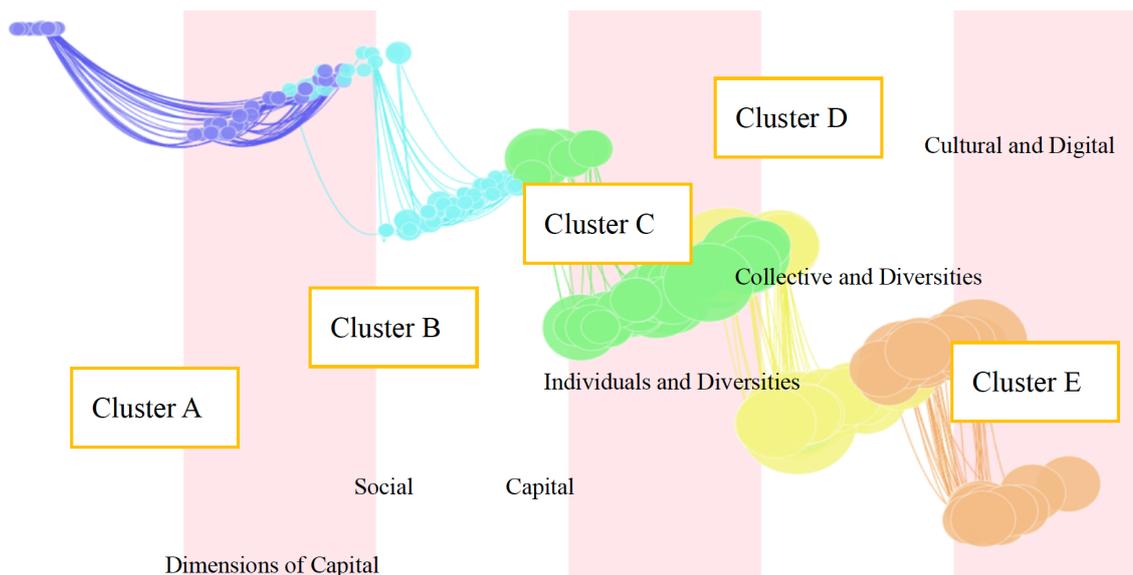
Previous studies have focused on how social media influence people's self-identity and social structure. However, the impact of social media on culture is a new perspective. Social media, to some extent, can be considered a cultural product, and also affects and shapes users' cultural orientation. The tangible cultural products include advertising, television, text and law. They are created by people's concept of cultural consensus; in turn, they also affect people's cultural preferences. The core value of social networking is to help users connect and share user-generated content (UGC); at this stage, the study is considered a cultural product to strengthen the cultural concept of a particular case (Li, 2014).

### **3.10 Research on social capital**

Searching the Web of Science for the title of “social capital” in the literature entries will result in 45,708 relevant topics dating from 1970 until 2020. “Cluster A” presents the studies from of the 1970s; these are mainly focused on the area of capital theories from a social policy aspect, and the cooperation between sociology and economics. “Cluster B” provides the studies from 1980 to 1989; researchers at this stage investigated the structural factors, the social class differences, and social capital’s role in the creation of human capital and citizenship. From the 1990s, as the representation of “Cluster C” in figure 3.6 at below shows, the nodes are larger and denser than formerly, and this signifies that the concept of social capital has by this time been considered more widely by scholars. The research orientations included social participation, ethnicity, social mobility, personal wealth distribution and occupational segregation. Moving to the 2000s (Cluster D), because of Putman’s “bond” and “bridge” social capital theory, the topics of clique identification, civil society, stratification and bounded rationality, subcultural capital and individualization are discussed more frequently. From 2010 until now, researchers have begun to emphasise the role of institutional and cultural factors in economic and social development (Cluster E). Social capital theory has become an important element in cultural studies — introducing trust and reciprocity norms, citizen participation and formal and informal networks into the research into economic development and collective actions; this has involved the subjects of sociology, economics, management, pedagogy, education, and so on.

In short, the historical process of undertaking social capital research indicates the fact that both concepts and measurements of social capital are improved when a dynamic environment is assumed. The cultural and digital layer may be the next stage for researchers to explore.

Figure 3.6 “Social Capital” in research timeline from 1970-2020



(Source: data adapted from Web of Science, 2020.)

### 3.11 Social capital vs. guanxi

The concept of social capital was well known and has been frequently used by sociologists, political scientists, management scientists of the last century. Bourdieu (1986) indicated that social capital is a kind of social convention; it is based on reputation and social status. In some discussions, it is said that this social convention refers to the social networks via which people associate with each other, and that simple social networks appear to be formed via personal relationships or interpersonal ties (Bian, 1997). Thus, the study of social capital in a certain sense can be seen as a study of “relationship” theory, and therefore it would appear that the concept of social capital could be used to study the Chinese “guanxi” phenomenon. However, social capital is a new theory of social networks which is based on the concepts of material capital, technical capital and human capital, and key concept associated with social capital is whether individuals are willing to join a community or an organisation and actively participate in that community or organisation (Lin, 2005). On the other hand, guanxi, according to the Confucian point of view, indicates the human itself, and so trust in guanxi is not built on a social system, but on individuals and the personal social contexts of associations. It can be seen that social capital and

guanxi are both based on social networks, but at different levels and to different degrees (Li, 2006).

Social capital can be used to interpret aspects of western communities: democracy, the market and non-governmental aspects; it is integral to the examination of association, cooperation, trust, reciprocity and information channels (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993; Fukuyama, 1996); Guanxi is based on the Chinese family-oriented society, its origin is in familial ties and geography and expanding from that, in classmates, colleagues and people in other relationships with the subject; discussions of guanxi are generally based on the range of social circle (Alston, 1989; Fan, 2002). The difference between the two concepts is that social capital is mostly related to associations, and guanxi is primarily related to personal relationships. Social capital pursues public welfare and justice, and these return benefits back to individuals, communities and society as a whole (Gittell and Vida 1998). However, the characteristic of guanxi is of individual shortcuts, and these always require self-interest to drive them; rigorous and rigid system cannot allow for this. Thus, with guanxi, more problems are solved through personal relationships, feelings, and negotiation (Chan, 2006). Furthermore, a community is a voluntary organisation, individuals can join, participate or exit depending on their personal aspirations and interests. However, a family is an involuntary organisation which relates to the interests of all parties; parties cannot join and cannot leave, but can escape (Hwang, 1987; Li, 2006; Huang and Wang, 2011).

On the other hand, both guanxi and social capital are concepts which can be utilised for guidance purposes. They can be used to study any social phenomenon which operates under their respective frameworks (such social phenomena do not necessarily belong to a particular society) (Pye, 1982; Pablos, 2006, Qi, 2013). However, we cannot use one of these concepts (guanxi or social capital) as a substitute for the other. Using social capital to study guanxi does not allow us to see the multiple modes of operation of the relationships. And inversely, using the guanxi concept to investigate social capital would not allow us to understand the operation of power in civil society, organisations and management. However, just as it is certain that Chinese society has the

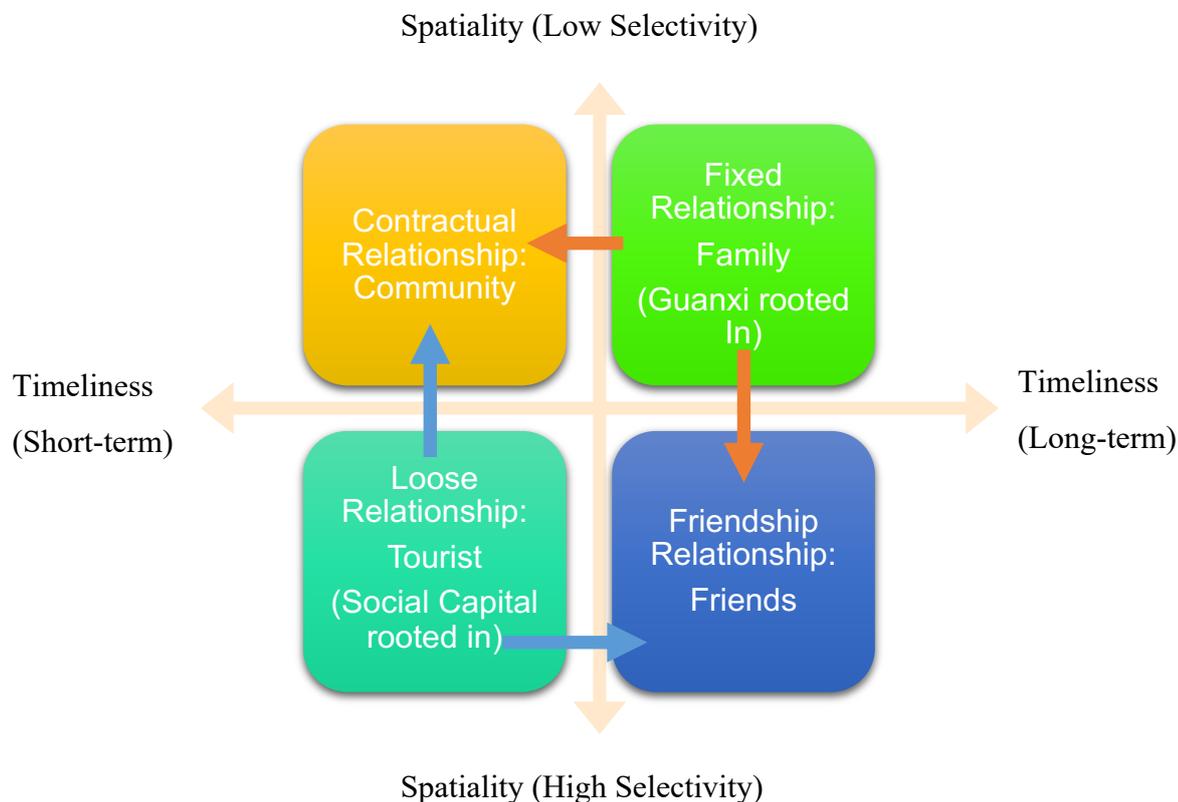
phenomenon of social capital, Western society would also appear to have a form of guanxi operational within it (Li, 2006; Pilotta, 2013).

Social capital itself can be looked at in terms of individual networks and the collective network (Coleman, 1990; Portes, 1998; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Guanxi may be classified as focused on only ego-centered networks (individual networks). The study of social capital highlights the transition from personal attributes to relational attributes, emphasising quantitative research on relational structures, whereas research on guanxi highlights involuntary and non-selective structures, and the need to discuss the problems of favour, mianzi and personal characteristics; such research cannot be undertaken using quantitative methods (Alston, 1989; Park and Luo, 2001; Dauw and Chen, 2006.).

Zhai (2013) pointed out that China is a society built of strong relationships. But when looking for the roots of Chinese people's relationships, the usual way is to try to discover the cultural roots of these relationships. To explain human behaviour patterns via culture is a very common method which is adopted by most researchers. However, if culture is used to explain relationships, these explanations cannot be combined with western research methods. Therefore, such a theory of relationships is returned to the status of a general theory only. Zhai (2013) emphasised that all human relationships (not just those of Chinese people) are placed in two dimensions: one is the time dimension and the other is the spatial dimension. Without any intervention from the cultural level, all relationships nevertheless occur in time and space (time here refers to timeliness, not physical time. Such timeliness has a duration, either short-term or long-term). In addition, space means spatiality, not physical space, it indicates human mobility. If a person is not move in any way and stays in one place for their entire lifetime, his or her communication selectivity is very low, and their guanxi exhibits low selectivity; if a person frequently travels and moves around, this means that their guanxi will exhibit a high selectivity. Such considerations can be analysed by looking at four quadrants, and four different relationships are thus obtained: short-term duration and high selectivity characterise loose relationships, short-term and low selectivity characterise contractual relationships, long-term and high

selectivity characterise friendship relationships, and long-term and low selectivity characterise fixed relationships (Zhai, 2013).

Figure 3.7 The four quadrants of relationships



(Source: Zhai, 2013)

A fixed relationship is the basis for generating renqing and mianzi. Loose relationships emphasise individualism. Westerners also have renqing and mianzi as part of their friendships, but these attributes are not as obvious as they are in Chinese relationships. Relationships between Chinese people are based on the characteristics of fixed relationship. Chinese people use the fixed relationship model to influence the nature of contractual relationships and friendship relationships. Relationships between westerners start from the basis of a loose relationship. They use loose relationships to think about how to make relationships with others (Zhai, 2013).

The most current form of communication is interaction via the Internet. Since people have so enthusiastically embraced this form of communication, the most common form of relationship has become a loose relationship. As a result, new behaviour patterns that Chinese people do not find easy to establish in physical reality are nevertheless established by them on the Internet. Loose relationships were difficult to establish in China, but with the prevalence of Internet communication, the younger generation of Chinese people are finding it is possible to leave behind the ideas which go with fixed relationships and form individualistic relationships instead (Zhai, 2013).

To summarise the above, both social capital and guanxi are based on social networks, but at different levels. Firstly, social capital is based on the theory of social networks and emphasises the willingness of individuals to join and actively participate in that network; guanxi, on the other hand, emphasises the people themselves, and guanxi is not based on social systems, but in the social environment of the individual (Bian, 1997; Lin, 2005; Li, 2006). Secondly, the concept of social capital is community-based and pursues public welfare. In contrast, guanxi is based on the social circle of the family and is driven by self-interest (Hwang, 1987; Li, 2006; Huang and Wang, 2011). Thirdly, individual or collective social capital is mostly investigated using quantitative methods, whereas guanxi is an individual-centred network that is more suitable for qualitative research (Alston, 1989; Park and Luo, 2001; Dauw and Chen, 2006.). Finally, Zhai (2013) presented a new model of relationships of how social capital and guanxi are related and different from each other in the dimensions of time and spatiality.

### **3.12 Research questions**

Research questions are the starting point for academic research methods in the natural and social sciences. Designating a research question is one of the first methodological steps a researcher must take when conducting an investigation. Choosing a research question is a core element of quantitative and qualitative research, and in some cases, it may precede the construction of a research conceptual framework. In all cases, selecting a question makes the theoretical

assumptions in the framework clearer and, most importantly, it shows what the researchers most want to know (Wayne, 1995; Creswell, 2014).

A research question has two purposes. First, it determines where the author is looking for research. Second, it identifies the specific goals that the research or the paper will address (Creswell, 2014). According to the background research of Chinese international students in the UK and their use of social media, combine with the current research issues and the latest research trends in guanxi and social capital, the research question of this study is defined as: how is social media used to shape international students' lives and how might cultural context influence their online and offline social capitals through social media?

*Table 3.4 Current research issues and the latest research trends*

<b>Chapters</b>	<b>Current research issues</b>	<b>Latest research trends</b>
Chapter 2: Chinese International students and their use of social media	Social media has become an indispensable part of Chinese international students' lives. Most of them have been participated in the use of WeChat groups	Social media can be treated as a new method for scholars to conduct social research projects
Chapter 3: Guanxi	Lacks multi-perspective studies on guanxi, it could be changed through virtual communities, and breaks the rules of traditional Chinese social circles (Can only be tested using qualitative method)	Guanxi in social obligation, social network, social behaviour and culture values "Latent friends" as a new indicator to examine the quality of online guanxi
Chapter 3: Social Capital	Lacks a comprehensive index system as a standard to measure social capital Different age groups and cultural backgrounds cannot be measured using the same scale (More focus on quantitative data rather than qualitative data)	Social capital in cultural and virtual studies

*(Source: the author's own data)*

### **3.14 Chapter summary**

Chapter 3 is concerned with representing guanxi and social capital systematically with discussing definitions and measurements. Furthermore, the author has argued that guanxi is a dynamic process involved with personal social networks, and has indicated that there are five main relationships which can be used to interpret guanxi and have illustrated the reasons why guanxi can be described as a dynamic process. Guanxi is intangible and hard to quantify. Online guanxi depends on its social circle structures; the “latent friends” is selected as an indicator to exam the quality of bridging and maintained guanxi. Lastly, the previous literature reviews extracted from the web of science databases presented that the academic field lacks multi-perspective studies on guanxi; thus, this is a further direction for scholars to explore.

The discussion of social capital has indicated that the reason for the difficulty in describing and managing social capital may be derived from its multi-dimensionality. Thus, this chapter suggests that the scope of social interactions should be paid more attention when we consider social capital across different layers. Additionally, although most researchers used social network analysis to track the performance of social capital in people’s networks, there still a lack of a comprehensive index system which can be treated as a standard. On the other hand, social capital at the community level is also not easy to verify due to its vague boundaries. Thus, online social capital and its impacts has been explained by bonding, bridging and maintaining aspects. Through appraising the previous studies extracted from the web of science databases, we can see that scholars have recently started to undertake their research from both the individual and the collective points of view under the cultural and digital layers. The new research orientations may bring with them a fresh way for people to better understanding social capital.

Lastly, by comparing the similarities and differences between guanxi and social capital, the author believes that guanxi and social capital are the ability of individuals to access and mobilise social resources in their networks from

different levels. Therefore, this study attempts to decode the acquisition and mobilisation of social capital in the social networks of Chinese students through online and offline observations by use of WeChat under the influence of guanxi culture.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter demonstrates the research methodology support to the current research. The philosophical position and paradigm are presented at first, then it narrows down to the methodological approach and research strategies. Considering the process of the author's own research, the procedures of data collection and data analysis are illustrated step by step.

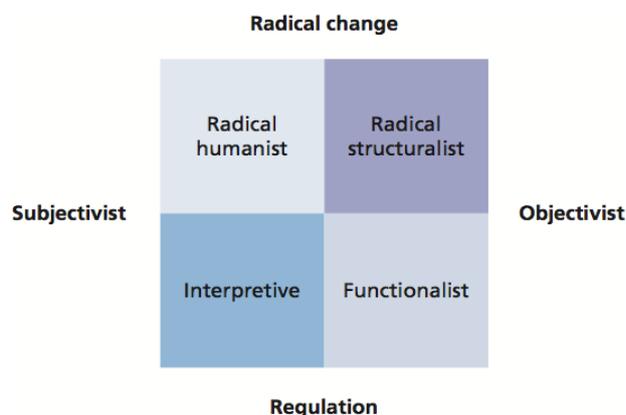
### **4.2 Philosophical position and paradigm of inquiry**

Philosophy is the study of universal and fundamental problems, which are usually associated with being, knowledge, value, reason, mind, language, and so on. It is a systematic approach, based on a rational argument (Teichmann and Evans, 1991; Grayling, 1998). A philosophical research framework is the set of beliefs, agreements or linked assumptions shared by a community of scientists who investigate how problems of the world should be understood and addressed, which can be defined as a research paradigm (Kuhn, 1996; Healy & Perry, 2000; Patel, 2015). Crotty (1998) manifested that ontology is a part of metaphysics of philosophy, which releases the nature of the world; while epistemology is a main branch of philosophy, which investigate the nature and origin of knowledge in disciplines; methodology is a system of methods of discovering and creating knowledge (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:109). The ontology (what reality it is), epistemology (how to know it) and methodology (how to find it out) are identified as three components in a research paradigm (Kuhn, 1996; Thorpe, Easter-by-Smith and Jackson, 2012). On another hand, research philosophy is the concept of doing research, which focuses on examine the nature of knowledge (ontology), explain how it comes into being (epistemology), and transmit it through language (methodology). The research method is the approach to answer the research questions, and it is determined by research philosophy, both of research philosophy and research method are consisted research paradigm (Paton as Cited in Schlegel, 2015).

Burrell and Morgan (1979) classified four paradigms for social science research by using dimensions of ontology and epistemology (see *Figure 4.1*). The functionalists believe that the world is mainly composed of social order (ontology), the objective methods (epistemology) can be independently used to observe and infer the order of events or behaviour patterns. However, the interpretivists stress on using the subjective interpretation to study social order and participants' social behaviours. If the researchers believe that the world is made up of rapid changes, the persons who attempt to understand the changes in an objective way are the radical structuralists; or decode the changes through subjective interpretation of participants, they adopt the radical humanist paradigm (Bhattacharjee,2012).

Similar to the natural sciences, most of the social science researchers use the functionalist paradigm, they argue that the study of social order or patterns can be understood by using objective methods (such as surveys and experiments). However, due to the rise of the post-positivism, a growing number of interpretive researchers attempt to use of subjective methods (such as interviews and ethnic studies) to clarify social problems. Comparing with the functionalists and the interpretivists who pay attention to the understanding of generalised social behaviours, events or phenomena, the radical humanist and the radical structuralist are very small parts in social science research (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Bhattacharjee, 2012).

*Figure 4.1: Four paradigms in social science research*



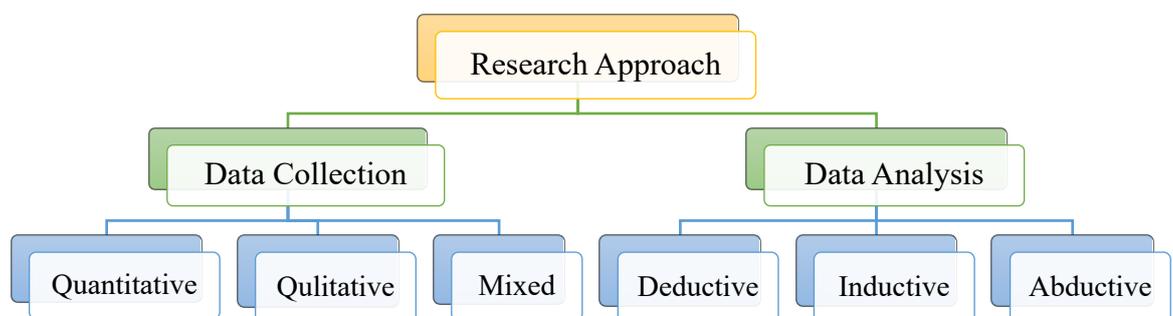
(Source: Burrell and Morgan, 1979)

Briefly, every discipline is a process under the guidance of certain paradigms to observe objects, collect and analyse data, test hypotheses, and develop knowledge. To clarify the philosophical position of research issues and combine with suitable research methods are necessary to all researchers (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In the current study, the research question is how is social media used to shape international students' lives and how might cultural context influence their online and offline social capitals through social media? Considering the consistency of the research purposes and a thorough review of the theoretical background, the interpretive paradigm is justified for this study, which is focusing on expound and understand a social phenomenon by human actions (Creswell, 2018).

### 4.3 Research approach

Sudeshna and Datt (2016) presented that research approach is a set of detailed methods been used for data collection, analysis and interpretation, according to the nature of the research question being addressed, it can be divided into the approach of data collection and approach of data analysis (reasoning). The approach of data collection includes quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research method (Onwuegbuzie and leech, 2005; Creswell and Clark, 2010); approach of data analysis contains deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning (Soiferman, 2010; Trochim, 2006; Kovacs and Spens, 2005).

Figure 4.2: Components of the research approach



(Source: adapted from Sudeshan and Datt, 2016; Creswell and Clark, 2010; Trochim, 2006)

The reasons for selecting qualitative approach are because of it is one of the methods widely be used in social science research for collecting and analysing

data (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative method refers to any type of research that is not obtained by statistical procedures or other quantitative methods, and the research questions are not designed with operational variables, but rather with complex subjects in situations. It may refer to studies of people's life experiences, behaviours, emotions and feelings, and may also include research on organisational functions, social movements, cultural phenomena and interactions among countries. In other words, qualitative research focuses on describing concrete life experience in a specific culture.

Furthermore, inductive reasoning is a research process from specific observations to a general conclusion. It draws a number of individual cases or sub-arguments and then sums up their common characteristics to a general conclusion. Inductive method is reasoning derived from the individual knowledge to general knowledge; from the known true premise leads to possible conclusions (Trochim, 2006). When using the inductive method for inference, its "conclusion" express something beyond the "premise" in the content, which is not necessarily logic inference from the "premise", so the "conclusion" cannot be guaranteed is true. In the case of scientific research, the greatest function of the inductive approach is to have creativity in the process of scientific discovery (Soiferman, 2010). On the other hand, inductive approach is widely used for analysing qualitative data in order to build a theory, which is focusing on gaining an understanding of a social phenomenon rather than testing hypothesis (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

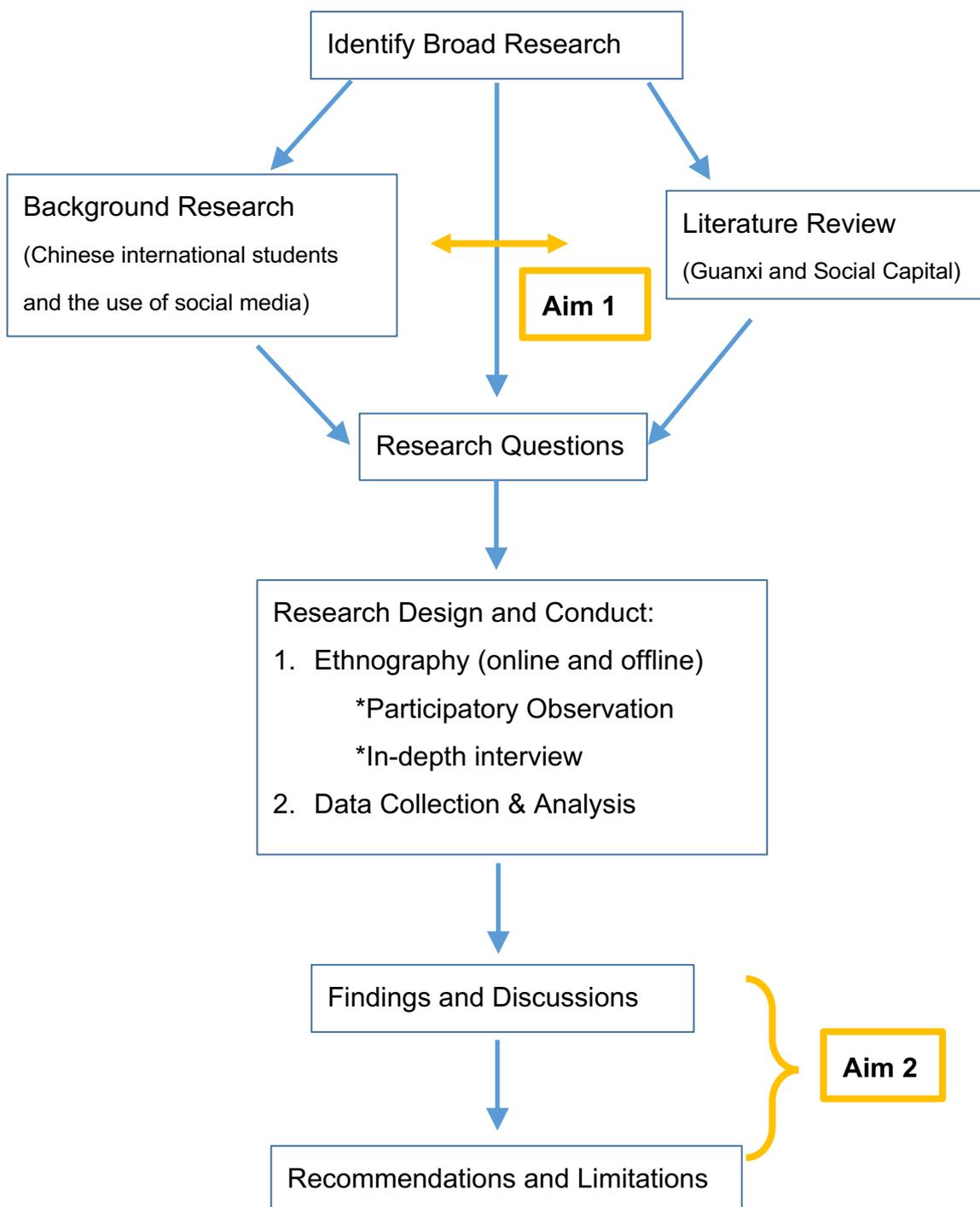
In summary, the philosophical paradigms have been discussed above has identified the currents study is interpretivism. According to this paradigm and nature of the research questions and research aims, qualitative approach and inductive reasoning are more suitable for a theory building and decoding the meanings of human behaviours through observations (Creswell, 2018). This study is pay attention to the inner point of view, feeling, life experience and social action of the Chinese international students lived at Plymouth. Therefore, qualitative method with inductive reasoning as the approach of data collection and data analysis are more suitable to produce interpretive data that describes what students said and feel, and observable their behaviours (Creswell, 2018).

#### **4.4 Research process**

Figure 4.3 is shown an overview of the research process of this study. Aim 1 is designed to produce an understanding of the motivations of Chinese international students in establishing social networks and discovering the meaning of guanxi and social capital for international students. This is to be achieved through the background research of the current situation of Chinese international students and their behaviours of using of social media, as well as literature reviews of guanxi and social capital in details. Subsequently, research questions are identified.

Aim 2 is intended to decode the characteristics of social capital within a cultural context through online and offline aspects. This is to be accomplished through an ethnography research by observing and analysing the performances of Chinese students' communities based on Plymouth University from participants' views. Then, the recommendations for universities in the UK for enhancing the level of international students' participation and the cross-cultural adoptions are provided.

Figure 4.3 Research process



(Source: the author's own data)

#### 4.5 Research Strategies

The research strategy is a plan generally used to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2018). The purpose of qualitative research is to gain a deeper

understanding of human behaviour and its causes. Therefore, it focuses on smaller and more intensive samples than quantitative studies to generate information or knowledge about a particular research case. Considering the need for this research, the author selects ethnography as research strategy for this study.

#### **4.5.1 Ethnographic research**

As a qualitative research method, ethnography originated in anthropology at the beginning of the 20th century (Pink, 2006). It is traditionally defined as the discovery and synthesis of the culture of an ethnic group. Ethnographic research requires the scholar to gain an understanding of the culture of the local people through his or her own personal experience (Fetterman, 2010). The quality of ethnography depends on the knowledge, competence, mind and conscience of the researcher who has to connect the local microcosm of research to the overall social and cultural landscape (Thomas, 1993).

A suitable ethnography requires three things: firstly, a naturalistic approach to the research process, in which the researcher actively participates in the group of subjects, observes what is happening in the natural context as a participant, and tries to avoid preconceptions and prejudices about the situation being studied; secondly, a holistic approach to micro issues, which requires the researcher to be immersed in a particular culture in order to obtain a holistic picture of a specific micro-issue; finally, the researcher needs to adopt multiple research strategies and modes, not limiting self to one or a few specific methods, but using a variety of methods flexibly according to the needs of the context, and even in the formation of the problem and its definition, which can be revised at any time during the research process (Fetterman, 2010).

The emergence of the Internet has promoted the development of social life networks, and the transformation of social forms means that the research methods of social sciences will also change (Underberg and Zorn, 2013). Firstly, the way of communication with the research object from face-to-face communication to non-face-to-face communication (to text, video, etc.); Secondly, the diversity of cyberspace research objects, resulting in unlimited

expansion of people's activities. Both time and space expand within their dimension limits, and themes can be implemented anywhere on the Internet according to their own time, rather than the current time that researchers in a particular geographic space can be observed by traditional methods (Hine, 2000; Sade-Beck, 2004; Wilson, 2006).

In the early 1990s, in order to cope with the challenges brought by the Internet to research methods, some scholars tried to use the Internet as a research field and tools, and proposed a virtual ethnography based on the revision and improvement of traditional ethnographic methods to study the virtual network culture (Sade-Beck, 2004). Virtual ethnography refers to the study of ethnographic research and the use of networks in a virtual environment. This is an interactive tool for gathering information, exploring and interpreting the Internet and related sociocultural phenomena (Hine, 2000).

Virtual ethnography as an ethnographic method, researchers need to experience to make directly emotional connections with other online users in the field (Hine, 2000). It is associated with the analysis of second-hand data such as text analysis, content analysis and image analysis. Researchers can only reach out to virtual fields when they participate in observations and have social interactions with other Internet users. And only truly understand and feel the culture of virtual communities by understanding the social connections of people in the virtual community in the process of participating in the interaction and understanding the individual meaning of the network users (Pink, 2006). On the other hand, if the researcher doesn't go deep into the offline world of web users, then the information they get online is just a one-sided and limited (Sade-Beck, 2004). Thus, the author not only limited to online observation and interaction when conducting research, but also return to individuals' real life for face-to-face in-depth interviews or offline life field work.

The author believes that ethnographic research can provide new perspectives on complex social issues and reveal cultural differences in the social and perceptual aspects of Chinese students in through participant observation and interviews. And by the using of online and offline two-way contact, can help the author to

more deeply explore the motivation and significance of Chinese students' social network construction.

#### **4.5.2 Ethical consideration**

In the research process, ethical issues cannot be ignored (Taylor and Bogdan, 1975). Researchers need to protect the rights and safety of research participants (Fistein and Quilligan, 2012). Nowadays, many academic institutions have formulated principles that determine the behaviour and ethics of researchers. Researchers, students, and staff must complete applications before they conduct research (Creswell, 2019). Before starting the data collection, the author had submitted an application for research ethics approval to the research ethics committee of Plymouth University, and received the ethics approval for this study.

According to the university's guidance requirements, the author needs to ensure that all participants in the research have the right to fully and clearly understand the content of the invitation to participate. It is necessary to inform each participant of the purpose of the study at the beginning of the contact. And to show participants the openness and honesty of the research through the informed consent process. All participants in the study are voluntary and have the right to withdraw at any stage of the interview process. The author is obliged to inform each participant that they have the right to interrupt the interview at any time. Considering by this research contacts participants through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, the author needs to give the interviewees enough time to complete the participation without any pressures, especially the author need to avoid mentioning sensitive issues, if there is a need of participants who seeking professional consultation during the observation or interview, the author will recommend the relevant departments of the university for them, and do her best to provide participants with protection and away from harm.

In addition, the author should introduce and update the research progress to each participant, so that all interviewees can understand the progress of the research. For confidentiality and anonymity, the author needs to guarantee the privacy of all participations in the beginning of contact, and to ensure that all participants private information will not be disclosed on any platform without their permission.

## **4.6 Techniques and procedures**

The previous section demonstrates strategies of qualitative research. Combining the nature of this research, the author conducts a participatory observation in Plymouth Chinese student communities to explore the online and offline activities of participators. Considered about the average time of Chinese student study abroad was 21.47 months (UKCISA, 2021). Thus, this investigation started from September 2015 to August 2017. During this period, in-depth interviews have been done during each year to revise current research results.

### **4.6.1 Data collection**

#### Method 1: participatory observation

The methods are used in the ethnographic fields to collect data, mainly based on research topics, methods of observation and interviews (Douglas, 1976). Observations in social studies refer to the systematic and direct understanding of what is happening, developing, and changing with a clear purpose, with their own senses and aids, and an analysis based on observed facts (Price, 2005). Regular interpretation is mainly divided into non-participatory observation, semi-participatory observation and full participation observation (Glaser, Strauss and Strutzel, 1968).

Non-participatory observation mainly refers to the observation that the observer does not participate in the investigation, and is completely concealed. The advantage is that it does not disturb the daily life of people and things at all, and can observe the most real and natural phenomenon (Douglas, 1976; Glaser, Strauss and Strutzel, 1968).

Semi-participatory observations give researchers two alternative roles, one is that the open researcher's identity participates in the observed person, and the other is the disguised identity for participation in observation (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). These two features can be observed relatively deeply, but often disturb the normal life of the respondent, making them feel that they are being observed, and thus may change the way they behave (Glaser, Strauss and Strutzel, 1968).

The way to really not disturb the observed and in-depth observation is to fully participate in the observation. Throughout the observation process, members of the observed group believed that the researcher was an ordinary member of the group and did not know that he was an observer. This approach is often used to collect social phenomena or groups that are completely incomprehensible under normal circumstances (Rice, 2005).

The author herself is one of the Chinese international students, and also participate in various activities held by the Plymouth Chinese Students and Scholars Association (Plymouth CSSA) every year. For example: New Student Welcome Party, Plymouth Voice, Chinese Spring New Year, etc. For these offline activities, the author adopts semi-participatory observation, which means that the author is not only an observer, but also an active member in offline events. Furthermore, the author cooperated with Plymouth CSSA to produce and analyse the feedback of offline activities throughout the year to help them further improve the content and methods of activities for the next year.

#### Method 2: in-depth interviews

Another research method used by the author is in-depth interviews. Qualitative interviews are a special purpose talks, researchers and interviewees, mainly focusing on the personal feelings, life and experience of the respondents, through the dialogue of each other, the researchers can obtain, understand and explain the personal recognition of the social reality of the respondents (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays, 2008). Interviews come in a variety of ways depending on the purpose, nature, or object of the study (Wilson, 2012). According to the way of communication between the interviewer and the interviewee, it can be divided into direct access and indirect access. The former is a face-to-face conversation between the two parties, and the latter is a conversation conducted by telephone (Knox and Burkard, 2009). According to the number of people interviewed, the interview can be divided into individual interviews and group interviews (Kazmer and Xie, 2008). Currently widely used in social studies is the classification according to the degree of control over access, which is divided into structured interviews, unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews (Glaser, Strauss and Strutzel, 1968).

Structured interviews, also known as standardised Interviews, are highly controlled to the interview process. Access objects for such interviews must be selected in accordance with uniform standards and methods, and probability sampling is generally used. The biggest advantage of structured interviews are that the interview results are easy to quantify and can be used for statistical analysis. It is a kind of statistical survey and can control the reliability of the survey results. Secondly, the recovery rate and questionnaire response rate are higher than others, which can reach more than 80%. However, structured interviews are expensive and time-consuming, often limiting the size of the survey. It is not very effective for sensitive questions, or personal privacy issues (Given, 2008).

Unstructured interview, investigators with advanced skills thoroughly interviewed respondents to reveal potential motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings about a problem (Wilson, 2012). Unstructured interviews are useful for understanding complex abstractions. These questions are often unclear, and only through free dialogue and in-depth discussion of topics of interest can the researchers summarise the information they need to know (Knox and Burkard, 2009). However, unstructured interviews also have shortcomings, due to the unstructured nature of the survey, the results are easily influenced by the investigators themselves. The quality of the results is often difficult to analyse and explain (Warren, 2002). In addition, the number of this kind of in-depth interviews in research projects is very limited due to the time and cost of the project (Wilson, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews are a collection of data between structured and unstructured interviews. Before the interviews, researchers must design an outline of the interviews based on the research questions and objectives as an interview guideline. However, during the entire interview process, the interviewers do not have to conduct interviews according to the order of the interview outline. Usually, the interviewer can also make flexible adjustments to the interview questions according to the actual situation. It assumes that although the interview questions are the same because the respondents have different perceptions of the problem itself and personal life experience, the response of

the respondents will often vary greatly (Glaser, Strauss and Strutzel, 1968). Compared with the other two interviews, semi-structured interviews have three advantages: firstly, it is often possible to adopt a more open attitude towards specific issues for data collection; secondly, respondents tend to adopt a more open attitude to reflect on their own experiences when they are less restricted in the interview process; lastly, semi-structured interviews is normally used to find a deeper understanding of personal life experiences (Given, 2008).

In short, in-depth interviews is mainly focusing respondents' feelings and experience through the dialogue (Wilson, 2012). Based on the above analysis and summary, the author chose a semi-structured interview method in her own in-depth interviews, aiming to give interviewees a more open attitude to express their true feelings and thoughts through specific guidelines. Additionally, in contact with the interviewees, the author continued to pay attention to Plymouth CSSA's online and offline activities. Not only observing the interviewees' behaviours of using social media WeChat, but also paid attention to the operation of Plymouth CSSA's media platforms.

### Sampling issue

The size of the sample is an important part that must be considered when designing a study (Kish, 1965 and Cochran, 1977). However, sampling is a multi-step process. Firstly, the target population based on the characteristics of the person or object to should be defined. Secondly, selecting an accessible part of the overall goal, which is selecting the sampling frame. In order to select a suitable sample, an accurate sampling frame must be defined (Sheehan, 2002). There are generally two types of sampling methods, probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Bhattacharjee, 2021). Probability sampling means that each unit in the population has a chance of being selected (non-zero probability) when sampling, and this chance can be accurately determined including selecting a random sample from the population list. Probability sampling includes random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling, cluster sampling, intercept sampling and multistage sampling (Lohr, 2010). However, when an accurate sampling frame is not easily available, non-probability sampling is the most appropriate method (Bhattacharjee, 2021). This includes convenience sampling,

self-selection sampling, judgment sampling and snowball sampling (Sheehan, 2002). Researchers need to determine the availability of sampling frames and research tools related to their own research (Lohr, 2010).

In this study, Chinese international students are a special group, and it is easy to find suitable interviewees in the activities organised by the group. Therefore, the author chooses cluster sampling, target on the members who would like to participate in social event hold by Plymouth CSSA. In addition, participants can also introduce other people they know who study and live in Plymouth. More individuals who are helpful to this research through the knowledge and network of the initial participators can be quicker contacted by snowball sampling (Small, 2009).

In addition, considering the limited budget and time cost, both cluster sampling and snowball sampling can save the author's time cost. It is more helpful to the later investigation and development of this research.

#### **4.6.2 Data analysis**

##### Research operations

Ethnographic research was used to investigate the performance of Plymouth CSSA's offline social events and actives started from September 2015 to August 2017. As a member of Plymouth CSSA, the author did the semi-participatory observation during this research period. In 2015, including the author, there were 10 students, 3 men and 7 women, one doctoral student, two graduate students, three junior students, and four sophomores. No freshmen join the current Chinese student union. Plymouth CSSA held at least five major social events in each year, which included New Student Welcome Party, Basketball Competition, Plymouth Voice, Scotland tours for the New Year and Chinese Spring New Year (Plymouth CSSA, 2017). There was a total of 42 students are be interviewed through cluster sampling and snowball sampling based on those five social events held by Plymouth CSSA, including 26 undergraduates, 14 master students, and 2 doctoral students. In the choice of interviewees, the gender ratio is balanced.

The semi-structured in-depth interviews for offline activities mainly focus on four aspects. The first part is the basic information of the respondents, including age, major, and the level of understanding of the UK and the city of Plymouth before they coming. The second part is about the basic social network of international students. Use kind of name-generator to generate important people in respondent's network, and asking about the basic situation of these people. Van der Poel (2013) pointed that the current name-generator can be divided into four types: generator based on interactions, generators based on the importance of certain links; generators based on emotion and generators based on exchange. Because this paper adopts qualitative research methods, it aims to explore how social media is used to shape international students' lives and how cultural context may influence their online and offline social capitals. Therefore, the generators based on emotion is the main method used in interviews. The author asked the respondents to point out the people who are closely related to them from their own point of view and put them at different importance levels. At the same time, because this method is more subjective, the interview was also be supplemented by the exchange method, the third part revolves how social capital is formed by asking the respondents how to meet people, and close to each other, what kind of thing they do together, such as entertaining or talk emotional issues. This allowed the author to understand the use of social media from a more objective perspective. The final part of the interview revolves around cultural differences, asking respondents about some of the different experiences and feelings in the process of using social media, and giving a further perspective on social capital from a cultural perspective.

On the other hand, Plymouth CSSA WeChat official account is an equivalent of a Facebook page, which can gather followers, send push notifications and redirect users to another website. It also included for a function of "chat", but it is not convenient for an account holder to use it as an instant message. From September 2015 to August 2016, there were 70 articles be pushed (Plymouth CSSA WeChat, 2017), and only 5 tweets on its Sina Weibo account Plymouth Sina Weibo, 2017). The function of Plymouth CSSA social media accounts in this year was mainly focused on promoting its offline social events and actives. In the next academic year, "*Plymouth New Student WeChat group 2016*" has been

launched out, the online participation rate has sharply increased. Total of 176 users joins this online group within a week. By the end of the survey, this online group have 327 users. Among them, there were 7 regular active contributors in this group, most of the users were lurkers and viewers. 230 messages on average were created per day from January 2016 to August 2017. And there were only 40 articles was pushed by its official account on that year, and no actives on its Sina Weibo account (Plymouth CSSA WeChat, 2017; Plymouth Sina Weibo, 2017).

Therefore, for the online semi-structured in-depth interviews on the WeChat group, the author pay attention to the participants' own social network building and participation in social activities through the use of social media. Each interview lasts approximately 40 to 60 minutes. In the interview, the author recorded the entire respondent and transcribed it in time after the interview. The recording is necessary because it enables respondents to focus on interviews and promote transcription. Semi-structured interviews should be prepared in advance and asked the interviewer to understand the purpose of the study. In the interview process, in order to prevent respondents deviating from the interview theme, the interviewer should guide the interview direction (Knox and Burkard, 2009).

Before the interview, the author developed the following four interview questions based on this research topic and literature reviews:

1. What kind of social media you regular used?
2. How do you think about Plymouth CSSA? (online and offline)?
3. Have you joined any social group (online or offline)?
4. How much do you know about Plymouth?

In the interview process, in order to successfully introduce this topic, the author showed her WeChat to the interviewee at the beginning and told them about the experience of using WeChat. After that, the author will follow the pre-set interview question "What kind of social media you regular used?" starts an interview. In this way, the author can easily explore the subject of the interview. In addition, the author will increase the question based on the respondent's feedback. Present issues may change during the interview. For example, when interviewing AL, he

noticed that he was talking about the role of “group chat” in people's interactions and guanxi relationships. He said that “group chat” provided an opportunity to contact ordinary friends and even strangers, but he did not mention a good friend. So, in addition to the question: “What type of 'group chat' do you have?”, the author added an interview question at the appropriate time: “Do you think that 'group chat' has a different impact on maintaining the guanxi between people? friends and close friends?”

Out of the initial 42 respondents, the author selected 10 participants who were both active in offline social activities and keen in WeChat group online discussions for online semi-structured in-depth interviews. Five male and five female, all of them lived in Plymouth between the ages of 20 and 30. All interviews were conducted through WeChat.

To sum up, the author studies in the UK and is a member of the group. The identity of the compatriots makes the author have convenient conditions close to the group, and it is more convenient to conduct participatory observation and in-depth interview (Douglas, 1976). In the process of investigation, the author always pays attention to maintaining the position of “value neutrality” (Horowitz, 1962), and strives to author self as an objective outsider to investigate Chinese students. And do not analyse the interactions of international students with a preconceived mindset, but summarises them according to their narrative. This can guarantee the objectivity of the research conclusions.

### Data analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) pointed that “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail”. Thematic analysis is often used in qualitative analysis. Commonly in the initial analysis of some textual content. For example, the content of interviews, online community posts, etc. This content is summarised and organised in order to distil some themes (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). Combining the scenarios of the use of thematic analysis, the author analyses the collected data through six stages:

Stage 1 Familiarising with data

Read all the collected data once, and transcribe the spoken language into words in the process of reading and sorting. This process is very time-consuming, but it is also a very important process to familiarize the content (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014).

#### Stage 2 Generating initial codes

Preliminary coding of the data. Coding depends to a certain extent on whether the subject is more “data-driven” or “theory-driven” (Patton, 1990). In the former, the subject matter will depend on the data, but in the latter, the data is handled in a specific problem (Sandelowski, 1995). Encode as many potential themes/patterns as possible during the encoding process, and retain some context-sensitive data for code excerpts (Thorne, 2000). Finally, a single data excerpt is coded according to suitable multiple “topics”, but it may appear that related excerpts are not coded or coded multiple times (King, 2004).

#### Stage 3 Searching for themes

At this stage, the code is sorted and summarized. Including sorting the different codes into potential themes, sorting out the themes extracted from all relevant coding data. Essentially, this stage begins to analyse the code and consider how to combine the code to form an overall theme (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). Some codes may form the main theme, some become sub-themes, and some may not belong anywhere. For this purpose, the author created a theme called “unknown” to store this kind of codes.

At the end of this stage is the author receives several candidate topics and subtopics, as well as all the data summaries of the codes related to them. At this time, the author began to explore the importance of each topic. However, all codes will still be kept, so that the author can review all the excerpts in detail later to check if there are some that need to be merged or separated.

#### Stage 4 Reviewing themes

At this stage, through detailed analysis, the author found that some candidate themes are not real themes, because of they do not have enough data to support them, and the data is too diverse, while some other themes still need to be

merged with each other. The double standards for judging categories are internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Creswell, 2018). The data within the topics should be meaningfully combined, and there should be clear and identifiable differences between the topics (Green,2000).

In addition, this stage involves two levels of subject review and improvement (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). The first level reviews the coded data extracts. This means that the author needs to read all the collated excerpts of each topic and consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern and whether the topic needs to be redesigned. After the review, the author needs to consider the validity between individual topics and the data set, and whether the candidate topic maps accurately reflect the obvious meaning of the entire data set.

#### Stage 5 defining and naming themes

At this stage, the author can define and further refine analysis theme and the data in it. Reorganising the data excerpts for each topic and organising them into a coherent, internally consistent narrative (Patton, 1990). For each individual topic, it is important to consider how it relates to the author's research question to ensure that there is not too much overlap between the topics. At the end of this stage, the author can clearly define a concise theme.

#### Stage 6 producing the report

Through the above five stages, the author finally obtained three clear themes related to the research question through coding from the data obtained from participatory observation and in-depth interviews: the way of establishing of social networks by Chinese international students, the maintenance and development of existing guanxi, and the mobilisation of social capital in the network.

#### Reliability and validity

Interpretative research and positivism research are based on different ontological and epistemological assumptions (Creswell, 2018; Bhattacharjee, 2012). Therefore, the reliability and internal validity that positivists believe are not applicable to interpretive research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) presented that dependability, credibility, confirmability and transferability are alternative

indicators for judging the rigor of interpretive research. Similar to the reliability in empirical research, if other researchers can reach the same or similar conclusions based on the same or similar phenomena, then this research is reliable. When the readers or interviewees believe that the researcher's conclusion is credible and agrees with the research conclusion, the interpretive research can be regarded as credible and verifiable. Finally, if the research results can be generalised to other scenarios, it means that the research is transferable (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

In this study, multiple data collection methods ensured the high validity of the study. Online and offline two-way participatory observation and in-depth interviews can provide a more comprehensive collect and explain of data. Keep up to date with the interviewees on the progress of the research, the author can get participants' feedback at the same time to strengthen the sense of identity. In addition, the way of studying social capital in the guanxi context through social media can be used for reference by other cultural backgrounds. In summary, the author believes that this study has qualified reliability and validity.

#### **4.7 Chapter summary**

This chapter introduces the methodology. Firstly, it confirms the research as interpretive research from the philosophical perspective according to the research objectives and research aims, and then chooses ethnography as the research approach. In the research development stage, data collection adopted by participatory observations and in-depth interviews from offline activities held by Plymouth CSSA and online activities through WeChat platform. And finally through thematic analysis to get the themes relevant to the research. At the same time, the author also considered the validity and reliability of the article and explained it at the end.

## **Chapter 5: Findings and discussions**

### **5.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter presents the findings and discussions based on the qualitative data collected through participatory observation and in-depth interview through WeChat platform reflect on online and offline performance by Chinese international students. The establishment of social network for international students, development and maintenance of guanxi in the network, and mobilisation of social capital in the network are three main themes be founded through thematic data analysis. At the discussion section, the willingness and restriction, adaption of communication strategies to the development and maintenance of guanxi in the network, and the evasion of renqing dilemma to increase the mobilisation of social capital in the network are be presented.

### **5.2 The establishment of social network for international students**

Most of the relationships in the social network of international students are highly spontaneous. Therefore, the research ideas for informal relations can help to understand the network construction abandonment of international students. From the process point of view, the initial establishment of the relationship in the social network of international students has greater contingency and extensiveness. Therefore, in the first stage, the author follows the direct and indirect forms are used to summarise the ways in which international students are established. In the second stage, the way students maintain relationships can be summarised as liaison behaviour, social behaviour, and human exchange behaviour. The various relationships in the network are built through specific individual behaviours. The action strategies and behaviours determine the strength of the relationship. The network contains resources (social capital) to provide the necessary social support for individuals. In the third stage, international students take resources from the social network they construct and get help. Individual behaviour choices determine whether resources can be utilized and the extent to which resources are utilised.

#### **5.2.1 Direct mode**

The most direct way to establish a network of international students includes encounters in various scenarios and direct contact in joint activities in specific venues. Such as encounter. In the context of local culture, individuals rarely connect with others through encounters. In contemporary societies characterized by anonymity, indifference becomes quite common and privacy is considered extremely important. In a fast-paced life, individuals have a sense of distance from strangers and do not want to be close to strangers. However, in interviews with international students, encounters may even become an important way to reach local people.

In a cross-cultural environment, language barriers and cultural differences have objectively brought about barriers to communication, but on the other hand, the cultural identity of international students can also promote the establishment of their specific network relationships. Cultural differences can become attractive and become a link between cross-cultural relations. British people interested in China will take the initiative to contact with international students. In this case, the relationship is established, and the introverted and implicit Chinese students are usually passive, and the opportunities for contact between the two sides also have strong contingency. When international students first arrive in the UK, they often feel at a loss when they are faced with strangers and strangers. The emergence of compatriots at this time will arouse their willingness to take the initiative. Both sides of the contact often share common experiences and desires, which can further break the gap caused by the difference in status and status, thus further developing the relationship.

In this article, international students at Plymouth University mainly meet other people in several places to build a social network. Schools, classrooms, and libraries are the main activities for international students. In the learning activities, international students first come into contact with other students and teachers, and then choose some of them to develop closer relationships. For some undergraduates, due to the large number of courses in the nature of lectures, there is very little opportunity to have separate access to the same school. In addition, most of the British are very independent and usually do not have a great interest in foreign students. Therefore, even if the number of students is large, it is still difficult for Chinese students to establish better personal relationships.

*"Although there are classmates, everyone goes away after class, and they don't talk. They do their own things. No one cares about others. It is impossible to know any friends." (Interviewee HYP)*

In the UK, recreational activities for young people usually take place in public places such as bars or clubs. Many international students also want to experience the life of young British people in this way and meet some friends.

*"We met the Party, and then we chatted and found that it was quite interesting. After he had a party, he called me. I don't like the party very much, but I have nothing to do, boring." (Interviewee SXJ)*

In addition, sports is also an important way for boys to build networks. ZZD, LX, ST, etc. all mentioned that playing basketball is an important way to make friends.

### **5.2.2 Indirect mode**

Indirect ways for international students at Plymouth to establish social networks include through third-party stakeholders, through institutional organizations, and

through the Internet. The way in which third-party stakeholders act as intermediaries to connect with others is common in any society. For Chinese students at Plymouth University, there are also many people who have expanded the membership of their networks in this way.

When JXW first arrived in Plymouth, he hoped to make friends with the British, find a language partner, and practice oral English. Her undergraduate classmates happened to have exchanged here. So, she asked the classmates to help introduce the language partners, and actively asked others to introduce the British friends. Most of the foreign students are practicing oral English and forming a language relationship with the British. In another case, international students use strong relationships in existing networks to develop other contacts. Due to frequent joint activities, international students can meet other people in these people's social networks and selectively develop further relationships with some members:

*"The Englishman who has a good relationship with me also has Katrina, a sociology, and an undergraduate degree. I have played more with her. Then I met Vivi through this girl. They met before the university, basically together, I can't wait. Sleeping all together. There is a game called geo-treasure hunt, we both like to play this, half-excursion semi-treasure like this. So usually we play together." (Interviewee HY)*

*Third-party organizations also provide an important platform for the establishment of social networks for international students. Plymouth University emphasizes the international nature of the school and provides some social conveniences for international students. The role of the Academic Outer Administration as a separate department of the school and the student organization "International Student Center" is critical.*

XYX (Informal Interviewer) also mentioned that the event organizer, a sociology major Italian student, was met through the weekly "Coffee Café"; WJH met a person through the "Language Night" held by the International Student Center. Retired grandfather; XX and YYYY know many doctoral students from all over the world through doctoral outings. For international students, school-organized activities tend to be closer to their living needs than private or social entertainment. The participation of the event is higher. At the same time, fixed time and place also increases the frequency of interaction. Therefore, international students rely on institutions to have more opportunities to meet and develop relationships. It can be seen that this kind of structural mechanism that facilitates the exchange of international students also plays an important role in the establishment of the social network of Chinese students.

With the advent of the information age, various means of communication have become increasingly developed. The use of the Internet to build a platform for realistic communication is also a way for international students to establish a realistic social network. Network communication mainly refers to the interpersonal interaction between people and computers through the computer and the Internet, that is, the interaction of the "one person, one person" model. Different from the actual interaction, the network communication has the characteristics of anonymity, transcendence of time and space, and succession. A channel for foreign students to make friends. On the social networking platforms such as Weibo, WeChat and even looking for a website, international students choose appropriate interaction objects to establish relationships according to their own needs, reflecting a certain purpose.

The Chinese student WeChat group at Plymouth University also plays an important role in establishing the connection between fellow students. The WeChat group was founded by CQ, the president of the Chinese Students' Union. The members of the group are mostly Chinese students studying in Plymouth, and some overseas Chinese and graduate students returning to China. The current number of people in the group has exceeded 300, and the content of the chat is mostly information consultation, help or transfer of goods. Due to the strong interaction needs in unfamiliar environments, online interactions can easily be extended to offline real interactions. The establishment of online Chinese organizations has expanded the way in which compatriots have established contacts, and has played an important role in the expansion of the overall network of international students.

*"That friend is the next home of my renting. I was just about to check out. I asked the (WeChat) group if anyone wanted to rent. In fact, the house does not have to have a home, but the landlord said it would be better to find it. The man looked for the landlord, and then I saw that I was Chinese and I was looking for it in the group." (Interviewee HR)*

Online communication promotes offline communication and contributes to the formation of new friendships in the real world. However, the premise of online friendship establishment is usually that they have something in common with people in real life. Lampe et al. pointed out in the article that college students use social media such as Facebook mainly to understand real-life friends, but less to seek new friends. However, in the author's research, it is not uncommon for international students to find new contacts through the Internet. This is mainly due to two reasons: On the one hand, international students are in a strange social environment, and their demand for belonging is more intense. Seeking a sense of belonging is an important reason why college students use social software. For Chinese students who are new to the UK, the break of the domestic social network and the strangeness brought about by the new environment will

make them feel confused and uncomfortable. They have stronger affiliation needs than in China. It is difficult to obtain a sense of belonging with the British, and the number of compatriots that can be made in reality is quite limited. International students will therefore resort to online methods and look forward to expanding their online relationships to the real world of the offline, thus more fully meeting their needs for “attribution”. On the other hand, in addition to the demand for “attribution”, the real social network of international students is not developed, which also makes it help to establish a new relationship with the Internet. Whether for instrumental purposes or based on common interests, international students use the Internet as an intermediary to expand the scale of real social networks. The subjects of communication and the students have something in common (for example, the same school), online communication is easier to expand to the real link under the line. This has also become another channel for international students to establish new social networks.

With the invention and expansion of new media and communication technologies, time and space have no longer become obstacles to communication. The Internet overcomes the limitations of time and space in real-life interactions, enabling international students to reach more people. For different purposes, individuals expand their own social circle through virtual platforms to enrich the social network in reality.

### **5.3 Development and maintenance of guanxi in the network**

The guanxi in the network has strengths and weaknesses. In the special context of China, some scholars have pointed out that China's "guanxi culture" lies in its ability to promote the transformation of weak relations into strong relations. In the first phase of network construction, international students establish contacts with others in unfamiliar society through various means, including the development of new weak relationships through strong relationships. In the process, the number of network members increased and the scale expanded. However, because the newly established relationship ties in the unfamiliar environment are usually weak, if the individual does not adopt the strategy to maintain it, the contact will be interrupted and the network scale will be reduced. Therefore, the newly established guanxi between foreign students needs a process of development and maintenance.

#### **5.3.1 Deepening and development of guanxi**

Due to the “distance rules”, the British are used to showing a reserved and cautious attitude in their interactions and less active contact with strangers. In dealing with acquaintances, the British are relatively friendly and easy-going, but they also pay attention to the maintenance of distance, not easily revealing emotions. Only when they have a real affection for each other, will they make private invitations and in-depth contacts. Many interviewees also stressed that it is difficult for British people to get in touch, just to do their own thing and pay little

attention to them. Therefore, if you want to develop a closer relationship with the British, the opportunity of communication is very important, and the structural factors in society often become the preconditions for the opportunity to happen. The dual relationship between international students and contacts, special events in the process of communication, and common interests or personalities can be an opportunity for further development of relationships.

#### (1) Double identities

The so-called double identities means that the two parties have two kinds of identity relationships, such as a classmate relationship and a neighbour relationship. The dual nature of this relationship objectively increases the frequency of interaction between the two parties and brings more common topics. The two sides are easy to have a sense of intimacy with each other, and then develop from an acquaintance relationship to a deeper friend relationship.

*"We have a room called Jena in our building. We are all in Japanese, so there will be a lot of conversations. We first met in the building, then when I was familiar with the class, I went to say hello and asked her. Is it living in our building, and it is true! Then we get to know it. We will also vomit what we are going to class in class." (Interviewee HY)*

The degree of time commitment is an important dimension to measure the relationship between strong and weak. The dual nature of the relationship objectively provides more time for the two parties to talk and work together, which brings them closer to each other and is more conducive to the further development of the relationship.

#### (2) Special events

Social networking not only enables strangers to get to know each other, but also provides opportunities for further development of relationships. Some occasional social opportunities can make the relationship intimate, such as an unforgettable banquet or an open-hearted conversation.

SXJ mentioned that when the neighbors invited the birthday party for the first time, because of drinking alcohol, they broke the embarrassing situation, and the manners were very open, and the relationship with the other party was close.

*"The first time I drank too much, I said everything, and then the relationship was near, and I became a drinker. He always told me to go drinking and chatting." (Interviewee SXJ)*

Many Chinese students have mentioned that foreign friends who are close to each other basically do not care whether the way they handle the problem is in

accordance with the standards of the British, and they are not puzzled and embarrassed about the way they behave differently.

### (3) Common interest

People have the willingness to interact with people close to themselves. In the UK, because the overall social background is vastly different from the environment familiar to Chinese students, international students will cherish the commonalities with strangers. Therefore, common interests have also become an important opportunity for relationship enhancement.

*"This person will ask me two Chinese sentences from time to time, because his brother's mother is Chinese and half-brother. So he has always been interested in China." (Interviewee ZZD)*

Personality is equally important, and this is an important prerequisite for relationship development in any cultural context. Many international students emphasize that whether they are British or Chinese, the key to being a friend is the personality of the other person, not their nationality.

### **5.3.2 Guanxi maintenance**

Whether it is a strong relationship or a weak relationship, international students need to learn further communication strategies to maintain them. For weaker relationships, occasional contact can play a role in maintaining relationships. For strong relationships, international students need to invest more time and energy, using social strategies and human exchange strategies to maintain the strength of the relationship, and even make it further strengthen.

#### (1) Contact behaviour

The role of the Internet is not only to broaden the channels for network establishment, but also to help international students stay in touch with their former friends. In the virtual space, students are still engaged in real-life communication and maintain relationships with real-life friends through online communication. Many students have mentioned that they maintain a certain frequency of mutual greetings through social software and contacts.

*"You will like a comment on Facebook. If you are chatting, use message. Let's talk about it every week. In fact, there is nothing wrong with it. It is some life, and occasionally ask questions. So it will not be too awkward to play with him." (Interviewee ZJF)*

Contact behaviours exist in two situations: one occurs in a weak relationship. The contact strategy keeps the weak relationship intact and is not interrupted by too little contact, so it can still function when necessary. Liaison provides the necessary preparation conditions for the development of weak relationships to

strong relationships. It is precisely because of the relationship between them that social behaviour and human exchange behaviour can be smoothly carried out. On the other hand, liaison behaviour also occurs in the process of weakening the strong relationship. Due to objective factors, the two parties cannot communicate as frequently as before, and can only rely on liaison behaviour to maintain the relationship. In either case, liaison behaviour is the easiest and most widely used relationship maintenance strategy. It is the basis for further social behaviour and human exchange behaviour, and is also a necessary preparation process for resource intake.

## 2) Social behaviour

Here, "social behaviour" refers to continuous, frequent interactions in social situations, including participation in spontaneously organized entertainment such as drinking, eating, playing basketball, and participating in various activities organized by schools or society.

Many international students also believe that common social activities can maintain each other's feelings, so they will also try to organise such activities through their own efforts. However, as the scale of social networks expands, the interpersonal relationships in the network become increasingly complex. Excessive social activities take up a lot of time and effort. Under this circumstance, international students make judgments based on the objects of interaction, rationally discriminate social activities, and reduce the social behaviour to achieve the purpose of simplifying interpersonal relationships.

*YXJ is not suitable for the entertainment of the British. "I am not willing to go to the party. First of all, I can't drink alcohol. I just can't get into trouble with them, and I think it's too noisy. They are too energetic to make two or three points, but I can't. I am going to bed at 12 o'clock. Even so, if the relationship is very good and a friend invites, she will go to participate. "This girl goes to the party. She sings very well. She is the lead singer in a band. She will call me." Although I don't like it, but since she is called, I sometimes go. (Interviewee YXJ)*

The social network of international students can be established through social activities, and the relationships in the network can be maintained through social behaviours and deepen the relationship. Through social behaviour, international students participate in the collective activities of local students. Collective activities are seen as important structural factors that influence the establishment and development of personal relationships. By participating in joint activities, members adhere to a common code of conduct in their activities and form a gradual consensus of values. The expectation and pressure of other members of the group on friendship will also strengthen the relationship between members. In the process of social behaviour, international students constantly adjust their own standards of behaviour and accept the values shared in the activities. The

acceptance of the members of the host country has been continuously improved, the relationship between the network of international students has been maintained, and they have also had cross-cultural behavioural capabilities.

### (3) Human exchange behaviour

According to Huang's classification in 2004, Chinese people have three basic types of interpersonal relationships: emotional relationships, instrumental relationships, and mixed relationships. Among them, emotional relationships are long-term and stable social relationships, such as family relationships and close relationships. Because international students spend relatively little time in the UK, their emotional relationships in the local social network are only a small part. The types of relationships in the new network of international students are mostly instrumental and mixed. Among them, the instrumental relationship is short-lived and aims to achieve certain material interests. A mixed relationship is the category of interpersonal relationships that individuals are most likely to influence others with "personality" and "face". Its characteristics are in the continuity of time, and it needs to be maintained through the exchange of people between people. Human feelings are social norms in how people should get along in Chinese society. In normal times, individuals use gifts and other means to maintain good interpersonal relationships with other people in the relationship network; when someone in the network faces a problem, others should show sympathy, understanding and best efforts to help. Even in the UK environment, the specific behaviour of international students will be affected by this mode of Chinese communication, and the exchange of people is still the action strategy that they often take to maintain foreign relations. This serves as both a reward for the help of the other party and an investment in the return of potential resources to the other party. The human exchange behaviour discussed here mainly includes gifts and care (Huang, 2004).

### **5.4 Mobilisation of social capital in the network**

Resource mobilisation is an important part of the dynamic process of social networks. It involves the use of an individual's social network and is a process of seeking resources and receiving support. Lin (2005) believes that resources refer to valuable goods that exist in society. The possession of these resources can maintain and promote personal interests that are beneficial to the survival and development of the owner. He divides resources into personal resources and social resources: personal resources are the resources owned by individuals, including the ownership of material and symbolic goods; social resources are the resources that individuals obtain through social connections. This view does not recognize the status structure of resources that can only be used through possession. Resources can be possessed not only by individuals, but also embedded in social networks and can be ingested through network relationships. People seeking help from others, in fact, are mobilizing resources through his social network.

From the perspective of social support, the network is seen as an interactive field where individuals in the field implement and receive help and protection. Social networks are the structure of the interactive process, and social support is its function. The network provides 1% of social support. For international students, the purpose of establishing a social network in the UK is not to acquire status and wealth as a symbolic resource, but to obtain the necessary help in daily study and life, and to better adapt to unfamiliar society and culture.

The social network of international students is the source of their supporting resources. When the size of the social network is large, that is, the number of relationships included in the network is large, the international students usually make behaviours to help others to obtain such resources. Even if the number of relationships available in the network is small, there are various inevitable difficulties in an unfamiliar environment, and international students must adopt strategies to obtain the necessary supporting resources. The specific ways in which others can help are inextricably linked to the strategies for resource intake by international students. Therefore, this chapter will start with the embedded perspective and analyse the specific types of relationships in the social network of foreign students, and analyse the strategies adopted by international students to obtain practical social support.

According to the actual needs of international students, this paper extracts three types of resources that are critical to the daily life of students studying abroad: information resources; material resources and emotional resources. Information resources refer to all kinds of information about study and life required by international students, such as academic information, job search information, and housing information. Material resources include the provision of materials, financial support, and services such as moving. Emotional resources include making recommendations on major issues, comforting emotions, and being able to share emotional experiences. The acquisition of emotional resources is often inseparable from the process of companionship.

#### **5.4.1 information resource**

In terms of the intake of information resources, the focus of academic debate is the different roles of strong and weak relationships in the individual job search process. Relationship strength is a combination of time input, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal exchange. Granovetter (1973) proposed the “weak relationship theory”, arguing that “strong relationship” often exists between similar individuals, while individual differences at both ends of “weak relationship” are larger. “Weak relationship” links different groups and can play a role as a bridge between groups, which is more conducive to the flow of information. Therefore, job seekers are more likely to get jobs through weak relationships. Different from Western society members to obtain the necessary information through “weak

relationship" and establish job-seeking channels, Bian (2014)'s "strong relationship theory" believes that in the special social situation of China, the influence of authoritative possessors in the process of obtaining positions must be more important than simple information flow. Strong relationships in a human society Both parties have higher levels of intimacy and trust and should fulfil more obligations with each other, thus increasing the likelihood of informal influence. Because of this, strong relationships play a more important role for job seekers.

In the survey of international students at Plymouth University, the author found that most of the international students choose the way to obtain information according to specific needs. "I feel where this information can be obtained from where to go". Different types of information needs have become the starting point for the rational consideration of international students. Strong and weak relationships can play a role in the mobilization of social network resources. Because weak relationships connect people with relatively different identities and are easy to obtain different kinds of information, weak relationships are the main way for international students to obtain information. At the same time, due to the particularity of cross-cultural networks, strong relationships can also play a role in the ingestion of information resources.

#### (1) Obtaining information through weak relationships

The relationship with ordinary students and teachers is a weak relationship, and international students tend to seek help from such relationships to obtain academic information. In the local social network of international students, weak relationships account for a large proportion. This type of relationship links more groups. Due to the short-term life of international students in the UK, the number of strong relationships is small. The members of the strong relationship network are mainly students, and the flow of social information in the network is not sufficient. Therefore, students must fully play the role of weak relationships to obtain different types of information

*"In fact, dealing with the British, you can go directly to ask. If there is any problem with the course, just go to the professor directly. If you have any questions about registration, you can go directly to the school. I will not like some Chinese, in the WeChat group. Asked, who has any experience. You can go to the office and ask for it. Experience is nothing. I just came to the moment is a black, many things do not know how to do. But the British have a benefit, that is He won't leave this thing and no matter what, he will tell you, who you are looking for, how to do it. For example, when I first came to get insurance proof, I am stupid, go straight to the office to ask, that It's the office of the supervisor. But I just sat there waiting, he just asked me to help me. So, I think it's easy to do things in the UK, don't worry about hitting the wall." (Interviewee SY)*

In the UK environment, weak relationships play an important role in the transmission of information. Classmates, professors, and even agency staff can help international students get the information they need. The way in which students take information from such relationships is straightforward. They only need to judge the situation, express the requirements clearly, and usually get the information they need.

(2) Obtaining through the letter of strong relationship

Another way to ingest information is through strong relationships. Some international students pointed out that all aspects of their affairs will be asked to the nearest friends, so that they can get the information they need more quickly. SXJ has a girlfriend-like British friend, and the two are neighbours. The contact is also very convenient. Every time I encounter a problem, I will first ask her.

*"For example, the school must ask the British girl, the relationship is iron, and the trouble is not too much. After all, she is here for a long time, she can help all the help. As long as I can get the answer as soon as possible, who is in charge of him." Object SXJ)*

The strong interaction between the two parties is very frequent and better understands each other's needs, so it can directly provide the information the other party needs. SY's rental information is obtained in this way.

*"My original house was too small. I always wanted to change it. Then my roommate knew that there was a house. The person who lived in the house left and asked if I would move it." (Interviewee HY)*

In fact, in a cross-cultural environment, strong relationships can also connect different groups. Once an international student can establish several strong cross-border relationships, these relationships can often serve as a bridge between the British and foreign students.

It is worth noting that with the advent of the information age, various communication methods are extremely developed. The online information channels are increasingly diversified, and international students search for the information resources they need more quickly and conveniently through the search for home websites, job search websites, and professional QQ groups. Even if you don't turn to friends, international students can easily get the information they need. Even so, the role of strong and weak relationships in the real network is still irreplaceable.

#### **5.4.2 Material resources**

The material help needed for international students can also be obtained by mobilizing resources in their social networks. Students are more inclined to seek help from people who are more closely related to themselves. The role of strong

relationships is more prominent. The British regard friendship as a relationship of trust. When one party faces difficulties, the other has an obligation to help. It is worth noting that Chinese culture is a typical high-context culture. Coupled with the “face” habits of interpersonal communication, international students are less likely to express their material resources in a straightforward manner. Uncertainty in the unfamiliar environment has strengthened the psychology of “euphemism temptation” for international students. Usually, the demand is perceived by the other party as the first step for the international students to ingest material resources. The strategy focuses on how to make this demand perceived by the other party and how to respond when the other party actively provides help

#### (1) Expression of demand

From the point of view of expression, Chinese students are more inclined to euphemistically express their own needs and guide each other to help. In Chinese society, the interaction mode between “human feelings” and “face” has become a social norm, Chinese In the interaction, more or less will take into account the "face" of the other party. The “direct” style of conversation in the UK is often understood as “not giving face”. In this case, the students express their needs euphemistically, only presenting the difficulties they face, and not explicitly asking for help, avoiding the embarrassment of being directly raised but rejected. If the other party is willing, they will help directly. This will save both the face and the help you need. In the cross-cultural social network, the strong relationship itself contains the tacit understanding of long-term relationship, which can reduce the obstacles of demand expression to some extent.

#### (2) Response to help

Due to the "face", international students usually make the other party aware of their own demands. Once the other party actively provides help, the international student immediately gives a positive response and accepts the help frankly. At the same time, the supporting resources in the network are not one-off items. Due to the small size of the international student network, they tend to seek help from the same people multiple times. Resources can be reused.

On the other hand, as the relationship deepens and the degree of relationship increases, the behaviour of international students will also be influenced by local customary norms, and the way of expressing demand is more direct. The adjustment of resource intake methods is also a process of gradually improving the cross-cultural competence of international students.

Personal values and his judgments on the values of others in the network will affect the individual's emphasis on “face”. 2 Over time, the values in British culture are gradually accepted by international students, and Become an integral part of its personal engagement guidelines. International students have adapted to the British model of interaction and are able to anticipate their possible responses.

Therefore, the behavioural strategy of “going face” will also be adjusted to the “direct” expression. The exchanges between the two sides are smoother and the resources are more convenient. Personal values and his judgments on the values of others in the network will affect the individual's emphasis on “face”. Over time, the values in British culture are gradually accepted by international students, and Become an integral part of its personal engagement guidelines. International students have adapted to the British model of interaction and are able to anticipate their possible responses. Therefore, the behavioural strategy of “going face” will also be adjusted to the “direct” expression. The exchanges between the two sides are smoother and the resources are more convenient.

The intake of resources is an ongoing process. In order to ensure the long-term availability of resources, international students often interact with resource providers to provide timely feedback. XY pointed out that when I first arrived in the UK, I was very unfamiliar with the course. The task of completing the professor was more difficult, and the classmates gave her a lot of help. She is not satisfied with passively accepting help, but gradually participates in discussions and helps each other solve problems.

*In the second semester, we don't know how the class is. The teacher asked me to choose the theme of the report, and we will come up with each other and say, 'I think you are suitable for this, 'you can choose this. Or ask, 'How do you figure it out?', then I said what I plan to do, what can you do. This helps each other. "(Interview object XY)*

From the perspective of cultural origins, Western society attaches importance to the spirit of independence and fulfils the principle of mutual benefit. Although the “giving” party does not expect the other party's return behaviour, the “reward” process enhances the frequency and extent of interaction between the two parties, and also conveys a polite and friendly signal that can deepen the relationship between the networks. It also provides a guarantee for the resource intake of international students.

#### **5.4.3 Emotional resources**

The premise that emotional resources can be ingested is the trust and dependence that the two parties establish over a long period of time. Especially for the British who pay attention to the "distance rules", the formation of friendship requires a long process. It is the process of making the objective and rational gradually give way to sincerity, sensibility and openness as the two sides continue to communicate deeply. International students only stay in short-term residences. Therefore, from the perspective of characteristics, the number of emotional resources embedded in their social networks is small, and the emotional support of international students usually comes from the most intimate relationship. Compared with information and material resources, the interaction

between the two parties is the most important in the process of obtaining emotional resources. Talking and understanding each other becomes an indispensable part of the process of resource intake.

#### (1) Choice of emotional resources

Compared with the other two types of resources, international students are least good at obtaining emotional support through the local network. Many international students mentioned that they are more willing to show positive and optimistic side to their friends here. Sadness and sadness often rely on self-regulation, or rely on relatives and close friends who are still in China to obtain emotional support. Some international students can develop their relationship with local students to a certain intensity in a short period of time, making the acquisition of emotional resources a fairly natural thing. This usually happens when each other defines the other as a "friend" rather than an "acquaintance."

The intake of emotional resources is embedded in the process of communication and interaction. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, "empathy" is an important feature of cross-cultural competence and cross-cultural sensitivity. Empathy is the identification and understanding of others' situations, emotions and motivations. The attitude of empathy is culturally relevant, which is the ability to envision oneself as another person in another cultural context. Establishing deep friendships with individuals of different cultures and sharing the meaning of interactions in communication becomes an effective way to gain empathy. The way of empathy helps individuals capture the communication signals of experience sharing and transform their roles according to the new environment. When international students have this ability, they can exchange emotions and mutual understanding with individuals in different cultures.

In addition to the sharing of emotional experiences, Chinese students who are studying in a strange country can have the opportunity to open their hearts and face their hearts and minds. They can find like-minded friends to understand and resonate with each other. This is a rare emotional resource. With the continuous deepening of network construction, the relationship in the network has reached a certain intensity, and mutual understanding has reached a certain depth. Cultural differences are no longer obstacles to communication. In the face of the common emotions of human beings, the tacit understanding brought about by the intersection of the souls is more important.

#### (2) Interaction between "get" and "give"

Wellman summarizes the three aspects of a strong relationship: (a) the two sides perceive the intimacy and particularity of the relationship, and will voluntarily pay for the relationship, strongly hoping to get the company's company; (b) in any case I hope to get along as long as possible; (c) have a tacit understanding,

understand each other's needs and be able to help. These three aspects can be summarized as: intimacy, obligation, tacit.

Western countries generally emphasize equality and are used to treating everyone with the same standards in interpersonal relationships. In the British environment, "universality" is mostly reflected in the same rules of communication. On the emotional level, the different definitions of "friends" and "acquaintances" of the British are similar to those of "outsiders" and "self". The division emphasizes the input of emotions and the obligations to each other.

### **5.5 Willingness and restriction of establishing of social network for international students**

Social interaction is the basic needs of people, and the individual's social network can provide the necessary resources. For international students, in a strange society, it is necessary to establish their own social network as soon as possible to meet the needs of communication and solve difficulties in life, so as to adapt to and integrate into the local social culture. As a rational mover, most of the international students have a strong willingness to contact the British. In the process of network construction, they measure the cost and potential return of the relationship.

The willingness of international students to contact the British is mainly for the following purposes: First, contact with local people can help improve English. This is true of almost all respondents. Language is a prerequisite for studying and living in a strange country. Only when the language reaches a certain level of proficiency can we communicate smoothly, and we can establish close contact with the local people, so that we can smoothly adapt to a strange society. As many students emphasize, "You can't express it and talk about deep communication." At the same time, the role of language is not only the barrier-free communication, but also the psychology and customs of a nation. In the process of acquiring language, the culture and customs of another country are also transmitted, which is crucial for the international students to understand and adapt to the UK.

Secondly, foreign students are exposed to the British to experience local customs. Most of the students who choose to study abroad are interested in the destination country. They are eager to learn about the local society, experience different ways of life, and regard the difference as a wealth of life. XY has clearly pointed out that he is more willing to interact with the British, and he will also focus on social strategies. From the perspective of her social network, British friends have brought her more than just language improvement. "If they don't invite you to his home, you will never know how British parents express love; if they don't give you On birthday, you will never know what British children do on their birthdays." (Interviewee XY) and British friends go to the restaurant to learn about their

dietary preferences and customs. When invited to the party, they understand that they have always been rigorous. How can the nation relax and relieve stress; go to the picnic together to understand that their love for nature is far better than the pursuit of urban prosperity... This kind of strange and novel activities attract young Chinese students.

Finally, from the perspective of utilitarianism, the establishment of relationships with local people can get more help. From the perspective of study and life, the British are more aware of the local situation and have more resources. Compared with Chinese compatriots who are studying in the UK, the British have the resources they cannot access. For example, be more familiar with course content and essay writing methods; learn more about part-time, housing, second-hand market information; or even provide vehicles for travel or provide housing for temporary boarding. This will make it easier to solve the real problems encountered by international students. Therefore, the rational choice of resource possession is another reason why foreign students are eager to contact the British.

Even though most international students have a strong desire to approach the British, the establishment of their social networks is affected by other structural factors. Chinese associations and international student organizations have a role in promoting network construction. On the other hand, the structure also limits the degree of personal choice. Secondly, the traditional Chinese “face culture” is not conducive to the establishment of relations with the British. British people rarely show strong willingness to contact strangers, actively expand relationships and even be seen as interference and entanglement with others, and maintaining distance is regarded as polite behaviours. In this case, international students need to adopt an active communication strategy. But in reality, many students still use passive communication.

Group constraints are difficult to break through, and individual behavioural habits are often difficult to change. In this case, the role of the organization will highlight the role of the social structure in facilitating the establishment of the network. As mentioned earlier, the activities organized by international students promote the establishment of Chinese students' social networks in the UK. Participants in the event want to learn about foreign cultures, prefer to communicate actively, and socialize more internationally. For Chinese students, it is easier to establish relationships with foreign students simply by giving appropriate responses. Therefore, the social structure has also promoted the establishment of social networks for international students.

## **5.6 Adaptation of communication strategies to the development and maintenance of guanxi in the network**

In the process of constructing cross-cultural networks, the choice of foreign students' communication strategies affects their realistic effects on relationship maintenance. The improvement of cross-cultural communication ability will help foreign students adopt a more rational communication strategy. Adjusting their own communication according to different cultural situations should become a key link in the process of relationship maintenance.

#### (1) Expression of opinions

A deeper understanding of each other's views is often a prerequisite for strengthening the relationship. China and the UK have great cultural differences in their expression habits. For the Chinese, they are not good at expressing their opinions directly, but they are used to suggest attitudes in a suggestive way, and they tend to remain silent in heated debates. This habit often causes great confusion to the British.

"I know that China has a saying of 'harmony', but if you have problems, you can't help but face it. For example, when I was in China, I told my classmates that the teacher was not doing the right thing. Let's talk about it. Then they will say, Professor Know what they are going to do, then ignore the problem. Of course, I think the students here will be better." (UK interviewee WM)

Britons are more accustomed to expressing their opinions directly, preferring to interact with people with clearer opinions, and the difference in opinions is the embodiment of personality. This is also the difference between individualistic culture and collectivist culture.

#### (2) Adaptation of behaviour

Successful interaction depends on the compromise and adjustment of the two parties' behaviours. Due to the social environment in the UK, Chinese students have a stronger need for communication, and the purpose of adapting to and integrating into foreign life is even more prominent. Therefore, in order to construct a new social network, Chinese students need to change their interactions according to local scenes.

With the extension of stay time in the UK, international students are gradually able to freely adjust and change their behaviours in different cultural scenes. The imitation strategy succeeded in making the behaviours of international students more localized, thus breaking another barrier to the construction of British social networks.

### **5.7 Evasion of renqing dilemma to increase the mobilisation of social capital in the network**

According to the Chinese people's behaviours habits, looking for someone to help actually owe the "human feelings" of others, we must wait for an opportunity to

return. Although there is no such complicated resource exchange rule according to the local social culture in the UK, Chinese students have formed such habits and codes of conduct in China, and the psychological “personality” norms still affect their way of resource intake. In British society, local people have more resources and more help, while Chinese students are at a disadvantage in resource flows, and the returns they can make are quite limited. In addition to making a return to the material resource provider in a “reward” manner; and maintaining emotional resources in a “compassionate” manner, it is difficult for international students to repay the “human feelings” of British students in other ways. Therefore, in the structural environment of British society, the behavioural viewpoints of foreign students will also be influenced by Western culture, and gradually will avoid the complicated situation of “renqing” from the strategic choice.

Huang (2004) summed up four ways in which Chinese people evade renqing: the internalisation of personal orientation; the establishment of interactive rules with fairness rules; the establishment of fairness rules in unfamiliar areas and the use of psychological “division” strategies. For students studying in the UK, the internalization of personal orientation and the establishment of fair rules in unfamiliar areas are more applicable. The former means that when an individual internalizes modernized individualism as part of the adult personality trait, the issue of human feelings and face will be seldom considered; while the latter means that instrumental relations are established in unfamiliar communities, and then the law of fairness is followed. Interact with these people. Specifically, the evasion strategy of international students can be summarised as the change of cognitive habits and the avoidance of the human environment.

### **5.8 Chapter summary**

This chapter first introduces the research findings in three parts based on the three themes of the construction of the Chinese student network, the development and maintenance of the existing guanxi in the network, and the mobilisation of social capital in the network. Based on the research findings, it further discussed the social willingness of international students in a cross-cultural environment and the restrictions from compatriots to their own development of social circles. At the same time, it also discussed the self-adaptive ability of Chinese students in the cross-cultural environment, from the expression of viewpoints and the adaptation of behaviours, especially for the evasion of renqing dilemma. The evidences show that the external living environment is gradually changing the cultural inherent genes of international students. Guanxi has not disappeared, but has changed under the new social network rules and the use of social media. When the international students return back to in China, traditional Chinese-style guanxi still dominate in their social interactions. The new characteristics of social capital within guanxi context of Chinese international students, could namely as guanxi 2.0. With the influence of

the media and the external environment, the author believes that this new form of guanxi will gradually strengthen as the length of stay increases.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Thesis summary**

This research complete and meets the pre-planned aims and objectives. The research aim 1 to produce an understanding of the motivations of Chinese international students in establishing social networks and discovering the meaning of guanxi and social capital for international students has been achieved through a background research of Chinese international students in the UK and at Plymouth University (chapter 2) and reviews existing literatures of guanxi and social capital through definition, measurements, online aspect and summarised current researches of guanxi and social capital. After that, by combining the literature reviews and comparing the similarities and differences between guanxi and social capital, the research questions of this study are conducted in at the end (chapter 3).

Aim 2 to decode the characteristics of social capital within a cultural context through online and offline aspects. This is accomplished through an ethnography research by observing and analysing the performances of Chinese students' communities based on Plymouth University from participants' views through Chapter 4 and chapter 5

Finally, the recommendations for universities in the UK for enhancing the level of international students' participation and the cross-cultural adoptions are provided in chapter 6.

### **6.2 Key findings and contribution of the research**

The thesis points out the three stages of the construction of the social network of Chinese international students at Plymouth University: In the first stage, the foreign students come into contact with an unfamiliar society and begin to construct a new social network through social media. And establish their new network through direct and indirect methods. Direct methods include occasional encounters with new friends and direct contact in joint activities in specific places. Indirect methods include establishing contacts through third-party related parties, Chinese international student organizations, and the Internet. In the second stage,

Chinese international students selectively develop and maintain guanxi in their own networks. Dual identities, special events and common interests are important opportunities for developing their guanxi on the Internet; to maintain guanxi, international students adopt contact behaviours, social behaviours, and exchange of favours. In the third stage, Chinese international students obtain necessary help and support by mobilizing social resources in the network. Such as gathering information resources from weak ties and strong ties; for material resources, the process of ingestion is reflected in the two stages, which are demand expression and response assistance; for emotional resources, Chinese international students often turn to the Internet for help with their close guanxi and have the same degree of emotional investment to the other party.

In the process of network construction, the specific behavioural strategies of Chinese international students are a mixture of instrumental and emotional motivations. In order to better adapt to the local society, the guanxi model of Chinese students shown a dynamic process of cyclical conversion between kinship-based guanxi and contractual guanxi, and to mobilize and utilise online and offline social resources through social media. In the author's view, this new guanxi model present the characteristic of social capital within guanxi context, which namely: guanxi 2.0

### **6.3 Research limitations**

Through ethnographic investigations, this research clearly shows the construction process of the social network of Chinese students studying abroad at Plymouth University, expands the scope of experience and research skills of social networks, and confirms the adaptability of related theories. But judging from the specific content, there are still some deficiencies. First of all, the thesis uses qualitative research methods to achieve the goal of in-depth analysis of the construction process, but through this method, it is impossible to draw clear and accurate conclusions about the specific holdings of foreign students' social networks. Many quantitative and graphical analysis methods have been developed in the field of network research, but due to the constraints of objective conditions, the author cannot apply cutting-edge analysis methods to this research. The article analyses the specific conditions of the international student

network with less pen and ink, and draws a conclusion through the narrative of the interviewees, which is subjective. If more professional network feature analysis methods can be applied, the understanding of the construction process will be deeper.

Secondly, the article focuses on the construction of international students' cross-cultural network in the UK, so the communication between Chinese students is insufficient. In the survey, the author has learned that a small number of students are more enthusiastic about maintaining the relationship between small groups of compatriots. Due to the limitation of space and research focus, the author failed to discuss the sibling network construction strategy of such students, but only regarded it as a supplementary part of cross-cultural communication for analysis. The club activities of international students will also play a very important role in the communication and integration of students. However, most of the Chinese community interactions that the author investigates are online observation, which objectively limits the in-depth observation and analysis of the interactions between compatriots.

Finally, the thesis takes the Chinese students from Plymouth University as an example to study the process and mechanism of the social network establishment of international students, as well as the social capital in the cultural context, but the extent to which the conclusions can be popularized requires further discussion. From the perspective of the time of studying abroad. The author's interview subjects are mainly short-term international students, and the research focuses on the communication strategies of international students and the development and change process of the network in the short term. However, the construction of the network and the transformation of social capital are a continuous process. As the time of studying abroad increases, the degree of cultural adaptation is strengthened, or the appearance of personal life planning problems will have an impact on the communication styles and network characteristics of international students. This has not been fully reflected in the author's research. From the perspective of field location, Plymouth University is not the most popular school for Chinese students to study in the UK. The relatively small number of compatriots makes the need for international students

and local students to establish social networks stronger. Although this is convenient for the author to study the construction process of his social network in a targeted manner, it will also affect the degree of promotion of the conclusion of the paper in the whole UK. The specific conditions of different regions need to be confirmed by further empirical research.

On this basis, the author believes that research in this field can be continued in the following aspects: First, combine quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the relationship between network scale and compactness and other specific indicators and the network construction process and strategy. Whether there is a certain relevance; second, pay attention to the process of communication between compatriots, and under the premise of sufficient samples, try to categorize the construction strategies of foreign students, and extract different time signs of different types of students' network construction; third, conduct Comparative research, such as selecting universities in other parts of the UK as online and offline observation sites, to find out whether the network construction of Chinese students in the UK has universal characteristics, or what are the differences in conditions in different regions. The author believes that taking the international students as the starting point, combining the social network theory in the field of sociology with the theory of cultural social capital more deeply, will surely make a greater contribution to the research in this field and the future academic development.

#### **6.4 Research recommendations**

The group of international students is a group that already holds its own national culture, but has a strong desire to integrate into another culture. Although after a period of cross-cultural life, the cultural habits and values of international students have gradually changed. From the perspective of cross-cultural understanding, in foreign cultures, foreign students will not only have difficulty in understanding the language of the two parties, but also misunderstand their behaviours due to the lack of a mutually recognized normative background. Cross-cultural communication embodies the tension between "understanding" and "understanding". The dynamic network development process of international students is also the process of change from misunderstanding to understanding

in cultural collisions.

From the perspective of social belonging, the understanding of content reached in individual communication does not mean acceptance by the social system. Because of the difficulty of group belonging, individual interactions are more based on common ground, such as common interests and similar personalities. This is crucial to the construction of the international student network.

For international students, the main purpose of constructing social networks is to obtain help and achieve short-term social adaptation. Few people express the goal of long-term social integration. When talking about future ideas, most students have no plans to immigrate to the UK. "Belonging" is always an extravagant hope that is difficult to achieve in a foreign country. It is precisely because they know this well that international students will not try their best to expand social networks, but choose to focus on maintaining and deepening their existing relationships, and get enough support and help from them. At the same time, it is precisely because of such "non-belonging" that the social network among Chinese compatriots is equally important, especially for students who are unable to develop close relationships with the locals due to various reasons. By participating in the activities of Chinese associations, international students maintained their identity with their own national culture, and their need for a "sense of belonging" was thus met.

From the perspective of social distance, international students in the UK are close to the British society; but from a psychological level, the differences between Chinese and English cultures make them feel a great social distance. For the local society, international students are not "non-participants", but some kind of "free participants". He can actively observe, objectively evaluate himself and the customs and norms of British society, and gradually learn and adapt to new behaviours patterns. In this process, international students gained knowledge about the new group and began to reflect on their own cultural differences. This is also the mechanism by which international students change their network construction behaviours in the process of perceiving social distance.

In order to expand the scale of social networks and enhance the degree of relations within the network, international students participate in local social activities. The different communication rules and judging standards in the activities collided with their previous values and behaviours, which made the international students experience a strong social distance. However, with the expansion of the Internet and the deepening of relationships, international students began to reflect on cultural differences and try to adjust their behaviours in accordance with local customs. At the same time, this social integration effort is not blind, but calm and objective. In the network of relations, it is precisely because of the existence of social distance that it maintains objectivity. It neither judge things completely in accordance with the standards of traditional Chinese culture, nor does it blindly accept the behavioural norms of Western society.

Based on the above discussion, the author suggests that universities in the UK should pay more attention to the international student group and appropriately use social media to care and actively guide this group. Emphasise the value of using social media, which is an effective way to help international student groups adapt to the new cultural environment better and faster. In addition, the information and resources obtained through the familiar use scenes of international students can help them increase their sense of trust and belonging, which also has a positive influence on social participation.

## Appendices 1

### Feedbacks for Plymouth CSSA social events

Social Events	Very good	Good	Not interest	Bad	Very bad
New Student Welcome Party					
Basketball Competition					
Plymouth Voice					
Scotland tours for the New Year					
Chinese Spring New Year					

## Appendices 2

### 中国留学生访谈提纲

#### 1.基本信息

姓名; 性别; 年龄; 专业; 学历; 到英国的时间:

为什么来 Plymouth 大学上学?

之前是否对英国有所了解?(风俗习惯、日常行为标准等)

目前是否适应这边的生活?(哪方面适应、哪方面不适应)

你更希望和哪些人交往,为什么?

#### 2.社交网络基本状况

你是如何定义"朋友"以及"熟人"的?

来英国之后结识到的英国人/中国人/外国人当中,朋友有多少?熟人有多少?

请按照他们对你的重要程度排出顺序。

#### 3.社会资本形成的过程

请讲一讲你和这些人分别是如何认识的,你是否为此做出努力?

你们的关系程度是如何增强的,你是否为此做出努力?

你们都会在一起做什么?

聊天的话题是什么?

当你需要获得信息(课程信息、兼职信息、租房信息.....),你会向谁求助?讲一讲具体的过程.

当你在物质上需要帮助(缺少东西、东西坏了.....),你会向谁求助?讲一讲具体的过程.

你的感受会向谁倾诉(不开心、抱怨、讲心事、重要的讨论.....),讲一讲具体的过程.

为什么会向他们求助?你为他们做过什么吗?

#### 4.文化差异

你觉得和英国人交流与和中国人交往有什么区别吗?

你觉得和英国人的交流有障碍吗?对你们的关系有影响吗?请具体描述.

你觉得交流过程中能够理解彼此的观点吗?请具体描述.

他们会对你产生影响吗?(观点态度、行为方式.....)

经过这一段时间,你对英国人的看法有改变吗?

你对这边的交流状况满意吗,为什么?

你对未来有什么打算?

## Appendices 3

### Chinese Student Interview Outline

#### 1. Basic information

Name; Gender; Age; Professional; Education; Time to UK:

1.1 Why come to Plymouth University for study?

1.2 Have you had any knowledge of the UK before? (customary habits, daily behavior standards, etc.)

1.3 Is it suitable for life here? (Which aspect is adapted and which is not suitable)

1.4 Who do you want to associate with, and why?

#### 2. The basic situation of social networks

2.1 How do you define "friends" and "acquaintances"?

2.2 How many friends are there among the British/Chinese/foreigners who have met in the UK? and How many acquaintances are there? Please follow the order in which they are important to you.

#### 3. The process of social capital formation

3.1 Please tell us how you and these people know each other.

Are you making efforts to this end?

3.2 How deep is your relationship? Are you making efforts to do this?

3.3 What do you guys do together?

3.4 What is the topic will you talk about?

3.5 When you need to get information

(course information, part-time information, renting information...), who do you ask for?

Tell me about the specific process.

3.6 When you need help physically (lack of things, things are broken...),

who do you ask for help? Tell a specific process.

3.7 Who will you talk to about your feelings (unhappy, complaining, worrying, important discussion...), and talk about the specific process.

3.8 Why are you asking for help?

3.9 What have you done for them?

#### **4. Cultural differences**

4.1 What do you think is the difference between interacting with the British and interacting with the Chinese?

4.2 Do you think there are obstacles to dealing with the British?

Do you have any influence on your relationship? Please describe them in detail.

4.3 Do you feel that you can understand each other's views during the process of communication? Please describe them in detail.

4.4 Will they affect you? (Opinions, behaviors...)

4.5 After this period of time, have you changed your views on the British?

4.6 Are you satisfied with the status of the communication here, and why?

4.7 What are your plans for the future?

## Appendices 4

### 中国留学生深度访谈提纲

- 1.您经常使用哪种社交媒体？
- 2.您如何看待普利茅斯 CSSA? （在线和离线）？
- 3.您是否加入了任何社交团体（在线或离线）？
- 4.您对普利茅斯了解多少？

## Appendices 5

### Chinese Student in-depth Interview Outline

1. What kind of social media you regular used?
2. How do you think about Plymouth CSSA? (online and offline)?
3. Have you joined any social group (online or offline)?
4. How much do you know about Plymouth?

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