

Understanding the Impact of WeChat Use on Chinese International Students' Social and Cultural Capital in Australia

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Abstract

In this study we explore how Chinese international students' (CISs) use of WeChat influences their ability to acquire and use different forms of capital – particularly cultural and social capital – while studying at an Australian higher education institution. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, we examine how these forms of capital shape and are shaped by students' experiences. We drew key findings from semistructured interviews and the scroll-back method with 15 CISs. We made three findings. First, WeChat helps many CISs overcome language barriers, which are an immediate and prominent marker of the cultural capital they often lack but need to navigate the Australian higher education field. Second, WeChat supports the development of social capital by enabling CISs to maintain and form new social networks. Third, while CISs show agency in identifying and acquiring capital, the ongoing interaction between field (the university context) and habitus (their internalised dispositions) also shapes their success. The findings underscore the importance of helping CISs position themselves to build relevant forms of capital as they adapt to Australian academic life. The study offers recommendations for higher education decision-makers on how to support CISs' WeChat use, inform policymaking and strengthen the university's reputation both nationally and globally.

Keywords: Chinese international students, Bourdieu, WeChat, higher education, transition

1. Introduction

In line with global trends, an increasing number of international students are choosing Australia as a study destination. Notably, three Australian universities rank among the top 20 in the *QS World University Rankings* (Cassidy, 2023). The number of international student enrolments in Australia continues to rise, showing an increase of nearly 15% compared to pre-COVID-19 levels (Department of Education, 2025). China has remained the largest source of international students in Australia's higher education sector for many years (Department of Education, 2025). However, CISs' adaptation to Australian universities remains challenging.

Numerous scholars have documented the challenges CISs face when adapting to new academic and social environments. Social media plays a significant role in international students' lives, particularly in facilitating their cross-cultural adaptation (Wenwe & Osman, 2022). In this study we focus on WeChat, given its status as one of the leading social media platforms globally (Thomala, 2025) and a key tool in CISs' adaptation to life and study abroad. By employing Bourdieu's theory of practice, we investigate how CISs' use of WeChat influences the development and use of various forms of capital while studying in Australia. Using semistructured interviews with the scroll-back method, we aim to understand CISs' digitally mediated experiences better. The findings will inform university policy-makers' strategies to support CISs better and improve their academic and social experiences.

2. Literature Review

Current cohorts of higher education students can be seen as part of a 'digital generation' that has used digital tools from a young age (Rospigliosi, 2019), meaning that digital technologies are a fully integrated aspect of their lives. This study is particularly relevant due to WeChat's status as the most prominent social media platform among Chinese people. Enjoying a rapid growth rate and far surpassing other Chinese social media platforms, WeChat reached 1.33 billion active users by early 2023 (Iqbal, 2025).

In several earlier studies on WeChat use among China's youth, scholars have found that social connection is the primary reason and motivation for young people to use the platform and to continue devoting significant time to it. For example, Gan and Wang (2015) found that almost all participants in their study used WeChat as a tool for social interaction and networking. Furthermore, they reported spending over 2 hours a day using WeChat. Pang (2016) found that WeChat creates a small and closed network for users and their peers, offering a relatively private yet simultaneously open space for those who know each other well. This makes it a comfortable environment for discussions and cultivates a series of alternative public spheres (Pang, 2016).

In recent studies, scholars have identified WeChat as an educational tool. Hou et al., (2021) highlighted that WeChat subscriptions are a vital but underutilised tool for student development. Knowing this, universities could optimise content to align with students' growth needs while addressing their preference for accessible, relevant information. Further expanding on WeChat's educational potential, Wu and Miller (2021) emphasised the potential of WeChat as a tool for fostering native cultural awareness and English proficiency among Chinese English as a Foreign Language students. Their findings suggest that WeChat's interactive features and content-sharing capabilities make it a valuable platform for language learning and cultural engagement.

Active engagement with social media facilitates psychological and behavioural adaptation cross-culturally (Pang, 2020). Hu and Chen (2023) found that when CISs leave their hometowns and families to live and study in the United States, they tend to prefer using Chinese social media due to established usage habits as well as psychological and cultural comfort. Given that domestic and other international students tend to use Western social media platforms, this divide may hinder CISs' ability to build the social networks necessary to adapt to new social environments. Amosun et al. (2022) examined WeChat use during COVID-19, highlighting how its socio-psychological functions significantly affected CISs during this period of crisis. They further found that the frequency of WeChat use and interaction could improve the quality of social relationships, although they observed no corresponding improvement in wellbeing. These findings reveal the complex psychological dynamics underlying WeChat use. On the one hand, CISs are motivated to maintain and strengthen their social ties through WeChat. On the other hand, while WeChat use enhances online social networks, it has limited impact on CISs' immediate wellbeing when living in a foreign country. This suggests not only the potential negative effects of reliance on WeChat but also the barriers CISs face in integrating into local communities.

In addition, language barriers and cultural challenges are common issues that CISs face while studying overseas. Exploring CISs' experiences in China–Australia joint articulation programmes, Dai et al. (2018) found that in shifting between two educational subfields, some CISs changed towards an 'in-between, diasporic cosmopolitan habitus' (p. 1329) during their studies while others maintained their habitus by compartmentalising new demands. Moreover, participants often relied on information and communication technologies and the internet to complete various assignments. Dai et al. (2018) argued that CISs' experiences in Australia occur within a space that both physical and virtual elements shape. Given WeChat's dominance in the Chinese social media landscape, it is important to consider how virtual spaces influence CISs' socialisation as well as their academic and personal lives during the transition process. To date, scholars have underexplored the potential and limitations of WeChat use among CISs. In this study we seek to address that gap by investigating how WeChat practices affect CISs' transition in an Australian university context.

3. Theoretical Framework

We chose Bourdieu's (1984) conceptual framework for this study because of its emphasis on social practice and the logic that shapes individuals' values and behaviours. He also recognised that specific rules that are fluid rather than fixed govern social practice and experience (Iisahunter et al., 2015). For example, CISs' social practice and experiences can be seen to change based on their context shifting from China to Australia. Bourdieu's social theory highlights individuals' participation in daily practices that form, reinforce or have potential to change social structures. These structures, or fields (Bourdieu, 1992), in turn, influence the development of habitus, which refers to the deeply ingrained dispositions and behaviours that social experience shapes (Bourdieu, 1992). Bourdieu's concepts align with the focus of this study: the ways in which CISs' cultural values, dispositions and actions are influencing, shaped by and embedded within broader social structures that define modes of being and acting but with space for agency (Iisahunter et al., 2015). Bourdieu's theory helps illuminate how individual practices reflect habitus, itself a product of the established culture, values and rules that structure one's social world. As the context of the field of higher education changes from China to Australia, we can investigate how one's habitus re/forms at the same time, potentially influencing the field.

A social logic that operates both consciously and unconsciously informs practice. Through practice, individuals may reproduce and sustain social norms and structures. These practices reflect the values and norms that form an individual's social (non)consciousness through an 'open system of dispositions' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). The reciprocal relationship between dispositions and structures, as practice, reinforces the existing social order but with opportunity for agency and social change (Isahunter et al., 2015). Such mutual influence is evident in the lives of CISs, whose social worlds span China, Australia and the diverse socialising contexts and networks in both with which they engage. These networks represent structured systems of social relations and positions within a field, in this case higher education, each with different access to capital as framed by the field, its subfields in different cultures and the practices valued within it. To understand CISs' experiences fully, it is therefore necessary to consider the social spaces they inhabit, navigate, are positioned in and position themselves and others in through capital exchange.

Bourdieu (1977) argued against traditional economic characterisations of capital as solely economic, instead proposing a more abundant meaning for the concept. According to him, anything can be regarded as capital if valued, and he assigned an exchange value within a specific field, allowing it to be used not only as a resource for action but also as a 'commodity' to be traded and accumulated. This implies that capital exists in multiple forms, and each field defines what counts as capital based on what it values and is embodied by those valued within it. The value of an individual's capital, and in different forms, therefore, can vary across different fields and in different contexts of the field such as higher education.

Bourdieu (1986) identified three primary forms of capital (cultural, economic and social), each corresponding to a distinct symbolic economy. He defined economic capital as material assets that are 'immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights' (p. 242). He also regarded capital as a key mechanism that shapes the potential for action; that is, capital serves as an intermediate means of transformation. For instance, individuals who are relatively rich in economic capital can convert it into cultural capital to attain higher social status through educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1989). This might be a driver for Chinese students to invest financially in an international degree that might be more highly valued over a local degree.

Cultural capital is the totality of one's cultural resources (Bourdieu, 1984), or the accumulated knowledge, practices and skills that together constitute cultural competence where one exists. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in three states: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Institutionalised cultural capital refers to educational credentials, such as university diplomas. Embodied cultural capital consists of the knowledge and information acquired over time through socialisation and education (Bourdieu, 1984), shaping an individual's patterns of thinking, attitudes, language, manners and practices. Objectified cultural capital refers to material possessions that reflect or support one's qualifications, occupation or socioeconomic status, such as books, technological devices or musical instruments (Bourdieu, 1984). This form of capital may also signal one's economic class, as per the previous example. Cultural capital also exists in an institutionalised state, which refers to how it is measured, ranked and certified (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, educational experience and qualifications are key indicators and formal recognitions of one's cultural capital. Social positions, such as job titles or social roles (e.g. wife or mother), can also confer cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Differences in social structures, conditions, cultural characteristics, and dispositions mean that individuals from different nations may acquire and value knowledge in different ways. While both China and Australia value education, and an undergraduate degree represents cultural capital in both contexts, the nature of cultural capital obtained and expressed by CISs and Australian students differ. For example, CISs may be more inclined to obey authority in educational settings in China, rather than challenge or critique it to explore knowledge independently. In Chinese education fields, critique is not strongly emphasised or valued, whereas in Australia, education fields encourage critical thinking and analysis including to understand society through personal experience and inquiry (Hains-Wesson, et. al, 2021).

Bourdieu defined social capital as 'the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). This definition emphasises the importance of personal relationships and networks in enabling individuals to pursue their interests and accumulate social capital. For Bourdieu (1986), social capital refers to the volume of past and accumulated personal relationships and networks that a social agent commands (p. 249). The prospect of profit or value maintenance motivates individuals to engage in and maintain links within networks. These profits, or forms of social capital, can include social benefits and power, but they are not distributed equally. Participating in networks and securing social capital and resources drive people to maintain or improve their social position. The size or number of networks in which they are involved, the value held by members of those networks and the individual's ability to derive benefits from those connections shape an

individual's social capital. For example, CISs might sustain their social capital in China by returning to China and meeting family and friends in breaks from study in Australia and preparation for return post-study.

Bourdieu argued that language itself is a form of capital that can be exchanged for other forms, including cultural, economic and social capital (Wacquant, 1989). Given the influence of globalisation, higher education institutions have developed into highly diverse educational systems, in which universities' specific languages of communication – or linguistic capital – play an important role (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021). Within the Australian education field, domestic students' language backgrounds function as a form of capital that can be converted into academic advantage. Watkins and Noble (2008) identified educational capital, extending Bourdieu's original concept to explain how certain aspects of cultural capital operate as resources accumulated by students through their surrounding environments and the contexts in which they are socialised. Educational capital is embedded in all structured systems within society, including the family environment, community relationships, social class and the schooling system. It shapes students' worldviews, knowledge and behavioural patterns, enabling them to integrate into the societies in which they live and to gain social acceptance. As such, international students may not have Australian-context language capital, as one of many forms of capital, in the subfield of higher education. In this study, we explore the forms of capital in operation for CISs, and how their use of WeChat influences their ability to acquire and use different forms of capital while studying at an Australian higher education institution.

4. Methodology

We conducted our research at an Australian higher education institution, one of the Group of Eight universities, referred to here as 'Beachside University' (a pseudonym). We received ethical approval (undisclosed for anonymity) and required students' written consent to participate. The first method to obtain evidence was document collection for a policy document review, which involved analysing policies and programmes that Beachside University developed for international students. Semistructured interviews (Gillham, 2005) with scroll-back (Robards & Lincoln, 2019) served as the primary method of evidence creation. We recruited 15 participants – seven first-year and eight fourth-year students – from the university and interviewed them between September 2020 and March 2021. We conducted interviews both online and face-to-face, each lasting approximately 50–60 minutes, and we recorded them for later transcription. Participants chose to conduct the interviews in Mandarin, which the researcher translated into English.

We included the scroll-back method (Robards & Lincoln, 2019) in interviews to elicit participants' reflections on their WeChat use as they scrolled through their WeChat account from the past 12 months. They talked about posts made, for example, using the 'Moments' function, reflecting on why and how they created specific content. To understand CISs' WeChat practices better, scrolling back encouraged participants to revisit their experiences of developing and sharing content on the platform. We designed this technique to compensate for silence or memory lapses when discussing their WeChat use. The scroll-back approach incorporated narrative inquiry to capture the 'wider story' of CISs' WeChat practices, shifting the focus from verbal self-reporting to screen-based prompts. This stage of the process, which may be considered 'intervening', offered insights into CISs' social and personal experiences by prompting them to share stories related to their WeChat use (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

We analysed the interviews through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which we collated with document review to inform the findings. Thematic analysis is a way to develop themes, which are patterns in the qualitative evidence researchers draw on (Joffe, 2012). Thematic analysis simultaneously recognises the varied experiences of individuals and draws approximate comparisons among them. We manually coded interview transcripts and then clustered them as themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Bourdieu's concepts theoretically informed the thematic analysis by examining the experiences of individual participants within the field and considering how habitus formation and capital influenced individual positions (Grenfell & Lebaron, 2014). We move now to the findings, exploring the relationship between WeChat practice and capital formation and its employment for negotiating the transition between the previously experienced Chinese context of higher education to the new Australian context.

5. Results

The findings are from a larger study (Meng, 2024), but for the purposes of this paper, we focus specifically on evidence related to capital. Findings indicate that WeChat functions as embodied linguistic capital, objectified cultural capital and linguistic capital in CISs' practices while studying within the Australian higher education field. We begin the results with an examination of linguistic capital because it emerged prominently in the interview data analysis.

5.1 Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital, a form of cultural capital, is reflected in proficiency in standard English, which we found directly influences participants' ability integrate their use of WeChat with their studies. CISs seeking to study at an Australian university must meet minimum English language requirements and provide evidence of their proficiency. Although all participants had satisfied these requirements, many reported experiencing language barriers as an initial and highly salient marker of embodied cultural capital, which hindered their integration into the Australian higher education context. This lack of linguistic capital was a significant challenge. For example, Shi shared that she often sought out other CISs in class and used WeChat to initiate course-related discussions:

I usually found CISs in class and exchanged WeChat information so that we could discuss the assignment, lecture contents and arrangements together. This was important for me because we could not fully understand the lecture content and requirements due to the language barrier. Our English proficiency was still limited so that helping each other was important to avoiding misunderstandings.

This demonstrates that WeChat served as a medium for overcoming the language barrier by allowing participants to ask clarifying questions to other CISs. This practice helped resolve misunderstandings related to class content or assignments and eased doubts or negative emotions associated with language difficulties.

However, fourth-year participant Zi noted the following:

I participated in a range of social activities, like language classes and communication programmes, to meet people from different backgrounds. I also listened to local radio programs, such as 9News, to improve my listening skills. I think that cultural difference does exist, but this factor did not have much of an influence on my socialisation and integration to the local community. Now, I have many friends in Australia. They are from different cultural backgrounds.

The interviews with Zi revealed that she did not rely on WeChat to navigate the language barrier. Instead, Zi's agency contributed to a transformation of her habitus. Her practices enabled her to develop a higher level of linguistic capital, which allowed her to adopt and use Western social media tools more comfortably, without depending on WeChat in the Australian context. This suggests that students often use WeChat as a compensatory tool to manage the absence of linguistic and social capital. When CISs possess sufficient levels of these forms of capital, the role of WeChat in their social networks and interactions tends to diminish.

5.2 Objectified Capital

Objectified capital refers to transformable cultural capital that is manifested through material objects or practices, such as access to and use of social media tools. In the Chinese context, WeChat can be understood as a form of objectified capital. The Chinese community legitimises WeChat through the continuous reproduction of its value and central role in everyday communication, work, entertainment and information sharing. Through repeated use and social reinforcement, WeChat becomes normalised and situated at the centre of many social activities. As a culturally specific tool, WeChat not only affirms in-group identity but can also function as a mechanism for excluding those outside the group. In this way, it reinforces cultural distinctions between Chinese and non-Chinese contexts. Consequently, WeChat serves as objectified capital by tangibly representing a field's cultural capital. It is a visible, concrete form through which cultural values are expressed. Many participants noted that nearly all CISs they knew used WeChat, which prompted them to use it to communicate and maintain social relationships.

For Chinese users, WeChat was a natural and rational media choice, deeply embedded in the socio-technological developments that shaped the CIS experience. It reflected a shared memory, set of experiences and behavioural patterns among many Chinese people of similar age groups. As Cong explained,

I think most Chinese people would experience two stages in their use of social media. They used QQ when they were at secondary school and then shifted to WeChat. It is about technical evolution. I think social influence is also a reason as most people use WeChat now so I also use WeChat. It is the influence of the social environment and flow. We use WeChat because of the social influence of everyone using it.

Yuan, another participant, demonstrated the strategic negotiation of different social spaces to gain social advantage:

I often use WeChat and Weibo. Most users of these platforms are Chinese, so there are no cultural differences. We can understand each other without problems or misunderstandings, like when using slang. It is more convenient for me to use these to engage with Chinese people because it brings a sense of closeness. I also use WeChat to get information about Melbourne, like about discounts and entertainment. At the same time, I use Western platforms, like WhatsApp, for group work purposes.

These examples illustrate how many Chinese people adapt to technological shifts and social currents by transitioning to WeChat. This shift reflects broader movements and fluctuations within the field in which they live and participate. WeChat thus acts as a form of objectified capital that materialises otherwise invisible cultural capital into a concrete, functional tool. It not only strengthens group identity but also reinforces the embodied cultural capital of the field. This explains why CISs continue to use WeChat while studying outside of their home country.

5.3 Social Capital

Cultural capital can be increased by building social capital and vice versa. It is important to note that a lack of cultural capital can create barriers, especially when combined with limited social capital. For CISs, WeChat served as a means of accumulating social capital by facilitating connections within social networks. This was an institutionalised network that relates to the membership system of a certain group. As such, WeChat practice is an informal network rooted in the institutionalised network of the Chinese fields to which they belonged. Therefore, the WeChat network can reflect social, embodied and cultural capital. It should be noted that WeChat was legitimised through the reproduction of its position in CISs' fields. It not only represented CISs' position in the Chinese fields but could also be a way to position others, such as non-Chinese students who are excluded from CISs and Chinese fields. Although this legitimised social media had deep roots formed through the embodied and social capital of the institutionalised social networks of Chinese fields, it also reflected the barriers CISs experienced when transitioning to the Australian university. Through WeChat practice, CISs could retain their social connections and prevent isolation when living and studying in Australia. It also provided support for each group member from the perspective of collective ownership of capital and allowed them to gain social capital in the form of a relationship network. The Chinese Student Association (CSA) was one university organisation that engaged with WeChat, ultimately enhancing some CISs' adaptation to university life.

The CSA was one of many university clubs and organisations hosting various activities both on and off campus to expand students' knowledge and perspectives. CISs could join the CSA WeChat group or follow its Official Account, which regularly shared updates about events and useful content. This account highlighted the CSA's efforts to collaborate with the university while aligning with CISs' social media habits. Through these efforts, the CSA became more relatable to CISs and kept them informed in a timely manner.

Jiao described her engagement with CSA's Official WeChat group as follows:

I took part in the activities held by the Chinese Student Association, joined the membership and paid a \$10 membership fee. At that time, they would hold welcome events for new students every year and set up a platform on campus. Not many interesting things. They only send pamphlets or information they want to publicize, like recruitment information and how to engage in activities and events. They may have other private WeChat groups, I guess.

Yuan said,

I also joined in some WeChat groups, such as the IT student group. We chat about IT experience, learning experience and exam experience. We can meet students that who enroll in the same paper or the former students of these courses, so we can communicate on these topics and support each other.

Xin stated,

To be honest, I was very hopeless at the beginning of the semester [2020]. Unlike other majors, like business, there were very few Chinese in my major. I had difficulties in the first few assignments. For the questions I did not know, I had to do it by myself. I had no idea to ask the teacher or my classmates because we didn't know each other and there was nothing I could do about it. I got to know a few classmates later when I was divided into a group for assignment in which there was a Chinese student. Now, it's much better for me to discuss assignments together by setting up a WeChat group. The situation has improved a lot since the beginning of the year.

A few participants perceived they did not receive sufficient support from the university in terms of community engagement. In such cases, where participants lacked adequate support and resources due to limited social capital, WeChat functioned as a pre-existing form of objectified capital that could help them improve their situation. This illustrates that WeChat is not only a crucial communication tool for CIS groups but also an important information-seeking resource. Its multifunctionality reinforced CISs' daily reliance on the platform. It reflected the ways in which activities were conducted within the social space of Chinese society. For these participants, WeChat practice appeared to be a means of accessing capital through Official Accounts or groups, helping mitigate their disadvantaged position in the Australian higher education field.

However, the interviews also revealed a more complex aspect of content shared through WeChat's public subscription accounts. Wen observed as follows:

I found the content on WeChat groups and Official Accounts to be quite tricky because they are not objective but instead, they are influenced by personal positions and perspectives. The majority of the editors are also Chinese so that they focused on the Chinese aspects of information and therefore develop content from the Chinese direction. This means the editors does not object through considering comprehensive information and content. Sometimes, for example, they will be oriented because they won't translate all information. They also usually translate with some personal emotions and they want the headline to be as eye-catching as possible. The Official Accounts just interpret an article, but the news is more of a neutral report. In many cases, if it is a WeChat Official Account, it may be too neutral to attract people's attention and thus deprive the site of traffic. If you read the WeChat Official Account first, you may be influenced by their political orientation or their mode of thinking. So, I think, in this case, it is better to look at original reports, like ABC News.

Yuan noted the following:

I also follow some Official Accounts to get information. For example, some Official Accounts are operated by local Chinese groups, like the Australian Daily. I get local news, such as information on COVID-19, from these Official Accounts rather than from TV news reports. However, I also search the local authority website to confirm these messages rather than fully rely on Official Accounts. The information on Official Accounts is not as reliable or comprehensive as those on Australian official websites.

As noted earlier, WeChat currently plays a dominant role as one of China's leading social media platforms. According to government regulations, Chinese social media companies must censor content before publication to shape citizens' political and social values. While some WeChat public subscription accounts are privately operated, they often publish emotionally charged, attention-grabbing content for the purpose of increasing traffic and attracting followers, potentially misleading readers. As Wen described, editors tend to translate selectively, infuse their interpretations with emotion and craft sensational headlines. After transitioning into the Australian higher education field, both Wen and Yuan became more aware of these patterns. Their habitus had begun to shift, influenced by the Australian cultural field. They were no longer following only culturally embedded practices from China but were actively seeking out Australian sources and learning about local news on their own.

This perception relates to the habitus reproduced within the field. Because CISs were raised in China, they shared a similar habitus that influenced them regardless of their specific city or region of origin. These ingrained dispositions shaped their thinking, values and practices, which in turn determined the types of information they sought and the perspectives that aligned with their expectations. As such, content circulated through WeChat was developed in accordance with this shared habitus, including common political positions and preferences, cultural knowledge and attention to family in China. WeChat content's tailored nature made it highly acceptable to CISs and strengthened the platform's embeddedness within their habitus. WeChat functioned as a vehicle for transmitting and transforming the Chinese cultural field's accepted or normalised values and ideas. In doing so, it demonstrated its reproductive role, further reinforcing its significance in CISs' social networks and accumulation of capital.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that most of the participants were aware of their fish-out-of-water experience during the transition process, which Bourdieu (1977) described as the 'hysteresis effect' (p. 78). Given the dynamic nature of Bourdieu's theory, as participants moved out of the Chinese context, it became apparent that, much like a fish realising it has been in water only after leaving it, students often became conscious of their cultural embeddedness only after some time after stepping into a new environment. Dai et al (2020) found that, although participants possessed agency, some reproduced the practices of their previous and familiar field while others attempted to alter it or were altered by it without CISs being fully aware. Their ability to do so depended on how effectively they used their knowledge to position themselves in the new context. If students recognised their position in a culturally different space, maintained self-awareness, challenged their habitus and transformed their social media practices, they were more likely to adapt successfully to the Australian context. Indeed, some participants worked diligently towards their goal, namely realising the anticipated outcomes of transitioning into Australia's higher education field. However, for various reasons, most participants did not fully engage in this process. Rather than actively striving to adapt, they continued to rely heavily on WeChat. As a result, while they were physically situated within the Australian higher education field, they remained virtually and psychologically rooted in the Chinese virtual field. In this sense, the persistence of their partial prior habitus shaped their adaptation.

The changed nature of the field that participants entered upon arriving in Australia facilitated their recognition of differences in cultural norms, communication styles and study practices embedded in their original habitus. While CISs possessed the capacity to exercise agency, that is, control over and reflection on their own habitus and the field, they sometimes applied this agency non-consciously. Participants often adopted a pragmatic approach, relying on past experience in China to assess situations and decide whether to adapt their behaviours to the new environment. Many reported gradually adjusting their practices over time. Some expressed intentional efforts to adapt, such as by using Western social media platforms, actively interacting with non-Chinese students from diverse backgrounds and working to overcome language barriers. They saw these efforts as ways to ease their transition into the Australian higher education context. These participants demonstrated an awareness of how to extract value from the new environment, adjust their habitus and sustain adaptive practices to position themselves effectively within the field's new context. However, most participants did not sustain these adaptive practices over time. This may reflect a misalignment between their existing habitus and the new field's norms.

Participants experienced a restructuring of habitus during their transition to studying in Australia. Their understanding of what Bourdieu referred to as *doxa* (1990), or their presuppositions of the game, was becoming more available to assist them in understanding how they were now positioned. It also assisted them to form ways to position themselves more strongly. As their presuppositions and concomitant cultural and social capital from the Chinese context ceased to function in the same way, they began to question their internalised assumptions of which they were becoming more conscious. For example, Wen was initially highly motivated to integrate with non-Chinese students upon arriving in Australia. She actively engaged in classroom discussions with students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, demonstrating an understanding of how to acquire capital in the academic setting. However, over time, she withdrew from these interactions in social contexts, ultimately finding a stronger sense of belonging among Chinese peers who shared her cultural background. She noted that she was unable to extend relationships beyond the classroom, which may have been due to the language barrier. Wen's experience illustrates the degree of misalignment between her habitus and the reduced value of her capital within the new field context. The lack of linguistic capital created social distance and reinforced boundaries between groups. Her case also reflects Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* (1990), which refers to one's investment in the game and the belief that participating in a particular field is meaningful and worthwhile. For Wen, integrating with local or other international students was not simply a matter of choosing to do so. It required significant time and emotional investment to overcome the language barrier and build relationships. Such an effort could be perceived as offering a meaningful return to justify the investment. Xuan's experience further illustrates this phenomenon, as she occupied an "in-between" status: an outsider in the domestic student group and an insider within the CIS group. These findings are consistent with earlier research. For example, Dai et al. (2018) noted that comparative experiences of Chinese and Australian education systems often produced a sense of in-betweenness among CISs. Similarly, Dai et al. (2020), in a study of a joint programme, found that while CISs were familiar with the logic of the Chinese higher education field, they felt like fish out of water in the Australian context because their habitus did not align with the new field. Dai et al. (2020) described the emergence of a diasporic, cosmopolitan habitus among some participants, formed through transnational experience. In this study, CISs' habitus was shaped through the transition process, including their use of WeChat. For some, as they moved through different cultural and educational contexts, their habitus adapted, evolved or remained in flux. After experiencing the hysteresis effect, some participants remained in an in-between state, navigating both the old and new fields simultaneously. Habitus is fluid, and the factors that influence its transformation during transitional experiences varied across individuals. For CISs, the realisation and acceptance of these limitations played a vital role because they directly influenced the value and transferability of their capital in the new field.

Kim and Chang (2021) found that the communication patterns involved in CISs' WeChat use could influence their learning outcomes, and they further suggested that CISs should use WeChat appropriately during their studies in Australia. In addition, R. Hou et al. (2021) observed that the frequency and duration of WeChat use can affect Chinese university students' quality of life, due to the platform's influence on self-control and the dynamics of their social relationships and activities. Extending this work, we demonstrate the need for higher education institutions to consider how social media can be used more effectively to improve CISs' transitions and therefore study experiences. Institutions could also support CISs in adopting Western social media platforms to help them navigate the digital transition and enhance their social engagement. By investigating CISs' social media practices, we show that WeChat has the potential to support CISs' transition into the Australian higher education field.

Higher education institutions around the world use Chinese social media platforms for marketing and promotional purposes, to share information and to disseminate university news and events (Ali & Hu, 2022). Australian universities are no exception. Prior scholars (e.g., Ali & Hu, 2022) have asserted that WeChat is the preferred channel

for electronic word-of-mouth communication about studying abroad among prospective CISs. In addition, educational institutions and international student recruitment agents in New Zealand have recognised the Chinese market's importance and WeChat marketing strategies' effectiveness. CISs prefer to access information about New Zealand's education system and academic opportunities through WeChat. As most participants affirmed in this study, they trusted and relied on education-related information obtained through the platform when considering study abroad options and were aware of WeChat's potential to filter certain types of government control. As the international education market continues to evolve, CISs have an increasing range of options for study destinations. For Australian universities to provide better services and strengthen their reputations in this competitive global market, it seems essential that higher education institutions and policy-makers understand CISs' social media practices, along with their experiences and strategies for adapting to study and life overseas.

6. Conclusion

In this study we adopted Bourdieu's conceptual framework that included concepts of field, habitus, capital, doxa, hysteresis and illusio to explore how WeChat use influenced the forms of capital that CISs drew upon while studying at an Australian university. We conducted semistructured interviews using the scroll-back method to examine CISs' perspectives and encourage reflection on their experiences in Australia including their social media practices. The findings suggest that differences in habitus played a key role in shaping CISs' communication patterns and social media behaviours. WeChat had become a key characteristic of the CIS habitus, helping maintain their identity and position within Chinese social spaces. It could also be considered a virtual space where multiple fields, such as education and family, intersected to allow CISs to access and accumulate social and cultural capital, much as they would in Australian higher education's physical field. These findings highlight WeChat's vital role in CISs' academic and social lives in Australia. However, the study's limitations must be acknowledged, particularly its inability to capture the full diversity of experiences across all CISs. We drew participants from a single Australian university, and their experiences may not be representative of the whole target population. Future scholars could expand the scope of this study by employing a larger and more diverse sample size from other universities and incorporating perspectives from key stakeholders (e.g., university key stakeholders and academic staff) to help develop a more comprehensive analysis.

We contribute to theory by interpreting CISs' social media practices through a Bourdieusian lens. We argue that while CISs exercise agency in recognising and accumulating various forms of capital, the interaction and mutual construction of field and habitus also shape their success. Therefore, it is important for CISs to position themselves in ways that enable them to acquire relevant capital and successfully transition into the Australian higher education field, rather than rely heavily on WeChat and the culturally familiar content that Chinese students' shared habitus shapes. CISs should be encouraged to reflect on their own agency and consider how they can actively engage with the higher education field's new context. At the same time, they may require the university's explicit institutional guidance and support to help them navigate this transition effectively.

For Australian institutions, the challenge is to explore WeChat's potential further while creating inclusive spaces that encourage CISs to step beyond their comfort zones. For CISs, the challenge is to navigate strategically between the use of WeChat and studying in the destination country's university. Thus, the insights offered can assist Australian university decision-makers and policy-makers in better understanding how CISs perceive institutional support and in making appropriate adjustments to improve the effectiveness of current support programs. Finally, we recommend that CISs strive to balance their use of WeChat to engage more fully with their international hosts such as Australian higher education and broader society. Doing so may enable them to acquire more valuable forms of capital and enhance their academic and social integration.

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