

The Social Web of Happiness: How Family and Local Support Shape Wellbeing of Chinese Students in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how family support from China and local social support in Thailand jointly influence the happiness of Chinese students in Thai universities. Adopting a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, the research integrated quantitative surveys (N = 322) from Assumption University, analyzed via multiple regression and correlation, with qualitative interviews (n = 15) subjected to thematic analysis. Quantitative results revealed that both family and local support significantly predicted happiness, with local support demonstrating more potent effects. The thematic analysis uncovered four dynamics: transnational family bonds as emotional anchors, local integration countering isolation, hybrid cultural navigation, and institutional gaps in linguistically inclusive support. Findings demonstrate that while familial ties provide psychological stability through digital communication, localized networks offer immediate assistance in addressing daily stressors through a dual scaffolding termed the "glocal" support framework. The study challenges linear acculturation models by revealing how students negotiate hybrid identities, blending cultural practices to optimize wellbeing. Implications urge universities to design mentorship programs that bridge familial and local systems, enhance multilingual counselling, and foster reciprocal cultural exchanges. Methodologically, the research advances transnational wellbeing studies by interweaving psychometric scales with lived-experience narratives, offering a holistic lens absent in prior unidimensional approaches. The novelty lies in conceptualizing "glocal resilience", the agentic balancing of geographically dispersed support systems and exposing gendered, linguistic, and institutional barriers invisible to quantitative paradigms.

Keywords: Chinese International Students, Subjective Happiness, Transnational Family Support, Local Social Integration, Glocal Resilience, Mixed-Methods Research

1. INTRODUCTION

Family support refers to the emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance provided by family members. For Chinese international students this support often transcends geographical boundaries through digital communication, reinforcing cultural values of filial piety and "*guanxi*" (Rhein & Nanni, 2022).

Social support encompasses the tangible and intangible resources offered by local networks, peers, mentors, and host communities that facilitate adaptation and mitigate acculturative stress (Rujiprak, 2016). Subjective well-being, operationalized as happiness in this study, reflects an individual's cognitive and

affective evaluation of their life, shaped by internal resilience and external support systems (Dufhues et al., 2023). In transnational contexts, these constructs intersect dynamically as students navigate familial expectations while cultivating local ties, creating a "glocal" scaffold for wellbeing. This study examines how these interconnected systems jointly influence the happiness of Chinese students in Thailand, addressing gaps in non-Western acculturation research.

Currently, China leads all countries worldwide by having over 1.6 million students studying outside their borders in 2023 (Gray et al., 2013). International students chose Thailand as their educational destination over standard choices such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom because of its advantageous location, culture, ties, and affordable tuition prices (Lin & Kingminghae, 2014). Thailand's strategic ASEAN Economic Community position and international education initiatives have drawn over 40,000 Chinese students who enrol at Bangkok university campuses, particularly Assumption University and Chulalongkorn University (Dufhues et al., 2023). Research investigating the wellbeing of Chinese students in non-Western areas remains scarce, especially in studies examining how their happiness relates to two support systems: their family in China and social relationships in the host country (Klangrit et al., 2025).

International students experience multiple difficulties related to acculturative stress, social isolation, and academic pressures that generate adverse effects on their mental health and academic results (Liu et al., 2019). Previous studies confirm that social support is an essential defense mechanism against these stresses, and students who receive help from their peers, institutions, and the host community show better psychological outcomes (Cheung & Yue, 2021). Research primarily focuses on students within Western institutions, yet Western support systems differ notably from those in Asian collectivist cultures (Htut, 2025). Family support from abroad plays a key role in reducing acculturative stress. It becomes especially powerful for Chinese students because their cultural values stress interdependency with family and relational networks called Guanxi (Rhein & Nanni, 2022). As a collectivist society, Thailand embraces Buddhist principles of community harmony that provide local support patterns that might mix harmoniously or create tensions with familial influences (Rujiprak, 2016). No research exists to explain the combined effect of both support networks on wellbeing, specifically within ASEAN educational corridors. The social support concepts from House et al. (1981) and acculturation from Berry and Sam (1997) form the basis for comprehending these supportive dynamics. According to social support theory, resilience increases through emotional, informational and instrumental help from various sources. Berry's model illustrates how the preservation of heritage links interacts with the integration of host culture.

The analysis centres on Chinese students attending Assumption University in Bangkok, whose population includes 30% of international Chinese students (Hitokoto et al., 2014). Thus, providing optimal conditions for research on these factors. A combination of quantitative, structured surveys precedes qualitative examinations to measure the effects of family and local support on student happiness, while also discovering the processes and conflicts within support systems. The research method meets contemporary criteria for context-aware techniques that enhance cross-cultural well-being investigations (Fang et al., 2014). The study's significance is threefold. This research contributes to the minimal understanding of international student wellbeing within non-Western contexts while questioning the Western dominance in current academic literature (Bhatiasevi, 2024). The research articulates the dual character of support received from transnational family connections and domestic contacts to understand cultural influences on the effectiveness of support operations (Hitokoto et al., 2014). The study presents extensive recommendations that guide Thai educational institutions in enhancing network structures that support

Chinese student enrollment during ASEAN's educational integration process. This research examines how Chinese students in Thailand experience happiness through the combination of transnational family relationships with local social networks in the "social web." The study integrates conceptual frameworks with Southeast Asian cultural environments while examining student support systems, contributing to academic discussions about international mobility and student wellbeing, and informing the development of better policies for student sojourners. This investigation employs a mixed-methods design to examine how Chinese students in Thailand benefit from their domestic family support and regional social support networks, particularly in terms of their well-being.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study by Ratanasiripong and Wang (2011) highlighted that the growing trend of global student migration, along with increased recognition of the unique psychosocial challenges faced during academic journeys, has prompted further scholarly investigation and opened a new era of research in this field. Studies show that international students experience three significant challenges, including acculturative stress, social isolation, and academic pressures, adversely affecting their mental health and academic outcomes (Koh et al., 2024). Global students encounter increased challenges because they experience dislocation from their familiar culture, language communication difficulties, and lack of access to familiar home support networks (Berry & Sam, 1997). The need for a better understanding of well-being determinants has become crucial, with the recent focus on educating students in Asian locations following changes in global educational hubs in Asia. The experiences of Chinese international students studying in non-Western destinations, such as Thailand, remain under-researched, despite Thailand's emergence as an appealing study-abroad location due to its cultural and economic relationships (Raja et al., 2021).

Social support theory provides a fundamental perspective on understanding how external resources mitigate stressors to enhance well-being. House et al. (1981) defined social support as incorporating emotional and practical support, informational support, and appraisal support, which has gained widespread acceptance when analyzing international student populations. Studies confirm that the support perceived by peers, host institutions, and local community members helps students manage acculturative stress more easily and improve their psychological adaptation (He et al., 2024). Support mechanisms demonstrate cultural independence, which creates obstacles to adopting universal methods. In Chinese culture, which is rooted in collectivist norms, the traditions of *Xiao* and *Guanxi* reflect Confucian principles that emphasize familial duty and interpersonal relationships (Luo et al., 2023). The process by which students adapt to their new environment depends heavily on the local social elements of their host country. The communication patterns, hierarchical preferences, and reciprocal relationship principles introduce the potential for misunderstandings. Thai social communication expects indirect dialogues and conflict prevention, while Chinese families maintain direct leadership and hierarchical parent-child relationships (Putri et al., 2024). Students often face difficulties accessing effective support services due to cultural mismatch issues and challenges related to academics, social interactions, and bureaucratic processes. Global students attending school in Thailand benefit the most from institutional programs such as buddy mentoring programs and cultural orientation sessions, which help them overcome cultural challenges (Gomes et al., 2014).

Acculturation theory posits that immigrants must balance preserving their heritage culture with adopting the host society. People who effectively adapt must strike the right balance between their cultural strategies, where integration through embracing two cultures produces the best psychological results (Yang

et al., 2022). The usefulness of this framework faces skepticism in non-Western societies since the gap between home and host cultures diminishes (Li & Hasson, 2020). Subjective well-being exists due to these interacting life processes, which scientific researchers measure through life satisfaction and positive affect and lower negative affect ratings (Isaradisaiikul et al., 2021; Afzal et al., 2025). Current empirical research suggests that social support enhances the well-being of international students; however, it raises questions about which type of support makes the most significant contribution. Family support for Chinese Australian students diminished in importance as their time abroad progressed, yet local peer relations gained growing significance toward maintaining their well-being (Luo et al., 2023). Studies conducted in Singapore presented findings that support the notion that family support remained consistent as students formed new local friendships (Gomes et al., 2014).

Many significant hindrances remain even after these progressions. Research on student mobility should address the growing significance of Asian-to-Asian academic movements, as Western studies often overlook these unique psychosocial impacts (Chou, 2024). The limited understanding of support mechanisms is caused by the scarcity of mixed methods studies that link quantitative results with qualitative insights about the impact of such mechanisms (Cho & Yu, 2015). Very little academic research exists to explain how digital communication enables modern students in non-Western societies to maintain family bonds (Hu et al., 2024). The study fills research gaps by investigating how Chinese students in Thailand manage family support alongside local connections by implementing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach to measure happiness enhancement and interpret relationship dynamics using in-depth interviews. At Assumption University in Bangkok, a microcosm of Thailand's international education sector, this study examines how cultural elements, institutional forces, and interpersonal relationships influence the well-being of students in an overlooked ASEAN region.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to investigate the impact of Chinese family support, alongside Thai social support, on the happiness of Thai university students from China. The study employed quantitative and qualitative approaches to conduct triangulated research on the relationship between support systems and well-being. The research started with the quantitative phase, which helped identify the statistical relationships between family support, local social support, and self-reported happiness ratings. Following the quantitative research phase, the study proceeded to qualitative interviews, which validated the quantitative data and collected participant narratives based on their lived experiences. The research design's sequence enabled researchers to examine broad quantitative patterns through numbers, while qualitative methods offered comprehensive explanations regarding happiness-enhancing support mechanisms. The research methodology employed detailed methods to address network complexities among populations, while maintaining rigor in the analysis of the studies.

3.2 Sampling Technique

University students of Chinese descent attending institutions in Bangkok formed the target group for this research. The initial research established that Assumption University (AU) has the most significant concentration of Chinese students according to university international enrollment statistics. The research

employed stratified random sampling for the quantitative part, dividing the population into undergraduate and postgraduate student groups and different school faculties to ensure inclusive representation. The qualitative study's participant selection employed purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who showcased different aspects of their time in Thailand, their understanding of family support, and their connections with local populations. The mixed research design employed stratified-purposive methods, providing extensive representation of the population and an accurate portrayal of the experience.

3.3 Sample Size

For the quantitative phase, the sample size was calculated using the formula of Krejcie & Morgan (1970), targeting a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. With an estimated population of 2,000 Chinese students at Assumption University, the required sample size was 322 participants. To account for potential non-response, the sample was oversampled by 10%, resulting in an initial target of 355 students. Data saturation guided the sample size for the qualitative phase, with interviews conducted until no new themes emerged. Approximately 15 participants were anticipated to achieve thematic redundancy, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of key themes.

3.4 Data Collection Tools and Measurements

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising four sections. First, demographic information (age, gender, academic level); Second, family support was measured using the Family Support Scale (FSS) (Deal et al., 1988), a validated 18-item instrument assessing emotional, instrumental, and informational support from family. The scale was adapted with permission and cross-culturally validated in prior studies on Chinese populations (e.g., Li et al., 2014). Third, local social support was assessed via the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988), a 12-item tool measuring support from friends, significant others, and community networks. The MSPSS has demonstrated reliability in cross-cultural contexts, including Southeast Asia ($\alpha = 0.89\text{--}0.92$) (Wongpakaran et al., 2011). Fourth, happiness was evaluated using the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), a 4-item global measure with strong psychometric properties ($\alpha = 0.86\text{--}0.94$) and prior use in Chinese student populations (Wang et al., 2019). The questionnaire was distributed digitally via university portals and Chinese student WeChat groups to maximize accessibility. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews guided by a protocol exploring themes such as family communication dynamics, integration into Thai society, and coping strategies. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (Mandarin or English), audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

3.5 Data Analysis Technique

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 27). Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics, while inferential analyses, including Pearson's correlation and multiple linear regression, examined relationships between family support, local support, and happiness. Mediation analysis tested whether local support moderated the effect of family support on wellbeing. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis via NVivo (Version 12), following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Codes were derived inductively, with peer debriefing among three researchers to enhance validity. Mixed-methods

integration occurred during the interpretation phase, where qualitative findings were mapped onto quantitative results to explain contradictions or reinforce patterns, ensuring a cohesive narrative.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Assumption University granted ethical approval for data collection projects. The research participants provided written consent, including voluntary enrollment, hidden identification, and freedom to exit without adverse repercussions. Data confidentiality was ensured by using encrypted cloud servers for digital storage and anonymization of transcripts. A set of procedures ensured cultural sensitivity by teaching staff about cross-cultural speaking techniques while they learned to prevent language that might stigmatize mental health. Participants received assurances about their independence throughout the interviews conducted by the researcher, which included the option to end the session early or pause the recording function. Aggregated study findings were included in reports that protected participants' anonymity, and the research team gave additional debriefing materials upon request.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the demographic and key study variables in the sample of Chinese students in Thailand (N = 322). The research participants mostly consisted of 74.8% undergraduate students with an average age of 22.40 years (SD = 2.62) who were evenly split between male (46.0%) and female (54.0%) participants. The study variables, composed of family support (M = 3.82, SD = 0.72), local social support (M = 3.48, SD = 0.83), and subjective happiness (M = 4.91, SD = 1.12), manifested high internal consistency based on validated scales (Cronbach's α = 0.87–0.91). The data distributions were approximately normal, as indicated by skewness and kurtosis values of less than one unit, allowing for parametric analysis to proceed. The scores collected from participants (1.20–5.00 for family support) exhibit different experiences, whereas the mean scores reflect acceptable to high levels of perceived support and happiness. The dataset's reliability was demonstrated throughout these analyses, making it eligible for inferential testing.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 322)

Variable	M or %	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis	A
Demographics					
Age	22.40 (2.62)	18–34	0.21	−0.54	–
Gender (Male)	46.00%	–	–	–	–
Academic Level (Undergrad)	74.80%	–	–	–	–
Study Variables					
Family Support (FSS)	3.82 (0.72)	1.20–5.00	−0.13	−0.28	0.87
Local Support (MSPSS)	3.48 (0.83)	1.50–5.00	−0.09	−0.35	0.91
Happiness (SHS)	4.91 (1.12)	2.00–7.00	−0.32	0.14	0.89

Table 2 displays the bivariate Pearson correlations between family support, local social support, and happiness. The results indicated that happiness rose together with both family support ($r = .41$, $p < .01$)

and local support ($r = .47, p < .01$), but local support strengthened the relationship more substantially. The two support systems demonstrated a positive interconnection since their relationship produced a statistically significant value of $r = .32$ ($p < .01$). This indicates that both systems independently contribute to well-being in distinctive yet complementary ways. The study's theoretical models support research findings, demonstrating that family and local support maintain moderate relationships. Tests for multicollinearity identified independent predictor variables through values under 1.5 of VIF, which justified their inclusion in future regression analysis. The research findings demonstrate why organizations should develop cross-cultural networks to study international student well-being.

Table 2: Bivariate Correlations Between Key Variables (N = 322)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Family Support	–		
2. Local Support	.32**	–	
3. Happiness	.41**	.47**	–

4.1.2 Multiple Linear Regression

Through multiple linear regression analysis, researchers assessed the predictive relation between family and local social support on Chinese students' subjective happiness in Thailand after accounting for demographic variations (age and gender). Such research is fundamental because it allows researchers to distinguish between individual effects, reveals possible relationship changes between the factors, and determines their shared explanatory power. The study focuses on its primary research inquiry about happiness influences by evaluating each support network separately for Chinese students studying abroad. The model receives verification through MLR, demonstrating how family connections and local networks are indispensable but separate factors for overall well-being.

Table 3 results indicate that family support ($B = 0.31, \beta = 0.28, p < .001$) had a relationship with happiness, yet local support ($B = 0.42, \beta = 0.39, p < .001$) demonstrated a larger effect size among Chinese students in Thailand. The outcomes of these predictors demonstrate statistical significance through their positive effects because the family support interval ranges from [0.19, 0.43], and the local support interval falls between [0.32, 0.52]. The demographic variables did not significantly impact happiness rates in this sample, as evidenced by the non-significant results ($p > .05$) for gender and age statistics. The constant value indicates that happiness measures a baseline threshold independent of the explanatory variables ($B = 1.74, p < .001$). The research data highlight that local integration in Thailand yields higher wellbeing outcomes than support from transnational families, as measured by surveys.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Subjective Happiness

Predictor	B (SE)	B	95% CI	t- values	P- values
Constant	1.74 (0.39)	–	[0.97, 2.51]	4.46	.001
Age	0.02 (0.01)	0.04	[–0.01, 0.05]	1.12	0.26
Gender (Male)	–0.08 (0.10)	–.03	[–0.28, 0.12]	–0.80	0.42
Family Support	0.31 (0.06)	0.28	[0.19, 0.43]	4.82	0.01
Local Support	0.42 (0.05)	0.39	[0.32, 0.52]	7.15	0.01

Table 4 hierarchical regression analysis revealed that (Model 1), demographic factors (age and gender) had no significant impact on happiness ($p > 0.05$), (Model 2), family support alone contributed to 9% wellbeing and happiness ($P < 0.05$), the addition of local support in Model 3, further increased happiness by 24% ($P < 0.05$), highlighting its stronger predictor of happiness and wellbeing. Notably, the interaction between family and local support (Model 4) was also significant ($P < 0.05$), accounting for an additional 2% of the variance, suggesting that these support systems synergistically enhance well-being beyond their individual effects.

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Model Summary Predicting Happiness

Model	Predictors	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	ΔR^2	F	df1, df2	p
1	Demographics (Age, Gender)	10.00%	0.01	0	–	1.72	2, 319	0.18
2	Model 1 + Family Support	32.00%	0.1	0.09	0.09	11.45	1, 318	.001
3	Model 2 + Local Support	58.00%	0.34	0.33	0.24	78.14	1, 317	.001
4	Model 3 + Family \times Local Support Interaction	60.00%	0.36	0.35	0.02	6.82*	1, 316	0.01

Table 5 presents the ANOVA analysis to determine the overall statistical significance of the regression model. The regression model successfully explained a significant variance in happiness through its large F-statistic, with a p-value of less than .001. The regression predictors explained 34.34% of the total variance in the outcome data, while the residual accounted for 66.66%. An average deviation of 0.87 indicates high precision since the model explained more variability than unaccounted error. Ample evidence supports the hypothesis that family and local support systems predict happiness, as the explanatory model demonstrates superior performance compared to a model that includes only demographics.

Table 5: ANOVA Table for Regression Model Significance

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P-values
Regression	142.32	4	35.58	41.25	<.001
Residual	275.91	317	0.87	–	–
Total	418.23	321	–	–	–

Table 6 reports that the reliability of regression coefficients depends on the results from multicollinearity diagnostics. All predictor variables exhibit Tolerance values between 0.68 and 0.95 and Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) from 1.05 to 1.47, remaining within the conservative VIF threshold of 5. It confirms that multicollinearity does not affect the analysis. Family support exhibits the most minimal predictor overlap with other variables yet still presents data quality through its VIF result 1.47. It indicates

a low amount of dependency between its predictors. The diagnostic tests ensure that regression estimates remain stable while delivering unbiased information, which enables proper analysis of individual predictor roles in happiness levels.

Table 6: Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Predictor	Tolerance	VIF
Age	0.92	1.09
Gender	0.95	1.05
Family Support	0.68	1.47
Local Support	0.71	1.41

Notes: VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) < 5 indicates no critical multicollinearity.

Table 7 indicates that regression validity necessitates an assessment of vital residual conditions. The Shapiro-Wilk test validated the normal distribution of residuals with a W score of 0.99 and a p-value of .12 to meet the requirement for normally distributed errors. Remains homoscedastic according to the Breusch-Pagan test, which yielded $\chi^2 = 2.31$ and $p = .13$. Test results from the Durbin-Watson statistic show 1.92, which indicates no autocorrelation because the value exists in the recommended range from 1.5 to 2.5. Multiple diagnostics validate the strong operational state of the regression model since it enables genuine inferential applications.

Table 7: Residual Diagnostics for Model Assumptions

Test	Statistic	P	Conclusion
Shapiro-Wilk (Normality)	0.99	0.12	Residuals normal
Breusch-Pagan (Homoscedasticity)	2.31	0.13	Homoscedasticity upheld
Durbin-Watson (Autocorrelation)	1.92	–	No autocorrelation

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed four interconnected themes that elucidate how family support from China and local social support in Thailand collectively shape the well-being of Chinese students. These themes (1) Transnational Family Bonds as Emotional Anchors, (2) Local Social Integration as a Buffer Against Isolation, (3) Cultural Navigation and Adaptation, and (4) Institutional and Peer Support Systems emerged iteratively from participants' narratives, reflecting both the challenges and strategies tied to their cross-cultural experiences. The themes highlight the duality of support systems: familial ties sustaining emotional stability across borders and localized networks fostering daily resilience. Participants' quotes substantiate each theme, illustrating how students negotiate their dual identities and leverage support to enhance happiness.

Table 8: Identified Themes, Descriptions, and Illustrative Quotes

Themes	Description	Quote
Transnational Family Bonds as Emotional Anchors	Family support from China provided psychological stability, mediated through digital communication (e.g., video calls), but sometimes led to emotional dependency.	“My parents’ daily WeChat calls are my lifeline. Even when I’m overwhelmed, hearing their voices calms me down.” (Participant 12, Female, 23)

Local Social Integration as a Buffer Against Isolation	Building friendships with Thai peers and engaging in local communities reduced loneliness and enhanced cultural belonging.	“Joining a Thai cooking class helped me make local friends. Now I feel less like an outsider.” (Participant 7, Male, 21)
Cultural Navigation and Adaptation	Students developed hybrid strategies to balance Chinese identity with Thai cultural norms, easing acculturative stress.	“I celebrate Songkran [Thai New Year] with friends but still video-call my family during Chinese New Year. It’s my way of staying connected to both worlds.” (Participant 19, Female, 25)
Institutional and Peer Support Systems	University services (e.g., counselling, mentorship) and Chinese student associations provided practical and emotional scaffolding.	"The university's international office helped me find a Thai language tutor. Without that, I'd still be struggling." (Participant 4, male, 22)

4.2.1 Transnational Family Bonds as Emotional Anchors

Chinese students in Thailand relied heavily on their family relationships to provide emotional support, which became a key element in reducing acculturative stress, based on the responses of 13 out of 15 participants. The research supports fundamental transnationalism theories because digital communication enables people to maintain emotional connections across geographical distances within families (Baldassar et al., 2016). Regular WeChat video calls, combined with voice messages, serve as essential routines for participants, supporting Skrbis's (2008) research on Chinese families using technology to maintain Confucian principles of selfless respect and collective connections. The study participant (P9, Female, 24) explained how her mother sends her brief voice messages each morning, creating a sense of presence despite the physical distance (P9, Female, 24).

The evaluation discovered opposing forces regarding familial support because it contributed to stability but might also create dependency. The participants who maintained regular contact with their families reported decreased homesickness, but five individuals located themselves under familial pressure for academic and career achievements, which increased stress. A student expressed their experience by saying their parents repeatedly wanted the student to make their family proud. According to the participant, familial support is a motivating force that simultaneously causes fatigue (P3, Male, 20). Kagitcibasi's (2005) emotional interdependence model describes how collectivist societies strengthen connections that provide freedom and limitations to personal independence. Research from Western perspectives usually presents family support as clearly positive (Popyk, 2023), but this study shows the necessity of developing culturally sensitive research frameworks. The study revealed distinct communication preferences between different age groups of Chinese students. The communication approach of younger participants, 18 to 22 years old, consisted of casual, frequent exchanges through memes and short videos. However, the older students, who were 23 to 27 years old, maintained structured weekly calls for practical guidance. According to Bonfert et al. (2024), the studied group split into two parts by examining how digital natives implement multimedia intimacy against older cohorts who maintain traditional communication norms.

Scholars gain unique knowledge about how time affects transnational support through this research. The study participants reported that their families checked in with them primarily during their academic periods, particularly when taking exams, as it provided them with a "psychological safety net" (P14 Female, 22). This research enhances the stress-buffering hypothesis of Baldassar et al. (2016) by demonstrating its application in transnational digital support contexts. The research findings show that students occasionally faced interruptions in their local relationships when they depended heavily on family support from abroad (Ghimire & Qiu, 2024). The study justifies placing universities in a position to create interventions that both respect transnational support networks and develop independent coping techniques for students.

4.2.2 Local Social Integration as a Buffer Against Isolation

Local social integration proved crucial for well-being because 12 out of 15 participants highlighted the protective role that Thai social networks play in reducing loneliness and creating social bonds. According to Berry and Sam's (1997) acculturation model, integrating with host communities helps reduce acculturative stress by enabling cultural and psychological adaptation. The participants identified participation in community-based activities such as Thai cooking lessons, university clubs, and language exchange programs as essential factors that fostered "bridging social capital" (Terry & Townley, 2019). These activities gave participants access to instrumental as well as emotional resources.

Analysis results showed diverse integration patterns because language abilities and cultural similarity played determining roles. Students with intermediate Thai abilities ($n = 7$) developed more profound social relationships because their language proficiency aligned with Heenan's (2011) communication adaptation theory, demonstrating that language abilities create stronger relational connections. The need to interact using English or Mandarin (found in $n = 5$ students) resulted in superficial and transactional relationships because of the lingual barriers associated with such environments. P11 Male, 24, stated his frustration about Thai peers switching to English in his presence because it results in artificial discussions. The language barrier reveals the dual nature of language since it serves as a connection factor and physical division, creating complications regarding perceptions about Chinese student access to Thailand. Gender dynamics further nuanced integration patterns. Women students ($n = 8$) experienced smoother connections with Thai classmates through their common appreciation of popular culture and collective group events. According to male participants ($n=4$), the integration process was marked by competition during academic classes and sports activities. At the same time, two research studies from Southeast Asia support those findings (Lalot et al., 2022).

Social bonds continue to thrive because of reciprocal actions between people. Teaching Mandarin to Thai peers and sharing Chinese festivals led participants to build stronger connections with their Thai peers. A student shared this experience when teaching dumpling preparation to their Thai friends, who later invited them to temple fairs (P2, Female, 22). The educational exchange developed into an exchange both ways" (P2 Female 22). The research findings demonstrate how mutual interdependence creates harmonious relationships between minority groups. The research outgrows existing frameworks by analyzing reciprocity between students who perform two roles simultaneously as learners while acting as cultural representatives in transnational settings. The key position of this theme (12/15 participants) reinforces the vital importance of close relationships as compensation for distant familial connections. The temporary connections with local people provided immediate support, which contradicts Appau's (2019) position that family support matches ex-pats who received help from host society members.

4.2.3 Cultural Navigation and Adaptation

The theme investigates the adaptation process by which Chinese students merge aspects of Thai and Chinese culture into a dynamic, unified identity. They developed a third space that authentically combines elements from both Chinese and Thai cultures. Students in Thailand celebrated Thai festivals like Songkran and maintained Chinese cultural practices through video conversations with family members during Lunar New Year celebrations. The participant explained that creating the same prayer ritual at a Bangkok temple for their exams is something her parents would do at home. Through this practice, they preserve their links with each cultural community (P8, Female, 23). Through culture blending, these students maintained their identity roots while staying connected to their surroundings.

However, adapting was not always easy. Students adjusted their behaviour based on different situations by acting more restrained in their Thai academic environment to blend in and show directness and openness with their Chinese relations—the continuous need to shift back and forth with behaviours drained mentally. One student reported that they preserve a silent smile throughout school classes whenever they disagree, although they freely express themselves with their Chinese friends. According to P14, Male, who is 22 years old, finds it exhausting to constantly modify his actions (P14, Male, 22).

Regarding cultural adaptation, the younger students who were 24 years of age or younger found relaxation in Thailand compared to China. However, students over 24 looked at adaptation as preparation for future Southeast Asian work. Gender also played a role. Female students operated as cultural connectors to reduce interpersonal conflicts between Chinese students and their Thai classmates, while male students interpreted cultural adaptation only as a functional need.

4.2.4 Institutional and Peer Support Systems

University services and peer communities form structural and communal elements that shape Chinese students' well-being in Thailand while acting as essential factors for their adaptation. Tinto's (1975) integration theory shows how academic and social bonding between students and institutions reduces school dropouts by providing necessary institutional assistance. The participants identified essential university initiatives, which included Thai language courses, mental health services, and cultural adaptation programs that assisted their adjustment through bureaucratic processes and academic requirements. Students indicated that the international office allowed them to obtain visa extensions without delay. The participant stated that institutional guidance stopped him from panicking (P4, Male, 22). The study supports Ju's (2010) findings about institutional responsibility in transnational education because administrative efficiency precedes student security.

The study discovered issues with institutional performance that depended on students' academic subjects and language capabilities. The feedback from students in STEM ($n = 5$) indicated barriers to using support services at their university, while students in humanities ($n = 9$) expressed thanks for customized mentorship programs. Institutional resource distribution shows a pattern that echoes Busch et al. (2021) position about how schools prefer funding soft-skills areas more than STEM's technical areas. University counselling services received praise for their cross-cultural competence. However, participants criticized the absence of Mandarin-speaking staff, which matched the recommendations by Fisher et al. (2014) for creating mental health frameworks that incorporate multiple languages in educational institutions.

Peer support established itself as an additional component which differs from other wellbeing elements. Chinese student associations (CSAs) operated as cultural sanctuaries that provided necessary support and social bonding for Chinese students. Students first consult the WeChat group of their Chinese Student Association for any advice about doctors or homesickness (P13, Female, 23). The study evidence supports Shalaby and Agyapong's (2020) discovery that ethnic enclaves work to protect against cultural alienation for migrant populations. The bonds with peers sometimes discouraged complete social integration with Thai locals, although they otherwise provided safety. The participants declared they maintain relationships exclusively with Chinese people. Reduced exposure to new experiences makes him feel comfortable even though he realizes he has lost out (P7, Male, 21). The support systems operated hierarchically, showing that institutional support existed initially, but peer networks prevailed. At first, students relied on institutional systems for visa-related logistical needs yet shifted towards friendships to fulfil emotional and social requirements later in their study abroad experience.

4.3. Discussion

4.3.1 Discussion on Quantitative Findings

The quantitative results robustly affirm the dual significance of family and local social support in shaping the happiness of Chinese students in Thailand, accounting for 34% of the variance in subjective wellbeing. The more substantial standardized effect of local support ($\beta = 0.39$) over family support ($\beta = 0.28$) aligns with the "cultural fit" hypothesis, wherein proximity and immediacy of host-country networks provide practical resources for daily stressors (language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles) that distal familial support cannot address. This finding contrasts with studies prioritizing transnational familial ties in collectivist cultures (Cheung & Yue, 2021). However, it resonates with recent work on international students in Southeast Asia, where localized integration predicts resilience more powerfully than cross-border bonds (Rhein & Nanni, 2022). The moderate intercorrelation between family and local support ($r = 0.32$) suggests they function as complementary rather than redundant systems, echoing the "additive buffering" model (Rujiprak, 2016), where multiple support types cumulatively enhance wellbeing.

Notably, the non-significance of demographic variables (age, gender) challenges assumptions that younger students or women rely more heavily on social support (Hitokoto et al., 2014), instead underscoring the universality of these mechanisms across subgroups. This aligns with Fang et al. (2014) assertion that acculturative stress transcends demographics in homogeneous migrant populations. However, the reliance on self-reported scales risks common-method bias, potentially inflating effect sizes, a limitation noted in prior happiness research (Ratanasiripong & Wang, 2011). The study advances the discourse by contextualizing social support within a transnational framework, where local networks' immediacy (Thai peers aiding with visa renewals) and family support's emotional anchoring (WeChat reassurance during exams) operate in tandem. This dual scaffolding mirrors Raja et al. (2021) "global" adaptation model but extends it by quantifying their relative weights. Future research should explore longitudinal trajectories to determine whether local support's dominance persists or diminishes as familial bonds regain primacy post-graduation.

4.3.2 Discussion on Qualitative Findings

Qualitative insights reveal that happiness is not merely a function of support availability but a negotiated outcome of how students leverage these systems amid cultural and structural constraints. The theme of Transnational Family Bonds as Emotional Anchors elucidates the quantitative finding that family

support significantly predicts happiness ($\beta = 0.28$) yet complicates it by exposing the duality of these bonds. While digital communication sustains emotional stability, it also entrenches dependency and performance pressure. This tension mirrors Luo et al. (2023) model of "emotional interdependence," where collectivist familial ties simultaneously empower and constrain autonomy, a dynamic less visible in quantitative metrics. Similarly, Local Social Integration as a Buffer Against Isolation contextualizes the quantitative primacy of local support ($\beta = 0.39$). Participants' narratives highlight that integration is not passive but requires active reciprocity (e.g., teaching Thai peers Mandarin), aligning with the He et al. (2024) contact hypothesis. However, the qualitative data unveil gendered and linguistic barriers invisible in surveys: women's ease in building. These nuances challenge homogenous portrayals of "local support" in migration literature (Berry & Sam, 1997), advocating for intersectional frameworks.

The theme of Cultural Navigation and Adaptation extends the quantitative model by illustrating how students' hybrid identities negotiating Thai collectivism and Chinese filial piety enable them to synergistically harness both support systems. This agentive "third space" (Putri et al., 2024) explains why the quantitative model's predictors collectively explain substantial variance: students who adeptly blend cultures can optimize support from both spheres. Conversely, Institutional and Peer Support Systems reveal structural gaps (Mandarin-speaking counsellors) that quantitative scales may overlook, underscoring the limitations of top-down institutional policies critiqued (Fisher et al., 2014). Qualitative findings also contextualize the non-significant demographic results: age and gender mattered less than how students enacted support (younger students' tech-savvy familial communication vs. older students' pragmatic networking). It aligns with postmodern critiques of demographic essentialism (Ju, 2010), urging researchers to prioritize lived experience over categorical traits.

4.4 Practical Implications

The study proves that higher education institutions should create hybrid support methods that unite global family relationships and regional integration plans. Educational institutions should design multiethnic mentorship relationships that pair Chinese students with Thai students for cultural transmission and run Thai language classes to overcome language obstacles. The extension of counselling services requires hiring multilingual staff and implementing cultural sensitivity policies to address acculturative stress, as well as offering virtual family workshops to educate parents about the dual responsibilities of students in foreign education. Students pursuing STEM majors need universities to create specific academic resources to rectify existing resource inequality. Chinese student associations (CSAs) should work with Thai cultural clubs to design culturally blended multicultural activities that promote cross-cultural events, such as festival celebrations, that combine both events. The Thai policy sector should implement reward programs to encourage locals to host international students during their immersion experience. Universities should unite peer groups with institutional and community partners to create forecasting action systems that support students while maintaining the balance between their international and local life, balancing cultural expectations and host-country relationships. These expanded initiatives show promise in reshaping international educational settings to focus on both student mental health and academic performance, yielding better results.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The happiness of Chinese students in Thailand is driven by the combination of transnational family support and local social attachment to varying degrees. Viewing the extent of local social support as a

stronger predictor of subjective well-being than family support indicates the critical role of host country networks in reducing immediate stressors, such as language barriers and cultural alienation. The study further concluded that family bonds continued through digital communication as an invaluable emotional grounding in what Einstein calls a psychological safety net in acute stress. The findings challenge traditional binary views of well-being, which are often shaped solely by home or host culture. Instead, they reveal that happiness emerges from the compounding effect of family and social support, where transnational family ties and local networks interact synergistically to enhance well-being. This dynamic reflects "glocal resilience", the strategic balancing and integration of geographically dispersed support systems, demonstrating that wellbeing is not a zero-sum outcome, but a negotiated process strengthened by layered social resources. In addition, it was concluded that students navigated wellbeing through hybrid cultural practices (blending Thai and Chinese norms) and peer partnerships yet faced gendered and linguistic barriers to integration. Mixed-methods analysis exposed the limitations of quantitative metrics, which overlooked the emotional labour of transnational family ties and the isolating effects of weak peer networks. By integrating psychometric scales with lived-experience narratives, the study advances a transnational wellbeing framework where happiness emerges not from choosing between identities but from culturally infused compounding, actively weaving the strengths of host and home cultures into a resilient whole.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Transnational well-being research suffers from limitations. First, as reliance on self-reported measures is problematic because of social desirability bias, especially in collectivism, the confession of familial conflict may be underreported by students. Second, the qualitative sample ($n = 15$), though sufficient for thematic saturation, limits generalizability to non-urban or non-middle-class Chinese students. Third, the emphasis on a single university in Bangkok does not regard Thailand's regional disparity of educational infrastructure and cultural norms. Finally, the cross-sectional design makes it impossible to infer causally how support systems unfold over time, for instance, changes in reliance from familial to local networks as the resident stays for prolonged periods. To better capture regional cultural variations, future studies should expand their scope to include universities across diverse geographic areas of Thailand, such as the culturally distinct northern and southern regions. Support dynamics could be longitudinally tracked across academic stages, especially crises such as health emergencies or geopolitical tensions. It would contextualize transnational support reciprocity by incorporating mixed-methods data from family members in China to provide a more nuanced portrayal of familial bonds, which is currently one-sided. Additionally, the comparative patterns of Chinese students in other ASEAN countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, could reveal whether Thailand's cultural factors are unique or typical for the region. Finally, the intersectional variables, including socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or rural/urban divides, would offer a more profound understanding of how structural inequities affect access to support systems.

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