Chinese Learners' Social Network Development and Language Learning Process in Study Abroad Context

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ABSTRACT

This empirical case study aims at investigating the language learning process of Chinese learners in a Study Abroad (SA) language program, which was held in 2015 at Peking University, China. The participants were undergraduate students from the University of Sydney, Australia. By employing the framework of Social Network theories, this research explores how social networks in SA context help to facilitate students' Chinese learning and acquisition. Specifically, this study looks into three issues: the types of social networks available to students during the program; the ways in which these social networks contribute to participants' learning of Chinese; and the implications for program designers and organisers. The findings drawn from data collected by pre and post-program surveys and in-depth interviews illustrate that three types of social networks are most notable and have attracted the researcher's attention, namely the language partner community, the WeChat mobile community (a mobile APP in China), and other local communities in students' day-to-day living environments (service places; dorm; transportation; etc.). It is further argued that these observed social networks benefited students' Chinese learning mainly in terms of creating interaction opportunities with native speakers. Examples and narratives from students' perspective are elaborated. Suggestions for SA program designers point to the approaches for increasing students' contact with local communities so as to provide them with more Chinese learning opportunities and better sojourn experience during SA in China.

Keywords: Chinese acquisition, study abroad, social network, language socialisation, interaction

Introduction

Research has shown that one important social factor affecting learners' second language learning in a study abroad (SA) context is the concept of social network. While many studies provide empirical evidence for the positive correlations between network development and sub-fields of language learning (Wiklund, 2002; Smith, 2002), other researchers worry that, in SA context, such benefits are not always perceived by students. The development of social networks for L2 learning in SA is not an easy process (Kurata, 2010), and contact with native speakers in an out-of-class environment is not automatically guaranteed by SA immersion (Dewey et al., 2012). Therefore, of central importance is maximising the study abroad, especially in short-term programs, via network development, and making the most out of it.

Despite the increasing awareness of a social network perspective in academic field, little is known about the formation and effects of social networks during SA in China. With its ever-increasing role on the international stage, the Chinese language has attracted a growing number of second language (L2) learners worldwide. Varied programs offering

Chinese courses have been set up in many tertiary educational institutions to meet the mounting needs of students learning Chinese as L2. According to the China Association for International Education (CAFSA), in 2013, a total of 356,499 international students from 200 countries or regions were distributed in 746 tertiary and other educational institutions in China, and the number of students from Australasia had significant growth (CAFSA, 2014). Given that the importance of a social network perspective for SA-in-China research field is acknowledged by scholars, and given that the existing SA literature on network effects on Chinese learning process is lacking, a more sophisticated examination on how social networks are developed by Chinese learners during SA and a fuller picture of how learning opportunities are afforded by these networks are especially crucial and timely.

Under this background, this research employs a social network framework and explores how social networks during SA in China facilitated students' Chinese learning and acquisition. Specifically, this study asks the following three questions:

1. What types of social networks were available to students during the program?
2. How did these social networks contribute to the learning of Chinese?
3. What are the implications for program designers and organisers?

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a social network framework. The concept of the social network had been widely used in anthropology, sociology, and politic science as a metaphor for social relations at the micro level (Wiklund, 2002) before it was brought to the forefront of sociolinguistics by Milroy in 1980 (Dewey et al., 2012). According to Milroy, a social network can be seen as an endless web linking people together, which structure comprises of interconnected individuals by friendship, kinship or common interests.

The notion of a social network was further introduced into the field of second language acquisition (SLA) by a number of researchers, inspired by its alignment with the increasing awareness of a sociocultural dimension of language learning. An example is Kurata's (2007) article, which defines the social network as the informal social relations contracted by an individual mainly in out-of-class settings. In particular, Isabelli-García (2006) applies the concept in SA context, in which the term is used to describe social relations abroad related to learners' experiences and how they incorporate themselves in the host culture.

Some other concepts, as mentioned earlier, although not addressing social network directly, are also relevant and prove fruitful in developing the framework for this study. The term "language contact" is used in Magnan & Back (2007) to examine SA participants' amount of out-of-class social contact with native speakers (NSs), non-native speakers (NNSs), and local media in the target language. A similar concept, "target language use", is found in Badstübner's and Ecke's (2009) paper looking at the interactional contact (e.g. Conversation) and non-interactional contact (e.g. Watching TV and reading newspapers) that requires the use of L2 in the informal learning environment. Castañeda and Zirger (2011) explore how "social capital" – the intangible resources gained by learners for language and cultural benefits by accessing already established social networks – facilitates L2 learning. All these research projects are in line with Kurata's notion of social network, highlighting the value of informal relationships constructed by L2 learners beyond language curriculum.

Integrating the above definitions of social network in general and in SLA and SA in particular, the term "social network" is utilised in this study to describe the informal social

relations connected to the individual student when abroad, which play a vital role in their L2 use and learning process.

Methodology

Research articles with a social network approach have demonstrated a range of methods to measure the social network qua structure and its effect on L2 learning in interaction. As researchers put it, the measurement of social networks varies in different articles depending on the objective of the research (Wiklund, 2002), and various survey, interview, and observational tools have been employed (Dewey et al., 2012).

Some projects use quantitative instruments to report and analyse network data. Such features of social network as size (the number of interactants in one's network), density (whether the interactants in one's network know each other), multiplexity (in what capacity they know each other) and intensity (the strength of the links among interactants) are widely investigated, and the techniques of mathematical graphs, sociograms, cluster analysis, block modelling are used to visualise those features (Smith, 2002; Wiklund, 2002). This line of research establishes the bridge between social network and L2 learning by accounting for the correlations between specific network features and fields of L2 proficiency, but findings differ from one case to another and one can hardly make a universal conclusion. For instance, some provide evidence that intensity and density are vital contributors to language acquisition (Dewey et al., 2012) while others present weak or even negative relationship between the same two network features and language proficiency (Smith, 2002; Wiklund, 2002). The contradictory results might be explained by the differences between the means of measuring language proficiency and network factors (Dewey et al., 2012), which can be an inherent deficiency of quantitative methods.

Consequently, it is advocated by the research team to employ quantitative methods to "reconstruct detailed life stories of learners hand-in-hand with and interest in linguistic development" to provide a more "holistic picture of learners' experience" and elucidate "factors that facilitate or inhibit social network development" (Dewey et al., 2012: 125-127). One example of qualitative research on social network during SA can be found in (Castañeda & Zirger, 2011). The authors utilise ethnographic tools to examine the available networks, the learners' integration, and the influential factors enabling or undermining their network participation in an SA sojourn. The major themes were identified by coding the statements obtained before they were analysed thematically. The "social capital" – linguistic and social resources for language learning - observed in Castañeda and Zirger's (2011) research was found to be available in the networks of host families, local communities, and service schools,

Largely informed by their research and considering the methodological implications from previous literature, I chose a qualitative approach in the design of the present study, looking closely at what types of social networks were constructed by learners and how network factors affected the language learning process during the SA program under investigation. The detailed research methods and procedures will be described below.

Participants and Data Sources

The program under investigation was a four-week (23 November to 18 December 2015) intensive language program held in the city of Beijing, China, offered by the University of Sydney (USYD) in collaboration with Peking University (PKU). Both are world-class and prestigious public universities. To enrol in the program, students were required to have completed a minimum of two semesters of Chinese units of study at their home university. Altogether, 44 students were enrolled in the 2015 program.

The language courses for the target country were taught by the academic staff at PKU. Three levels of courses were offered: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The program aimed to provide students with opportunities not only to improve their language skills in the Chinese-speaking environment but also to enrich their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture and society firsthand. For this purpose, intensive formal language instruction ran for four hours daily on average from Monday through Friday for four weeks. Apart from these lessons, students were also exposed to cultural experiences in a series of activities (Department of Chinese Studies, 2014), including two city excursions sponsored by PKU during the weekends.

Participants were housed in single or shared rooms in the international students' sector in Wanliu apartment, equipped with a canteen, convenience store, gym, and café, open to both international and domestic students. The apartment was located two stops away from the main campus. School buses ran in the morning, and the students needed to take public transport (e.g., subway) to get back to Wanliu by themselves after class. To provide additional opportunities for interaction with NSs, each participant was paired with a language partner from PKU. The language partners were volunteers selected by the program organisers according to their English level. Participants and partners arranged their meetings and activities at their leisure.

This study is part of a larger research project that examines the language and culture learning process the students experienced during the program from a second-language socialisation perspective. The original research entails a range of data sources for the sake of data triangulation, including pre- and post-program survey questionnaires, in-class observations, and field notes, as well as post-program semi-structured interviews. Considering the ethical issues, participating in this research was entirely voluntary. Twenty-eight of the 44 program participants contributed to the survey data, and 16 of them engaged in the interview. Since this article underscores the "individual life stories" with a qualitative approach, data involved will mainly be drawn from interviews, while findings from other sources will also be mentioned when relevant.

The interviews were conducted three months after the program, when the new semester began. Two forms of the interview were conducted, namely, the traditional face-to-face interview and the email interview. The rationale and limitations for doing email interviews can be found in Ratislavová and Ratislav (2014). Of the 16 interviewees, 7 were engaged in the face-to-face interview, with an average length of 50 minutes each. The other 9 students participated in the email interview, which comprised of a 10-page answer-sheet. Amongst all participants, 6 were enrolled in the beginners' class, 5 were from the intermediate class, while the other 5 were from the advanced level. The interviews were conducted in English.

The design of the interview questions has been motivated and guided by the research questions of this study, as well as by the preliminary findings in the survey questionnaires of the larger project. The major themes were identified by coding the statements obtained before they were analysed thematically.

Findings

Research Question 1: What types of social networks were available to students during the program?

The data collected demonstrates that participants relied on the language partner system, the mobile app WeChat, and informal acquaintances in daily interaction for the use of Chinese language.

In the post-program survey, the students were asked how they met Chinese-native friends in Beijing. More than 74 percent of the established relationships reported were made through the language partner system, indicating its significance in helping students connect ties with the local community. As Student AZ said: "I think having the language partner was quite helpful in terms of Chinese language learning because, whilst exploring Beijing with USYD friends, we primarily spoke in English. Having a language partner gave me the opportunity to really attempt the practical application of the language skills I was learning." This student made it clear that the language partner had pushed her in using the Chinese language. Otherwise, she would simply speak in English with peers instead.

Apart from language partners, the students also found the employment of the WeChat mobile app to be a good facilitator for using Chinese and familiarising themselves with Chinese society. In response to the survey, students provided examples of tools they regularly used for Chinese learning before starting the program in Australia and during the program in China. While the Chinese learning app Pleco was mentioned in both pre- and post-questionnaires (26% and 51%), a tremendous increase in WeChat usage appeared (from 3% to 44%). One participant, Student VY, reported: "WeChat has indeed facilitated my learning of Chinese, as many people who I've befriended frequently post in Chinese, allowing me to get frequent exposure to the Chinese script, which has enhanced my reading ability." The biggest difference between Pleco and WeChat is that the former is an informative tool used exclusively for language learning, while the latter is a communicative tool widely used among Chinese NSs for social networking. Despite that, all students in the program were required to install WeChat for administrative purposes, but they were not required to learn Chinese with it, not to mention they could easily use it in English. Therefore, it surpassed the researcher's expectation that so many students utilised WeChat to learn and practice the Chinese language.

In addition to questions related to the paired language partner, the students were asked whether or not they met or talked to other locals, and these experiences contributed to their Chinese learning. Like most participants, Student AZ, from the advanced class, expressed her regret in not making as many native friends as expected. However, she also mentioned, "we did interact with the locals daily, at shops and tourist sites, etc. These small instances of conversation were always quite interesting as I attempted to decipher thick Beijing accents, made all the more difficult when they spoke naturally fast." Such experience was not exclusively available for advanced learners. Student HM from the beginner's class also made a similar statement: "I spoke to the cleaning ladies of the dormitory in Chinese every time they came to my room. They were always chatty, courteous, and friendly. I also spoke with other commuters on the bus back from PKU." As shown, the third forum of relationships was the local communities in the informal environment, such as the acquaintances met at the dormitory, tourist site, shops, and transportations. These random encounters with locals were reported challenging by students, but also enjoyable and rewarding.

This segment has elaborated that the social network constructed during the SA program under investigation was dynamic and multidimensional, with ample resources and opportunities for Chinese learning and use. In the following, the issue of how these network resources were beneficial to students' interaction with NSs and the learning of the target language will be explored in detail.

Research Question 2: How did these social networks contribute to the learning of Chinese?

Students' narratives show that the above three types of social networks have facilitated their Chinese learning by affording abundant opportunities for the use of the target language and promoting interactions with natives speakers.

Making native friends in the target country can be a very tough task, and having an already paired language buddy might be a great comfort and relief for them. As Student LC remarked: "…because she was similar in age to me, it definitely helped another side of my Chinese language that I wouldn't really get in class. I practiced speaking comfortably and colloquially to a friend as we chatted about exchange and travel. She had a really open attitude … Otherwise, I wouldn't have had so much opportunity to practice and see so much of Beijing." For this student, having a language partner is different from relying solely on Chinese teachers, even though the latter were also very approachable. This is because having a same-aged friend who is also a university student and "walks in the same shoes" makes it possible to talk about a range of topics in a relaxed environment. Another story told by Student EW illustrates not only the participant's own language partner but also the partners of other Australian peers were potentially helpful for a learner's language learning: "… he (the Australian peer) spoke in Chinese with his language partner, and they just told me to try my best to listen and understand, but I could respond in English to take the pressure off. But after an hour or so, I wanted to speak in Chinese, so I would try to talk to them both in Chinese." With the joint effort of a peer from higher level class and the peer's language partner, the student was eventually motivated to speak in Chinese, in low-pressure situations. As a result, improved language skills and increased confidence were perceived after this particular outing.

The WeChat app served as an additional and unique venue for language use to take place, which value is seen not only in relation to its nature as a multifunctional platform but also in its application as a primary communicating tool between SA participants and staff at the target university. The students managed to utilise a variety of functions of WeChat for language contact. In addition to the basic texting function, which helped to develop reading and writing skills, the "hold to talk" (voice chat) function was also highlighted by students. By pressing a button below the chatting window, the user can send a voice message to the other chatter. After the audio has been sent, both interlocutors can use another device to transcribe the voice message into written Chinese. In this way, the spoken Chinese of the chatter goes through a transcribing system where his or her Chinese pronunciation is checked, and its validity or invalidity is confirmed. Another useful function mentioned is the subscription, where articles on various topics in Chinese are pushed out with notifications. Since the users can actively choose from a range of topics for their subscriptions, reading articles from subscribed channels turned out to be an efficient way to get the latest information of interest about China. The academic staff at PKU also made considerable attempts to promote students' awareness of using WeChat for language practice. Student LC depicted how a language pledge policy was implemented in the "chat group" set by her Chines teacher: "We could discuss our homework as well as just chat leisurely with our teachers. Although we were able to use WeChat in English, our class decided to challenge ourselves by forcing ourselves to try and speak and type Chinese whenever possible. So it was definitely helpful for us with our language." Even in the out-of-class setting, the students were able to contact via WeChat group chat with Chinese teachers, who were perhaps the most directly and automatically connected NSs during an SA program, and with a language pledge policy, the opportunities for using Chinese are expanded. It can be seen that WeChat

had broken the confinement of space and time and expanded communication opportunities with native Chinese teachers from formal instruction to informal, casual interactions.

Some students also expressed that opportunities to use the Chinese language had been promoted by interactions with acquaintances in daily living environments, including the Wanliu apartment complex, public transplantation, and other service venues. Most participants mentioned their exchanges with a range of service staff in the apartment complex, such as the front desk receptionists, staff at the gym and the café, the shop assistants at the convenient store as well as the cleaning staff at the canteen. Through these exchanges, the students were exposed to fluent Chinese spoken at a natural speed in real life. Apart from the exchanges in some survival contexts at Wanliu apartment, a number of students even took proactive movements in interacting with passengers on public transport or at tourist sites while exploring Beijing. One story about a peer was told by Student HM: "…I wasn't daring enough then to fully make use of the surroundings like some of my classmates did. This particular student even chatted up taxi drivers in Chinese by asking '你的家有几口人？(Nijia, you ji kou ren, how many family members do you have)'."This little instance highlights the student's ability to apply a basic expression learned in class to the real-life situation. Service places such as local salons or hairdressers are other possible venues for short informal conversations with NSs. Student LC reported: "The most interesting thing was probably on a day I went to get my nails done at a salon. The girls there were really nice, and we chatted about what school was like in China and what exchange was like… It was a great opportunity to practice my language as they were very patient and forgiving with my mistakes and inability to completely express my meaning. I'm glad I had the courage to speak up and start conversation rather than just sit there in silence for an hour." Service places like a salon can be good sites for language practice. From the researcher's own experience as a Chinese, staff at a salon in China are expected to chat with the customers while they are providing the service, and conversation in such a situation usually happens in a relaxing atmosphere.

Data from student interviews have illustrated that the informal relationships built with language partners on WeChat as well as with informal acquaintances in live surroundings collectively contributed to the construction of dynamic and multi-dimensional social networks for the SA sojourners. Within these networks, ample linguistic resources were available, and opportunities for language contact were constructed with assistance from key role players. Based on these findings, practical implications can be made for future SA-in-China programs.

Research Question 3: What are the implications for program designers and organisers?

Given that the key players in a learner's social networks played a crucial role in facilitating the construction of language learning opportunities in the three types of networks, it is suggested in this paper that they should be given more guidelines on how to assist SA sojourners and maximise their learning experience. The informants have reported on what could have been improved for the development of these three networks.

In terms of the language partner program, students felt their interaction and time spent with their partners were not sufficient. As many as 70% of students reported the schedule conflicts and busy timetables of PKU students. In this case, the arrangement of the programs should be considered more carefully, especially to guarantee an acceptable frequency and duration of the meetings. For example, availability could be added to the recruitment criteria. During the program, a "meeting journal" task can be assigned to the participating partners, asking them to write down the dates, duration, and activities of the meetings, which data

might be used to give an award at the end of the program to the most committed volunteers. After all, language partners should be informed about their roles in the sojourners' learning experience, which would motivate them to show more responsibility.

Regarding the application of WeChat, some participants confessed that they mostly used it to communicate with Australian peers as an alternative tool to Facebook, which is not accessible in China. One example given by Student AZ: "I don't think it particularly facilitated any Chinese language learning, as I was conversing with fellow Australian friends… we mostly just spoke in English." Such articulation illustrates that not all students were aware of the potential of WeChat as a Chinese learning tool. Under these circumstances, this study advocates for Chinese native teachers to explicitly integrate WeChat into L2 pedagogy, introducing its multiple functions and different purposes for language development, increasing students' awareness of using them strategically and, ultimately, promoting networking in the target language through this cutting-edge social networking tool in China.

When it comes to the community of informal acquaintances, it is a matter of fact that most students felt it too difficult to establish relationships with other local NSs. Whether dormitory placements or other sources in living surroundings, the realisation of the interactions with informal acquaintances in these setting usually require stronger motivation and initiative moves from students themselves, which are frequently reported constrained by a sense of language anxiety and lack of self-confidence. That is to say that the SA program practitioners should pay more efforts in facilitating the students to reduce stress and establish more confidence in using the L2. Many studies have noted that a pre-departure orientation might serve to help, as it provides students with the better concept of what to expect in their sojourn. In this particular case, it is advised to fit in an "experience sharing" session in the orientation, where previous SA sojourners are invited to share their successful stories (e.g. the stories told by Student HM and LC in the interview) with future participants, from which the latter cohort can learn as positive examples.

In summary, the formation of social networks can be facilitated by the SA-in-China program by strengthening the ties between students and NSs, in the networks of language partner community, WeChat online community, and other informal acquaintances in the living environments. The key players in these networks, specifically language teachers, program staff and paired language partners, should take more responsibility in facilitating students' interaction in these networks and extended networks.

Discussion

This study applies the social network framework to investigate the language learning process of Chinese learners during an SA-in-China program. Previous research articles on SLA and SA have argued for a social network perspective for empirical studies. Theoretically, a learner's social network consists of informal social relationships established out-of-class, which contribute to a major social dimension of language learning, echoing with the increasing awareness of the sociocultural orientation in the academic field of L2 learning (Kurata, 2007). Methodologically, the network context is an ideal environment to survey the multiple and relevant discursive settings, whose approach is deemed efficient to examine the complex sociocultural and linguistic phenomenon (Smith, 2002). Practically, investigating one's social network yields empirical data of network features that pertain to linguistic development and sheds light on the methods that can optimise this data for language learning. The current study agrees to the rationales for a social network framework for L2 studies in SA context, and further expands our knowledge regarding SA sojourners' network development and L2 learning in an SA-in-China situation.

Previous research studies have presented a range of methods for the categorisation of social networks. One of the common ways in which social networks are analysed is based on the concept of "domain," such as school, work, or church, to which individuals belonging may share the same networks (Wiklund, 2002). One's social networks can also be classified according to their language use orientation, that is, in what circumstances the learner's language use is L1-oriented, L2-oriented, or mixed (Kurata, 2006). Other studies that employ a Language Contact Profile to collect network data illustrate the classification of social networks with regard to the forms of language contact, such as in the forms of four skills (Magnan & Back, 2007) or language contact with L1 speakers, L2 speakers and L2 media (Badstübner & Ecke, 2009).

These categorisation methods, however, are not adequate for the objective of the current study as they fall short in delineating the resources and social supports available within the L2 learners' network. As previously mentioned, this study is informed by Castañeda & Zirger (2011), who adapt the concept of "social capital" to an SA context to describe the social resources available to participants for linguistic and cultural learning, for example, resources found within homestay families, extended families, and local communities as well as service schools. These types of networks were primarily drawn from the qualitative data and analysed thematically. The analysis of findings in the current study shares a similar approach with these researchers, but with complementary observation results.

In this article, three major networks contributed to the SA-in-China participants' language learning were reported from students' perspective - namely the language partner community, the WeChat online community, and the local community in daily living surroundings. The informal relationships developed with the Chinese NSs in these communities constitute to the three-dimensional social network a student might construct and resort to during the SA program in China (see Figure 1). Although the three forms of networks have been explored and discussed respectively in different research for various purposes, they have never been connected in the same context. The present study hopes to provide an example of how these three types of social networks collectively contribute to SA sojourners language learning process in China.

It is also hoped that the model can give practical implications for language teachers and SA practitioners. Many research articles have encouraged SA participants to integrate into the local community and interact with the NSs (e.g., Smith, 2002; Wiklund, 2007), but Kurata (2010) also notes that simply encouraging students to engage is not enough as the numerous obstacles they face might not be easily overcome without program interventions. She suggests that guidelines should be given by program designers. Some researchers further explain the facilitations can be afforded by the program to access learning opportunities. Dewey et al. (2012) argue that the SA program should facilitate the formation of social networks by connecting learners with local communities, such as clubs, and promoting volunteer works. Castañeda and Zirger (2011) also make the commendation that the SA curricula should utilise everyone involved and the key players should take an active role in introducing students to their own network. This empirical study tries to expand our knowledge of how such facilitation can be achieved in a Chinese situation.
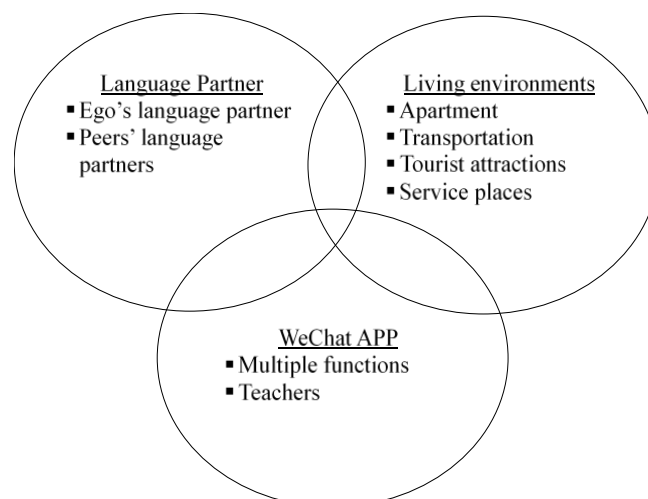
Figure 1. Three types of social networks for language learning in SA in China

Conclusion

The discussion in the current study confirms the claim that students' social networks outside of class in the SA context have the potential to provide opportunities for the target language learning and use. In the current program, such opportunities are most salient in the networks of language partners, the WeChat online community, and informal acquaintances in living environments. In the network with language partners, because of the similarity in age, the conversations often happen in relaxing atmosphere. In the WeChat online network, the multiple functions and the encouragement from Chinese instructors expand students' L2 use opportunities breaking the borders of space and time. In the network with informal acquaintances, possibilities are available in the settings of student apartment, public transportation, tourist attraction and service places. The three types of social networks not only collectively contribute to SA participants' language learning process, but also complement each other. Only with the joint efforts from the key players in these networks can we deploy most of the learning resources and construct more opportunities for language use and interaction.

A limitation regarding the research method of this study is that the interview data were collected three months after the program, which is identified as problematic by Badstübner and Ecke (2009) in that the retrospective narratives rely heavily on students' ability to memorise and recall the most critical moments in their sojourn experience. As they have suggested, a better way to elicit data on L2 use might be to have students report on their L2 on a daily basis in a journal diary. Furthermore, although this study has made its attempt to provide insights into the learning opportunities in three types of social networks by elucidating "individual stories" (Dewey et al., 2012), the individual differences are not fully explained in this paper. Future research can look further into the way that individual factors such as linguistic background, motivation, and language attitude facilitate or inhibit the development of the three types of social networks respectively in SA in China.

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