

# Individual and Social Challenges of Chinese International Students in the United States

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**Abstract.** The problems of the new cultural and educational environment are being faced by a rising number of Chinese overseas students attending American universities. Through analyzing the existing literature, this paper reviews and compares the challenges posed by individual and social factors to Chinese international students' American college life. Firstly, in order to study the various components of individual and social issues that contribute to difficulties for Chinese international students integrating into the American campus, this paper first explores six perspectives. Secondly, by comparing the different aspects, the article emphasizes that social challenges should be considered by international education institutions as a more general aspect of challenges. By understanding the impact of different types of challenges on Chinese international students, international education institutions, including U.S. universities and Chinese international schools, can act more directly and accurately which can assist this student population to better integrate into campus life.

**Keywords:** Chinese international students, U.S. colleges, College adjustments, Chinese international high schools, Chinese international programs, International education, Cultural differences.

## 1. Introduction

Chinese students have always made up a sizable share of the international student body at American universities. Despite the fact that the proportion of Chinese students has decreased recently due to factors including the COVID-19 outbreak [1], Chinese students still make up a sizeable component of the student body at American universities. Despite a 14.8% drop from the previous year, the Open Doors 2021 Report on International Educational Exchange states that there are more than 317,000 Chinese students enrolled in U.S. educational institutions for the 2020–21 academic year, making them the country's largest contingent of foreign students [2].

Even though there are many Chinese college students in the United States, transitioning to campus life can be difficult for many of them, especially those who finished high school in China. Long-time Chinese residents who study in American institutions are in for a big shock since they cannot anticipate the contrasts and challenges they would encounter there. [3]. Some many variables or challenges need to be looked at for international educators to understand better the process of Chinese students' adjustment to American universities [4]. Although many the challenges that Chinese international students face on U.S. campuses can be analyzed and outlined from various perspectives, these challenges can be broadly summarized into individual and social factors. Individual factors refer to the factors that Chinese students do not adapt to American life due to their personality, personal reasons, or internal factors, such as psychological problems, language barriers, and financial burdens. The social factors mainly represent the social differences or external factors that cause Chinese students' inadaptability, such as culture shock, differences in the education system, lack of group support, etc. Chinese students find it extremely challenging and tough to adjust to life in American institutions, whether they do so separately or in tandem.

It is crucial for international education institutions, including American universities and Chinese international high schools, to comprehend the difficulties Chinese students encounter in American higher education as the number of Chinese students studying abroad in the country increases. For U.S. universities, Chinese students are not only an important part of the student body but also an important

source of financial support. In the 2019/20 semester before the COVID-19 outbreak, Chinese international students provided roughly \$15.9 billion to the United States [1]. The tuition paid by Chinese students is a very significant economic source for U.S. universities, especially public universities. In order to stop the current decrease in Chinese enrollment, American colleges must work to ease the challenges experienced by their Chinese counterparts. It is crucial for Chinese foreign schools to comprehend the difficulties that Chinese students may encounter at American colleges in addition to U.S. universities. Strong international relations and China's economic growth have led to an increase in the number of Chinese students preferring to study abroad, particularly in the United States, which has resulted in the growth of foreign schools or programs inside of China. [5].

However, the rise of these programs does not represent a decline in the difficulties faced by Chinese students studying abroad. Many students have graduated from international high schools in China, including those with high grades. Many international preparatory programs in China do not effectively prepare these students for higher education in the United States, as evidenced by the numerous challenges they have faced during their time in college in the United States [5]. Chinese high schools and programs must fully comprehend and address the difficulties that Chinese foreign students have in American higher education if they are to contribute to the growth of international education in China.

Not only for the students, but also for the international education institutions and schools in the US and China, a thorough knowledge and solution of the difficulties faced by Chinese students in American higher education are crucial. It is also an important part of the economic and cultural development of both American and Chinese societies. In order to make recommendations to international education institutions on how to provide more direct support to these students, this study will discuss and compare the personal and social issues Chinese foreign students confront during their educational experience in the US. It is hoped that by discussing and examining in depth the challenges of Chinese students, the current situation of this student population will be emphasized and improved so that these students can better integrate into American universities and provide an impetus to the educational and economic development of China and the United States.

## **2. Individual Challenges**

Individual challenges focus on Chinese students' maladaptation to U.S. higher education for more personal or intrinsic reasons. These factors are often related to the individual's background and upbringing. In this paper, this category will be discussed from three perspectives: mental health problems, language barriers, and financial burden.

### **2.1 Mental Problems**

When discussing the challenges of Chinese students, mental issues tend to receive the most attention. Although psychological problems are considered to be the result of various internal and external pressures on Chinese students, unhealthy psychology is, at the same time, one of the main factors that exacerbate the maladjustment of Chinese students. In a Yale University survey of Chinese overseas students, 45.5% of respondents showed signs of despair, and 29.2% showed signs of anxiety [6]. These pupils still have serious psychological issues while attending one of the top institutions in the country.

Besides the mental discomfort due to the difference in the external environment, the psychological problems due to internal reasons are also serious for Chinese students. Chinese society tends to emphasize "restraint" about personal emotions [7]. When faced with painful emotions, the background of their upbringing often encourages Chinese international students to suppress their emotions rather than express them or seek help. This characteristic makes it difficult to capture the mental problems of Chinese students. Additionally, because Chinese culture places a significant premium on family ties, Chinese students' acute homesickness and filial piety may worsen their

psychological pain [7]. Chinese overseas students experience severe psychological issues as a result of the habits they have established in Chinese society being suppressed by their studies abroad.

## **2.2 Language Barriers**

One of the reasons why many Chinese students struggle to fit into American higher education is their inability to speak and write English fluently. Although bilingual education has become more of a priority in Chinese education, the results have not been entirely beneficial for students [8]. Chinese overseas students who were raised in a communicative setting where Chinese was spoken often feel under strain when faced with the sophisticated English writing and communication skills demanded in U.S. colleges. Lack of fluency in English puts these students under pressure not only academically but socially as well [9]. Compared to many international students growing up in English-speaking countries, Chinese students have more difficulty communicating with local American teachers and students, which makes it more difficult for them to integrate into the classroom and the local community. The different language upbringing contributes to a significant factor in Chinese students' difficulty adapting to higher education in the United States.

## **2.3 Financial Burden**

Despite not fitting some of the clichés about Chinese students, financial stress is a factor that hinders the adjustment to life in the United States for many Chinese international students. According to one survey, one of the most common preconceptions of Chinese students in the U.S. is that they are "wealthy Chinese" [10]. Despite the fact that some Chinese students come from wealthy backgrounds, not all of them. In fact, financial difficulties are an issue for many Chinese students, including but not limited to the low CNY/USD exchange rate, the lack of student loans, the difficulty in getting scholarships, and the lack of available jobs [11]. Due to the unique status of Chinese students, they face higher spending needs and less financial aid. This makes them more financially vulnerable, a phenomenon that is often masked by the more widely held stereotype of being rich.

## **3. Social Challenges**

The obstacles faced by Chinese overseas students in American colleges are discussed in Social Challenges in detail. These difficulties are more a result of the social contrasts between China and the United States and the isolation of Chinese students from the general population. In this essay, social issues will be examined from three angles: cultural shock, variations in educational systems, and a lack of social support.

### **3.1 Cultural Shock**

International students undergo culture shock when they move from the country where they grew up to the place where they attended school [12]. Living and studying in the United States surely implies significant changes for Chinese international students who were raised and spent the majority of their experiences there before attending college. From a cultural perspective, the way of thinking in China and the United States is vastly different. While Chinese society emphasizes collectivism, respect for authority, and restraint of emotions, American society emphasizes individualism, challenging authority, and direct emotional expression [13]. This different mindset makes it difficult for Chinese students who have grown up in China for a long time to integrate into the American campus truly. Chinese students are not only facing a foreign country but also a social system that is completely opposite to the one they grew up in. In addition to the differences in thinking and lifestyle, the differences in learning patterns are also enormous, which will be addressed in the next section.

The huge differences between cultures require Chinese students to step out of their comfort zone and change their habitual thinking patterns to better integrate into a brand-new environment. The pressure of facing a new environment is enormous, especially in the first few months [14]. The

difficulties they face in the integration process are undoubtedly enormous, which is the challenge that culture shock poses to them.

### **3.2 Differences Between Education Systems in China and the U.S.**

Chinese overseas students face numerous difficulties when studying in the United States, which is one of their main reasons for visiting. In terms of educational methods and ideologies, China and the United States have vastly different approaches. While China emphasizes a "Virtue-Oriented" learning process, where learning is serious and requires hard work, Western society, represented by the United States, emphasizes a "Mind-Oriented" learning process in terms of where learning is [15]. While American students place more emphasis on inquiry and creativity, Chinese students place more emphasis on hard work and obedience to authority. The concept of the learning process differing between China and the United States has resulted in big disparities in classroom environments and ambiances.

The differences in educational philosophies between China and the United States result in vastly different classroom settings. The American classroom is student-oriented and necessitates active interaction between students and everyone else, in contrast to the teacher-oriented Chinese classroom [16]. This model requires students to be more actively involved in all classroom processes, including lectures, discussions, presentations, etc. At the same time, the American classroom emphasizes critical thinking and questioning. While Chinese students are more accustomed to following what the teacher says and working on their own, the American classroom is set up to encourage students to ask questions of the teacher and to interact during the teacher's office hours [16]. Chinese overseas students must adjust to a new paradigm of learning in which they must actively participate in class rather than simply follow the instructor's pace. These differences between education systems make it more challenging for Chinese students to study in American universities.

### **3.3 The Lack of Group or Social Support**

Another difficulty that Chinese overseas students encounter when adjusting to a new environment and culture is a lack of social or group support. Informational support and emotional support are two types of social support that can offer assistance in varying degrees to reduce stress. [17]. For expatriates like international students, positive social support helps them to better adapt to the new culture and relieve pressure in the context of being away from their original social network [17]. By connecting with new groups either locally in the U.S. or within the university, Chinese international students can better relieve their stress and integrate into campus life. However, Chinese international students' habitual internalized emotional behaviors somewhat limit their access to adequate social support [18]. Most Chinese international students establish social networks with other Chinese international students instead of connecting with local students or organizations [18]. This action of disconnected from local communities or organizations is not beneficial when this group of students needs support when facing special needs in the local environment. It increases the difficulty of Chinese students to receive adequate social support in American universities.

## **4. Comparison and Future Development of U.S. Universities and Chinese International High Schools**

The difficulties faced by Chinese overseas students on American college campuses are increasingly being explored as more and more study focuses on diversity on these campuses. college campuses are increasingly being discussed. While the obstacles Chinese international students face are multifaceted and deeply cultural, some possible solutions can be addressed through in-depth understanding and comparison. By comparing the challenges caused by individual and social factors, international education institutions associated with Chinese students, such as U.S. universities and Chinese international high schools, can more directly assist and prepare this student population for their experiences in U.S. colleges.

## **4.1 Comparison Between Individual and Social Challenges**

While personal and social challenges make it difficult for Chinese international students to integrate into U.S. universities, there are significant differences in the causes and characteristics of these two areas. Some challenges are difficult to change in the short term, or some difficulties that can be mitigated by some changes. By comparing the characteristics of these two types of challenges, it can be concluded which aspect of the challenge is more urgent or can be improved more directly by international education institutions.

### **4.1.1 Individual Challenges**

Individual challenges, including the three components mentioned above - Mental health problems, language barriers, and financial burdens - are more relevant to the unique background or intrinsic factors of international students from China. This type of challenge is more related to the Chinese international student's own internal emotions, upbringing, or personal background. This type of difficulty tends to be more detailed or personal but, at the same time, makes these factors somewhat less prevalent. For instance, while some studies claim that financial difficulties are a problem for Chinese overseas students, others claim that many Chinese international students now come from affluent backgrounds. They do not have to worry about their everyday expenses or tuition as China's economy develops [19]. Due to various unique reasons, not all Chinese overseas students encounter this difficulty, but the constraints they present are real nonetheless. Thus, while individual challenges are more detailed and specific, the lack of universality makes the limitations they pose more challenging to mitigate through some larger-scale adjustment.

### **4.1.2 Social Challenges**

Social challenges, including the previously mentioned Cultural shock, differences between education systems, and the lack of group support, are more relevant to external factors such as sociocultural background (i.e., factors that pose challenges to Chinese international students at U.S. universities) due to cultural differences. In comparison to Europe or even other Asian nations, China and the United States have the greatest cultural differences [20]. Chinese students find it more challenging to socially integrate into American society and universities as a result of this cultural gap. Since this influence is significant and ubiquitous for students growing up in China, the sociocultural aspect has been the focus of the majority of study on Chinese international students in U.S. colleges. Because this kind of factors has deep cultural and historical roots, social or cultural shocks will always be present and hard to eliminate for Chinese international students [4]. However, with certain adjustments and assistance, the challenges of Chinese international students in facing these social differences can be reduced.

### **4.1.3 The Comparison Between Individual and Social Factors**

Although both individual and social challenges have led to Chinese students' difficulties in integrating into American universities, their causes, characteristics, and possible solutions are different. First, while individual challenges present difficulties due to personal traits and differences, social challenges highlight development limitations due to cultural differences. The difference in causes makes the challenges of individual challenges more personal or specific, while the difficulties caused by social challenges are more general or abstract. As mentioned above, although the challenges posed by individual factors are concrete or easy to apply to solutions, such challenges or constraints may not necessarily fit every Chinese student's background. For instance, in order to address the mental health concerns faced by Chinese foreign students, a school must be aware of the various sociocultural and psychological elements that contribute to these students' psychological disorders [14]. Therefore, possible solutions to mitigate the challenges caused by individual factors are more specific and may only target a subset of the student population. The issues brought on by social variables may have more generic answers. Chinese students are highly touched by the new culture when they arrive in the US, which is one of the cultural contrasts between China and the US [11]. For Chinese international students who have lived and studied in China up until college, this

impact is unavoidable and violent. Due to the significant cultural gaps between the U.S. and China, it is nearly hard to completely remove this barrier by making a few changes to international educational institutions. Nevertheless, there are practical ways to lessen the difficulties and restrictions in this circumstance.

While the challenges that individual and social factors pose to Chinese international students are both urgent to alleviate to help this student population better integrate into the American university environment, this paper argues that focusing on challenges brought by social factors, or sociocultural perspectives, will help students more directly in their transition and alleviate stress. As mentioned earlier, the social and cultural challenges are universal. Due to the sociocultural gap, students from China are not immune to culture shock in American universities [7]. This allows for programs that address this factor to reach more students. Also, the anxiety and isolation associated with culture shock are one of the major causes of psychological problems for Chinese international students upon arrival at U.S. universities [7]. Therefore, solutions that address these social factors can also remit some of the challenges related to individual factors. In the next section, this paper will discuss some possible solutions based on the challenges brought by social factors for different international education institutions.

## **4.2 Proposing Solutions and Future Development for International Education Institutions**

For Chinese international students who graduate from a Chinese high school and enter a U.S. university, U.S. universities and Chinese international high schools or programs are the international educational institutions that can most directly help mitigate the challenges. This section will discuss some of the options that may mitigate the challenges caused by social factors from the perspective of these two international education institutions.

### **4.2.1 U.S. Universities**

As the principal location for Chinese international students to live and study in the United States, American colleges can play a significant role in easing any difficulties they may be facing. Although many U.S. universities are inclusive and welcoming to international students, many of them do not have well-developed systems in place to support and assist this particular student population [21]. Schools need to expend more effort to understand the cultural specificities of this student population and encourage faculty, staff, and students to respect and welcome students with diverse cultural backgrounds. For example, schools can conduct cultural exchange activities and programs to make more school members aware of the backgrounds of Chinese students. Also, schools can offer introductory American culture classes for Chinese students to help them understand American culture and classroom settings [11]. Also, student groups within the school, such as the Chinese Student Association, can support Chinese students in many situations [14]. Schools should encourage the development of this type of club to help Chinese students better find a sense of belonging and be free from more worries. There are many ways that U.S. universities can help ease the challenges of Chinese students and, simultaneously, attract more Chinese students to apply to the school to benefit the school itself.

### **4.2.2 Chinese International High Schools and Programs**

Attending a Chinese international high school or program is a traditional way for Chinese students to go to U.S. universities. These institutions provide essential preparation and counseling for these students before they leave for the United States. As China's economy has grown, the number and demand for international high schools have increased yearly, with schools offering International Baccalaureate Diploma Programmes (IBDPs), for example, increasing sevenfold between 2003 and 2014 [22]. However, these international schools or programs established in China are deficient in blending Chinese and Western educational cultures; for example, they do not offer American-style classrooms, teaching environments, and teachers in their entirety, making it difficult for these schools to help alleviate the challenges these students may face in college in the future [5]. On the other hand,

Chinese international high schools must adapt more to the significant cultural divide between China and the United States.

In addition to ensuring that students can apply to their desired U.S. college, a Chinese international high school or program should focus on preparing students in advance for a completely different environment. Despite having high standardized test results, many Chinese students in American colleges struggle to adapt to living and studying abroad [5]. Chinese international high schools should be aware of the cultural differences that students are about to face and provide assistance for these sociocultural differences. First, international high schools should provide some introductions to American culture for students. Second, teachers should pay attention to not only the curriculum but also pedagogy [5] in the classroom to help students be more prepared for their future studies. Many different aspects can be adapted through the high school classroom to better prepare future Chinese international students for American universities.

## 5. Conclusion

The difficulties faced by Chinese overseas students studying at American colleges are reviewed and compared in this essay. Based on this comparison and the difficulties social issues provide for Chinese overseas students, the research suggests that international education institutions support these students more. Individual difficulties can include, but are not restricted to, mental health issues, language hurdles, and financial constraints, while societal difficulties can also include, but are not restricted to, cultural shock, disparities in educational systems, and a lack of social support. By comparing the causes, characteristics, and possible solutions of these two types of challenges, this paper argues that international education institutions including U.S. universities and Chinese international high schools that can help Chinese international students should focus more on alleviating the challenges posed by social factors because these challenges are more generalized and will help alleviate some of the challenges associated with individual factors. Finally, this paper discusses some possible solutions for U.S. universities and Chinese international high schools or programs based on an analysis of the socio-cultural challenges. By learning more about these challenges and dilemmas, these international education institutions can better understand and assist this large student population.

In contrast to examining different aspects of the constraints Chinese students face in U.S. universities, this paper highlights differences in these challenges and specific directions for improvement. This paper emphasizes the mitigation of challenges posed by social factors as a more efficient direction for reform for international educational institutions. At the same time, however, this paper does not call for ignoring the challenges posed by individual factors but rather calls for helping Chinese international students to become more integrated into the U.S. educational environment by focusing on their cultural differences.

Finally, personal differences and time changes also have an influential role in the dilemmas that Chinese students studying in the U.S, during which COVID-19 pandemic has brought a whole new set of travel issues and identity issues to the Chinese student community. In future research, more attention could be paid to changes in the Chinese international student population based on time and social development and the impact of these changes on the original challenges. With more detailed research and studies, educational institutions can better tailor their policies to help a broader range of student populations.

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