The Adjustment Challenges and Corresponding Solutions for Chinese International Students in the United States

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Abstract. Information about the challenges and adjustments for Chinese international students in the United States is ill-informed. This literature review analyzes the two major adjustment problems for Chinese international students, the reasons that contribute to these challenges, and provide some possible corresponding solutions. Firstly, cultural differences between China and the United States interact with the separation from families, the emergence of developing new social networks, and concerns about economic issues and certificates leading to social adjustment challenges for Chinese international students. Secondly, language barriers, accents, and unfamiliarity with the new education system contribute to Chinese international students' academic adjustment problems. Eventually, all these factors combined together affect the mental status of Chinese international students while increasing their social isolation, leading to poor academic performances, and making them feel inferior and pain. However, Chinese international students may relieve their pressure and shorten the period for adjustment through actively socializing in new environments, developing social networks with local Americans and compatriots, adopting integration strategies toward a new culture, and pursuing some external help such as psychological counseling.

Keywords: Chinese international students, social adjustments, academic performances, mental health.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development in global education, studying abroad now become part of the new normal [1]. As a country with a large population, China plays a huge role and the ratio of Chinese international students is continuously growing [2]. And because of viewing studying abroad as a way of internalizing higher education, developed countries such as the United States and Canada are their primary consideration [3]. Previous data showed that the population of Chinese students in the United States was continuously increasing from 157 million in 2010 to more than 372 million in 2019 [4]. This more than doubled growth in population deserves more attention. According to data from the Institute of International Education, Chinese students had already become the greatest international student group in the U.S. [5]. As the main force of international students in the US, Chinese international students contribute to a huge influence on the American economy from their tuition fees and costs of living during school to becoming part of intellectual resources in the United States when they choose to stay after graduation [6].

Empirical evidence showed that there are many advantages for international students to studying abroad [7]. With regard to Chinese international students, studying abroad provides them opportunities to communicate with students and instructors from various ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds which may contribute to their growth of confidence [8]. Moreover, they would experience personal level developments and develop their ability to think critically and creatively. Also, because of the special education experiences they received from studying abroad, these international students are able to become globally employable and more competitive when looking for jobs [9].

Even with these widely acknowledged advantages and national-level of interest for all kinds of institutions, there are still limited studies on the challenges and adjustments for Chinese international students in the United States. Fitting themselves into an unfamiliar culture is considered to be one of the biggest adjustment challenges that had to be overcome when entering universities in a different country [10]. Culture adjustments are always regarded as a challenge for Chinese international

students in the U.S. for they might face cultural shock and some other problems including living on their own, making new friends, and academically adjusting [11].

This article focuses on two aspects of the adjustments and challenges that Chinese international students in the United States are going to face ----social adjustments and academic challenges. Previous studies indicated that adopting a new culture is an adynamic shift of personal identification, a dual process that evolves in both cultural and psychological changes [12]. It's reported as a positive experience with challenges that can enhance an individual's intercultural communication ability by Chinese international students [7]. Also, some researchers found that there is a relationship between the stress of cultural adjustments and mental status----when it interacts with other pressure sources such as academic challenges, it might cause mental status problems [13]. Because of sharing different social norms in China and the United States, Chinese international students may experience many stresses which are defined as 'cultural distance' by Redmond [14]. As a collectivist society, the Chinese value more on group targets and interdependence while individualistic cultures such as the United States prioritize individual goals and independence. Tsai and colleagues described Chinese culture as emphasizing interpersonal relationships, collectiveness, obedience to authority, and self-control of emotions while the culture in the United States is demonstrated as supporting individualism, defiance of authority, and openness to expressing personal thoughts [15]. And these cultural differences can also be found in many dimensions such as the way of thinking and communication [14]. Therefore, when facing almost opposite cultural values, Chinese students are very likely to experience culture shock and homesickness [15]. While adjusting encountering themselves into the new culture, social networks such as friendships with other international students can have a significant impact on Chinese international students' mental health status by providing psychological support [16].

Another major challenge comes from the academic aspect while English has been viewed as the main issue for some Chinese international students and it's closely connected with students' academic performances and self-efficiency in their studies [17]. Griffiths and colleagues defined classroom transition as the feeling of anxiety and confusion experienced by students who are dealing with strange learning or teaching approaches and are shocked by unexpected ideas [18]. The differences between Chinese education systems and American education systems may contribute to huge amounts of barriers to Chinese international students' academic adjustment. For example, they might be less willing to express their critical thinking during class or show a low level of class engagement [19, 20].

Based on the above discussion, previous studies lack of a systematical research on the adjustments of Chinese international students. Therefore, in order to address these limitations, this article would analyze the adjustments and challenges encountered by Chinese international students and provide some possible corresponding solutions.

2. Adjustment and Possible Solutions

2.1 Social Adjustments

When coming to a new country, the very first challenge for Chinese international students is adjusting to cultural differences [11]. Empirical evidence indicated the cultural differences between China which shared a collective social norm and America which valued more on individualism. Specifically, collectivism shared a social value that self-enhancement, the foundational motivation of self-esteem, is not viewed as important as it's in individualism. The independence orientation prioritizes self-esteem and self-worth while the interdependence orientation, especially in China, prioritizes meeting societal standards [21]. These extreme cultural differences make Chinese international students have difficulties making accurate predictions and interpretations of the things they experienced and maximizing the cultural distance precepted by Chinese international students which might lead to their increasing psychosocial distress level [14]. Sue and Kirk compared the Chinese international students with local students from the United States and found that the Chinese

were more conservative, more likely to obey the authorities, more traditional and inhibited, less likely to actively interact with others, and less willing to express their internal ideas. These would lead to increasing difficulties for Chinese international students to adapt themselves to American culture and school lives and make them feel excluded and powerless [22]. Graham compared the comparative degree of cultural adaption pressure among students from nine ethnic groups. Besides the huge differences among all aspects, the results also suggested that Chinese students were the most excluded group [23].

While adjusting themselves to American culture, Chinese international students are also facing the challenge of independence. Leaving their homeland signifies farewell to their parents, friends, families, and all the things they were familiar with. To most Chinese international students, the United States is a brand-new environment. And because of deeply attached to their homeland, they tend to view themselves as 'guests' while staying in the United States. Therefore, these strong ties to home, cultural shocks, and lack of experience of living alone would contribute to homesickness and serious social isolation [15]. Many Chinese internationals reported their failure to develop a social relationship with local American students. Graham attributed this pheromone to the differences between Chinese academic-oriented goals in China and fun-oriented values in the United States [23]. On the other hand, Chinese international students would be influenced by the interdependence culture and language constrains and more willing to interact with other Chinese students and voluntarily separate themselves from local American students. However, the Chinese international communities in the United States are limited and usually not well-developed. Besides, the main focus of these associations is on academic issues which would lead to increasing social isolation.

Another major concern for Chinese international students is their economic issues, especially for those students who depend on scholarships and financial support from their schools [24]. Even though most Chinese international students come from middle- to high-income families in China, they have to confront a relatively high exchange rate between Chinese RMB to U.S. dollars [25]. Some of them are aided by their relatives which are often unstable. These situations are also common among local American students who can easily solve these problems by looking for a part-time job. However, governments and the immigration laws of the United States don't allow international students to have part-time jobs. Moreover, the student loan programs in their school are only available to local American students and they have extremely high constrains for international students. Due to limited finial resources, most Chinese international students show relatively low engagement in social activities. In addition, they often can't afford expensive housing and health insurance. These may attribute to serious outcomes when illness or accidents happened. But due to the rapid economic developments in China in recent years, the financial issues among Chinese international students are gradually improving [26].

Chinese international students' concerns about their certificates also play a significant role in their social adjustments. According to the immigration regulations of America, international students can only study at their school to hold student visas. Therefore, Chinese students are not able to have a part-time job when having economic issues and they can't request student loans because they are not American citizens or permanent residents of the United States [27]. Concerns about their visa also affect Chinese international students' home visiting plans. Many of them choose to not return to their homeland during vacation because they are worried about being refused by the customhouse to come back to school [28]. These problems eventually prolong Chinese international students' separation from their families. In addition, most Chinese international students are not familiar with American laws. It's very common for them to have difficulties dealing with American policies or other Americans.

2.2 Academic Adjustments

Language problems were reported as a major problem by many Chinese international students. Empirical studies indicated the connection between English proficiency with academic achievements, social adjustments, and stress of Chinese international students [17]. Language barriers for Chinese

international students may contribute to their lower engagement during class, require them to spend more time on their tasks and homework, and influence their academic outcomes. Moreover, it can trigger their doubts about themselves and decrease their self-esteem when making mistakes. Kao researched the problems of Chinese international students and English were reported as the biggest barrier to their academic success [29].

Challenges in language for Chinese international students can be found in both oral and writing while oral English is viewed as the most difficult problem [30]. When they were in China, most Chinese international students didn't have many opportunities to practice English. Specifically, the training they received in China focused more on helping them pass standardized tests such as TOEFL which often fail to help them meet the academic requirements in college or social interaction. Many of them reported having difficulties in understanding and communicating in English even achieved a very high score on these tests [31]. Besides affecting their academic performance, oral English also played a huge role in Chinese international students' social anxiety and isolation. Spencer-Rogers and McGovern found that language insufficiency was reported as the main obstacle to Chinese international students' social participation [32]. These may affect the mental status of Chinese international students and make them feel excluded and disconnected. In addition, speaking with an accent can also impact the academic performance of Chinese international students.

There are also cultural differences between China education systems and American education systems. The traditional Chinese education systems emphasize rules and discipline, teachers take control over the class while the students just follow the instructions. However, in the education systems of the United States, self-directed learning is encouraged while blind discipline is devalued [33]. Therefore, it can be challenging for Chinese international students to develop their ability on self-management and self-discipline [31]. Besides these, Chinese international students also need to organize their studies and determine their career futures by themselves in order to adjust to the American education system. These can be a huge challenge for they had followed clear instructions and rules for over ten years before coming to the United States. In addition, Chinese students need to adapt themselves to the American class environment and adapt to the teachers-students relationship in the United States. Teachers in the traditional Chinese education system are often viewed as authorities and shouldn't be challenged by the students while challenging and self-expression are often encouraged in the American education system. Moreover, constantly talking about own opinions is considered to be impolite in Chinese culture. Because of these cultural differences, Chinese international students might feel uncomfortable challenging their American professors or participating in class discussions. Moreover, American education encourages students to develop their creative and critical thinking which are viewed as unnecessary in Chinese education. Chinese international students who shared a collective social norm are often more encouraged to maintain group orders, keep a relatively low profile, have a lower tendency to express their opinions, and would avoid interrupting the flow of class [34]. Therefore, Chinese international students are more willing to respond to close-ended questions with exact answers to avoid interrupting class and giving the wrong answers while local American students feel free to participate in all kinds of questions, share their thoughts, and don't worry about making mistakes [20].

2.3 Mental Status and Corresponding Solutions

Based on the previous discussion, all these adjustments and challenges that interact with each other can contribute to the feeling of being overwhelmed, increasing pressure, and unstable mental status of Chinese international students. Empirical evidence indicates that the perceived cultural distance is related to the psychological and social concerns experienced during cross-cultural transitions. Lian studied the prevalence of mental problems among Chinese international students in US higher education and found that 77.9% and 74.3% of the two participant groups reported having experienced depression and anxiety symptoms in the past year [35]. One reason that contributes to Chinese international students' mental issues would be the violation of their expectations. Most Chinese international students come to schools in the United States with a high parental expectation of their

academic performance and their own expectations of their new lives. However, their imagination of the United States was not always met due to extreme cultural differences while language challenges continuously impact their academic outcomes. These violations of expectations create high stress and anxiety in Chinese international students and make them have an overwhelming sense of loss, pain, and inferiority [36]. In addition, Chinese international students are more willing to develop their social networks with other Chinese students rather than with local Americans. These co-national ties may solve their problem of social isolation to some degree. But fewer international ties seem to relate to an increasing level of social adjustment [37].

Even though mental issues among Chinese international students can easily be found through previous studies, the signs of their stress may not be visible to others because of their internalized social norms [35]. Traditional Chinese parents tend to teach their children to be introverted, to avoid drawing others' attention, and not to express their internal feelings. Moreover, revealing personal issues is considered as a coward, a lack of the ability to take care of themselves, and bringing shame on their family [38]. These cultural factors combined with the lack of counseling services in China make Chinese international students more difficult to admit their mental problems or seek external help.

There are several corresponding solutions to these adjusting challenges and one of them would be developing their social networks. 1) Developing a social circle in the new country can help international students to adapt to the strange environment [31]. Moreover, it can improve Chinese international students' communication competencies and language ability. Interacting with local people is able to help the newcomers quickly adjust themselves to the new culture, meet more people, develop their intercultural competencies, and receive more social supports which is positively related to mental health. 2) Besides interacting with local American, Chinese international students can also seek helps from Chinese student communities. Kao found that other Chinese nationals are considered to be the most prioritized sources of help when dealing with adjustment challenges among Chinese international students [29]. When new members join in, the old ones tend to help them explore new environments and pass on their wisdom. 3) In addition, Chinese international students can seek counseling services which are commonly provided in schools in the United States. Taken all these together, Chinese international students should actively socialize and engage in the new environments, develop their social networks with both compatriots and local Americans, adopt integration strategies toward American culture, and pursue psychological counseling when necessary. These can help them relieve their stress and shorten their social or academic adjustment period.

3. Conclusion

Based on previously described studies, Chinese international students are facing both social and academic adjusting challenges when they first come to the United States. The extreme cultural differences between China and the United States and different shared social norms would contribute to their culture shock and make them feel excluded and powerless. Leaving their homeland and living alone in a brand-new environment requires rapid development of independence for Chinese international students which can increase their mental stress and social isolation. Besides these adjustment problems in daily life, Chinese international students' challenges can also be found in their concerns about economic issues and certificates. The high exchange rate between the Chinese RMB and the U.S. dollars, unstable financial support from relatives, unavailable application for student loan programs, and constrains of having a part-time job lead to Chinese international students' low engagement in social activity and might have serious outcomes when accidents happened. On the other hand, in order to hold their student visas, many Chinese international students choose to not return to their homeland which prolongs their separation from their families and increases their homesickness.

Academic adjustments are also a huge challenge for Chinese international students. Language barriers and accents are commonly reported by Chinese international students which might lead to

their lower engagement during class and poor academic performances. Moreover, language barriers play a role in Chinese international students' daily interaction with local Americans and can enlarge their social isolation and loneliness. Also, due to the differences in educational systems between China and the United States, Chinese international students need to adjust themselves to the American class environment and adapt to another kind of relationship between instructors and students in the United States. All these adjustment issues, challenges, and anxieties interacting with each other can contribute to the increasing stress and mental issues of Chinese international students. In addition, the violation of their hopes of life in the United States and high academic expectations from their parents influence their mental stability. Depression and anxiety symptoms can be easily found in Chinese international students while their internalized social norms often prevented them to seek external help. Luckily, Chinese international students may solve these problems through developing social networks with local Americans, seeking help from Chinese students' communities, and looking for psychological counseling to shorten their adjustment period.

Besides the above findings, there are some limitations in this study. First, it only discusses Chinese international students in the United States. Studying abroad is now becoming increasingly prevalent and the population of international students all around the world is continuously increasing. Besides Chinese international students, international students from other ethnicities are also struggling with their adjustment challenges while adapting themselves to a new country. Moreover, some local American might face some adjusting issues at the same time. Second, this literature review only focuses on two kinds of major adjustment challenges for Chinese international students. However, starting a new life in another country can be full of unknowns. Therefore, more variables and factors should be taken into consideration for future studies. Third, this literature review only provides a few possible solutions for Chinese international students to relieve mental stress. Based on the previous limitations, future research is suggested to take students from other cultural backgrounds into account, consider about other factors that might also contribute to international students' adjustment challenges, and explore more corresponding solutions.

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