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Influencing Factors and Intervention Strategies for Mental Health Among Chinese International Students

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic raging overseas, the mental health status of Chinese international students is extremely concerning. This paper systematically reviews the manifestations and causes of mental health issues among overseas Chinese international students, highlighting the significant influences of Confucian culture, language barriers, academic pressure, social pressure, and prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, this paper evaluates intervention strategies for enhancing the mental health of Chinese international students from three dimensions: social relationships, cognitive-behavioral approaches, and internet-based social media. We hope that this integrative review can foster a more comprehensive and profound understanding among international educators, cultural psychology researchers, counselors, and other relevant stakeholders regarding the cross-cultural adaptation difficulties and mental health crises confronting Chinese international student populations, facilitate the identification and validation of effective psychological intervention methods, and provide a scientific foundation and practical insights for the improved implementation of psychological interventions in the future.

Full Text

Preamble

Influencing Factors and Intervention Strategies for the Mental Health of Chinese International Students

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic raging overseas, the mental health of Chinese international students has become a pressing concern. This article systematically reviews the manifestations and causes of mental health problems among overseas Chinese students, highlighting the significant impacts of Confucian culture, language barriers, academic pressure, social stress, and prejudice and discrimination on their psychological well-being. Simultaneously, we evaluate intervention strategies for improving mental health among Chinese international students from three perspectives: social relationships, cognitive-behavioral approaches, and internet social media. We hope this integrated review will enable international educators, cultural psychology researchers, and psychological counselors to develop a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the cross-cultural adaptation difficulties and mental health crises faced by Chinese international students, identify and test effective psychological interventions, and provide a scientific foundation and practical insights for future mental health interventions.

Keywords: Chinese international students, mental health, cross-cultural adaptation, psychological intervention, internet social media

Classification Number: B849:C91

According to the latest statistics from the Ministry of Education, from 1978 to the end of 2018, China had accumulated 5.8571 million overseas students, with 1.5339 million currently pursuing their studies. Chinese international students are spread across every corner of the world, particularly in North America, Western Europe, Africa, and Oceania (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). As the population of overseas Chinese students continues to grow and trend toward younger ages, combined with the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Chinese students studying abroad, their families, and their host universities are all facing tremendous psychological pressure. These students must confront not only the same academic, internship, and employment pressures as local students but also more severe challenges such as cross-cultural adaptation, language barriers, homesickness, and discrimination (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Consequently, issues related to cultural adaptation, mental health, and perceived discrimination among Chinese international students in their host countries have become increasingly prominent and warrant long-term attention and systematic investigation from psychologists (Zhai & Du, 2020).

Extensive research indicates that the mental health status of overseas Chinese students is deeply concerning. A study of Chinese international students at Yale University found that 45% of participants reported depressive symptoms and 29% reported anxiety symptoms (Han, Luo, Jacobs & Jean-Baptiste, 2013). Another study of Chinese international students in Australia revealed that among international students who died by suicide, significantly fewer had sought mental health counseling prior to their deaths compared to Australian domestic

students (22.2% vs. 57.1%) (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). Additionally, an online survey of Chinese international students showed that 54% of respondents experienced depressive symptoms, yet only 9% sought psychological counseling (Lu, Dear, Wootton & Titov, 2014). These findings demonstrate not only the alarming state of mental health among Chinese international students but also their lower tendency to seek external help when experiencing mental health issues, leading to prolonged suffering or even tragic outcomes (Mitchell, Greenwood & Guglielmi, 2011).

This article synthesizes previous empirical research on international student mental health by examining influencing factors and intervention strategies to provide macro-level, systematic, and evidence-based academic recommendations for improving the mental health of Chinese international students. We first introduce the implicit understanding of mental health and typical symptoms among students in the Chinese cultural context, then summarize various influencing factors and sources of stress for mental health problems, and finally review intervention approaches implemented by different organizations and individuals. This integrated review offers important theoretical guidance and practical implications for campus psychological counselors and educational administrators, off-campus mental health service providers and social workers, teachers, parents, and Chinese international students themselves.

2. Influencing Factors of Mental Health Among Chinese International Students

A study of Australian university students found that the overall mental health level of the student population was significantly lower than that of the general Australian population (Stallman & Shochet, 2011). Major triggers for mental health crises among these students included academic stress, financial pressure, life stress, and interpersonal problems (Vaez & Laflamme, 2008). More specifically, international students face additional challenges related to cross-cultural adaptation. Acculturation refers to the dual process of cultural and psychological change that occurs through contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005). In a new cultural environment, individuals often lack understanding of the values and social norms of the host culture and face tremendous acculturative stress during integration, which can trigger physiological, psychological, and social reactions such as anxiety, depression, anger, and social exclusion. Previous research has identified primary sources of acculturative stress as language barriers, academic pressure, social relationships, and social discrimination (Berry, 2005). Below, we elaborate on how these different factors impair international students' mental health and the underlying mechanisms.

2.1 Academic Pressure

Academic stress is an inevitable challenge for all students, but international students experience it differently than domestic students. For international students, academic pressure is often intensified by factors such as cultural background and language barriers, thereby deepening its negative psychological impact. A study of 143 international students found that daily life stressors—such as difficulties with English usage and cultural adaptation—combined with lower levels of social support, led to greater academic stress, which in turn predicted stronger negative physiological and emotional reactions, including fatigue, headaches, anxiety, anger, crying, and substance abuse (Misra, Crist & Burant, 2003). In a longitudinal study of 60 Canadian international students, researchers found that students who reported more academic stress in the first phase of testing reported higher levels of psychological distress 18 months later in the second phase (Rasmi, Safdar & Lewis, 2009). However, a 2004 comparative study of American and international students found that American domestic students reported higher levels of academic stress and more stress responses than international students. We propose that this inconsistent finding may be due to Chinese international students' perception that experiencing mental health problems represents weakness, immaturity, and shame, thereby reducing their subjective reporting of academic stress and stress responses. Future research should further investigate the prevalence and true causes of such inconsistent findings (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

2.2 Language Barriers

Language proficiency is a significant factor contributing to mental health problems among international students. In a questionnaire survey of 149 international students in the United States, researchers found that Asian students experienced greater adaptation difficulties than European students, particularly in academic learning and English usage, due to greater cultural distance. The results also showed that poorer academic performance and lower English proficiency were significantly correlated with overall maladjustment. Notably, master's students were more prone to these adaptation problems than doctoral students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). In another questionnaire study of 372 international students in the United States, researchers asked participants about their English proficiency and comfort level when using English, and collected feedback on acculturative stress. The findings revealed that more fluent English usage was associated with lower perceived acculturative stress and reduced homesickness and depressive symptoms (Yeh & Inos, 2003). However, current research relies primarily on participants' overall subjective reports, and previous studies have not collected objective measures or established causal models to examine which specific aspects of language proficiency affect international students' psychological adaptation and mental health—for instance, distinguishing between academic and social language. Additionally, existing research has not addressed the psychological dimensions through which language barriers reduce

student satisfaction and well-being. Future studies should further explore how to help international students improve their language skills and reduce language barriers from a psychological perspective, thereby decreasing sources of mental health stress.

2.3 Social Relationships

Beyond academics and language, another major challenge for international students is establishing positive social relationships in the host country. High-quality local social relationships are crucial for international students' mental health (Brunsting, Nelson, Zachry, Corinne, Takeuchi, 2018), and students who engage in more cross-cultural interactions perceive higher levels of social support and experience lower anxiety and depression (Berry, 2005). However, the reality of international students' social relationships is concerning. A study of 200 international students in Australia found that two-thirds felt lonely within just a few months of arrival (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). In New Zealand, 55% of Chinese international students were dissatisfied with their local interpersonal relationships, and 71% expressed a desire for more opportunities to develop friendships with locals (Zhang & Brunton, 2007). For Asian international students, collectivist cultural values make it more difficult to integrate into local social life compared to students from Western cultural backgrounds (Mori, 2000). Therefore, social obstacles and difficulties may directly trigger increased anxiety and depression among international students.

2.4 Prejudice and Discrimination

International students from Asia, Africa, India, Latin America, and the Middle East frequently perceive discrimination compared to American or European students, often feeling inferior, experiencing direct verbal attacks, receiving differential treatment in employment, and suffering physical violence (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). This discrimination includes both explicit and implicit forms (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Such culture-related discriminatory behavior is termed "cultural racism" –distinguishing racial relations based on cultural differences and assuming one culture is superior to another. Experiencing discrimination has profoundly negative effects on international students' mental health and is closely associated with depression and unhappiness (Jung, Hecht & Wadsworth, 2007). Additionally, international students are vulnerable to discrimination in language use. Research shows that groups experiencing language discrimination use psychological counseling services 2.2 times more than those who have not experienced language discrimination (Spencer & Chen, 2004), and these groups may develop more chronic health problems such as hypertension (Yoo, Gee & Takeuchi, 2009). Moreover, international students who experience discrimination have greater difficulty establishing good social relationships with local populations (Mori, 2000), which exacerbates their homesickness and loneliness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

2.5 Sociocultural Factors

Chinese international students possess a distinctive cultural background that differs markedly from Western cultures. Eastern culture emphasizes inwardness, while Western culture emphasizes outwardness. Confucian culture stresses “self-restraint and return to propriety,” requiring people to suppress emotional expression and achieve inner peace through behavioral constraint (Yip, 2005). In interpersonal relationships, Confucian culture emphasizes uprightness, modesty, friendliness, and forgiveness, while remaining loyal to friends, family, and country (Oldstone-Moore, 2012). Furthermore, Taoist philosophy in Eastern culture suggests that the best way to achieve high-level mental health is to maintain a state of “emptiness,” allowing life and death, fortune and misfortune to occur naturally (Yip, 2004). Due to this inward-oriented value system, most Chinese international students rarely utilize mental health services provided by schools or other organizations when facing mental health issues abroad, and they are more likely than American students to discontinue services when receiving mental health help (Pedersen, 1991). Additionally, because psychological counseling can be embarrassing and shameful, students often suppress their uncomfortable feelings, leading to increased depression. Research shows that compared to Americans and Europeans, Asian Americans experience embarrassment and shame when discussing mental health issues; and Asian American students under 16 feel less discomfort when discussing psychological problems with classmates and friends than with family members, possibly because adolescents are more acculturated than their parents (Fogel & Ford, 2005). Other studies show that among outpatients with depression, Chinese cultural background participants report more somatic symptoms, while Western cultural background participants report more psychological symptoms (Ryder, et al., 2008). When Chinese international students experience physical symptoms such as insomnia, stomach pain, headaches, and fatigue that may result from psychological problems, they are more inclined to seek physical treatment rather than psychological counseling services (Ryder et al., 2008). These sociocultural factors exacerbate negative psychological experiences and reduce the tendency to seek psychological assistance. Therefore, psychologists must consider these sociocultural factors when providing psychological counseling or interventions for Chinese international students to develop more effective intervention strategies.

The COVID-19 outbreak that began in Wuhan in early 2020 posed a tremendous threat to global human life and health, not only physically but also psychologically and socially. Large-scale infectious disease outbreaks are closely associated with psychological problems such as depression and anxiety (Bao et al., 2020). Beyond the fear and anxiety caused by the disease itself, city lockdown policies implemented for epidemic control also negatively impact mental health (Ali et al., 2020). For international students, policies such as school closures, on-line teaching, and visa restrictions prevented many from returning to campus, leaving them stranded at home and increasing their anxiety and worry about examinations, graduation, and employment (Lee, 2020).

University students are a population with frequent mental health crises. A study of domestic Chinese university students showed that 21.3% had mild anxiety, 2.7% had moderate anxiety, and 0.9% had severe anxiety (Cao et al., 2020). For overseas Chinese international students, beyond anxiety symptoms, they must also confront racial discrimination abroad while reassuring family and friends at home not to worry. Recent research found that Chinese international students remaining abroad had higher anxiety levels than the general Chinese population, and this anxiety was closely related to their perceived discrimination. The data showed that 31% reported experiencing discrimination in their communities, 58.2% reported feeling discriminated against when consuming news media, nearly all expressed concern about being infected with COVID-19, and nearly half felt caught in a dilemma—for instance, feeling safer returning to China but worrying about infection during travel (Ma & Miller, 2020). Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop, design, and optimize psychological intervention programs tailored to Chinese international students to help overseas students reduce psychological stress and enhance their sense of security, belonging, and well-being.

3.1 Social Relationship Interventions

Berry (2005) found that good social support facilitates international students' cross-cultural adaptation and helps reduce their anxiety and depression (Zhang & Goodso, 2011). Good social support also shows a positive correlation with subjective well-being. Research indicates that international students' perception of social support primarily comes from friends and institutional sources, particularly close friends, and that high-quality local friend networks mean better cultural adaptation, so students should focus on establishing local social relationships (Shu, et al., 2020). During the current COVID-19 pandemic, research shows that even under lockdown conditions with limited physical contact, Chinese international students who perceived more social support maintained better mental health than those with less perceived support (Ma & Miller, 2020).

Additionally, in an online survey of 120 Chinese international students, researchers found that students who used online social tools more skillfully and frequently had broader and more diverse social networks than those who used them less, and these broader networks enhanced students' cross-cultural adaptation in both academic and daily life (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). In a study of Australian international students, researchers found that 88% of lonely students turned to their social networks, especially friends, to alleviate loneliness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). Survey data from New Zealand international students indicated that more local friends meant more entertainment activities, and students with more than two local friends experienced less loneliness and better cultural adaptation than those with fewer than two local friends (Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Similarly, Kashima and Loh (2006) found that international students who made more friends from the same cultural and national background also adapted better to the foreign culture.

Based on this theoretical foundation, Sakurai, McCall-Wolf and Kashim (2010) designed an experiential method to enhance cultural adaptability. In the experiment, the experimental group consisted of 47 international students from an Australian university who traveled together by bus to a popular tourist attraction, while the control group of 51 participants did not participate in this activity. One month and four months after the experiential intervention, the experimental group had established more social relationships with locals and deepened their integration into the local culture compared to the control group. However, this intervention focused more on sociocultural adaptation rather than directly addressing psychological adaptation.

In a study on sense of belonging among international students at German universities, researchers used a social belonging intervention to enhance international students' sense of belonging and reduce their depression levels during the adaptation period (Marksteiner, Janke & Dickhäuser, 2019). During the intervention, participants first completed a reading and writing exercise in the laboratory. In the reading component, participants read several materials allegedly written by senior students describing their struggles during the initial university adaptation period and emphasizing that students from all social, cultural, and racial backgrounds inevitably feel challenged at the beginning, but these feelings diminish over time. In the writing component, participants wrote about their own difficult adaptation experiences that resonated with the reading materials. For five days following the laboratory intervention, participants completed two questionnaires daily: one in the morning measuring social adaptation, self-efficacy, and academic potential, and one in the evening measuring the same indicators plus reviewing all positive integration behaviors during the day, such as actively answering questions or participating in group activities (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Through these intervention methods, researchers found that international students' depression levels decreased, and their sense of social belonging increased by the end of the semester, though these positive changes disappeared after the new semester began. This study suggests that writing about positive adaptation experiences may enhance international students' sense of belonging, but further research is needed on how to extend the duration, maintain intervention effects, and improve psychological resilience.

3.2 Culture-Based Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions

Mak, Westwood, Barker and Ishiyama (1998) designed a cross-cultural social skills enhancement program called "Experiential Learning and Leadership" (EX-CELL) for international students. The program aimed to help international students maintain confidence and efficiency in academic and social interactions while preserving their cultural identity. The program consisted of six phases, each containing three hours of coursework for classes of 10-20 students, covering topics such as initiating social conversations, seeking help, integrating into groups, and negotiation. Wong (2001) found that international students at a Canadian university showed significantly improved self-efficacy when interacting

with local students after completing the EXCELL program, and local students also perceived substantial improvements in international students' communication skills. However, the program has not yet measured changes in stress levels and subjective well-being.

In another cognitive-behavioral intervention, Xu, O' Brien and Chen (2019) designed a culturally relevant "Acceptance and Commitment" counseling group. The program had two phases: Phase one lasted one hour and involved group discussions on topics including stress symptoms, coping strategies, stress control methods, and stressor definitions. One week later, phase two began, covering topics such as stress acceptance, value identification, and value-based actions. Researchers conducted questionnaires and statistical analysis immediately after the intervention and one month later, finding that participating students showed significant reductions in depressive, anxiety, and stress symptoms.

In a cognitive-behavioral therapy intervention project for Turkish international students, researchers used a 2 \times 3 quasi-experimental design. Participants reported psychological adaptation, self-efficacy, and stress levels after 6 months. The program lasted 8 weeks, with one 1.5-hour session per week. The first two sessions focused on ice-breaking and friendship building to overcome communication anxiety and embarrassment from different cultural backgrounds. The third session helped international students define and understand daily stressors. The fourth and fifth sessions explored various strategies for coping with psychological adaptation problems through shared experiences. The sixth and seventh sessions established more positive internal dialogue by rewriting participants' self-talk. The eighth session reviewed and reinforced skills and knowledge learned during the counseling process. Immediately after the intervention, questionnaire data showed that international students' self-efficacy significantly improved, though psychological adaptation and stress levels showed no significant differences. However, in a follow-up test after 6 months, the experimental group showed significant improvements in psychological adaptation and self-efficacy, along with decreased stress levels (Elemo, Aman Sado & Türküm, 2019). Therefore, this cognitive-behavioral therapy intervention approach should be more widely applied and promoted.

To meet students' complex mental health needs, some American university counseling centers (UCC) have implemented walk-in counseling procedures to replace traditional appointment-based systems. Under this walk-in system, both the proportion of students seeking counseling and the number of consultations handled by counselors have significantly increased (Blau & DiMino, 2019).

3.3 Internet and Social Media Interventions

With the popularization of internet-based social tools, international students use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to further integrate into local society, adapt to the host culture, and reduce social, academic, and cultural adaptation pressures (Pang, 2018; Wang, 2015). Inter-

net social media provides valuable opportunities for international students to practice English, make local friends, access local information, and maintain connections with family and friends back home (Hofhuis, Hanke & Rutten, 2019; Hendrickson & Rosen, 2017; Croucher & Rahmani, 2015). Data show that Chinese international students' subjective well-being levels are positively correlated with social media usage.

However, some studies suggest that social media use may also have negative effects (Park, Song & Lee, 2014). For example, heavy Facebook use may lead to inadequate social skills and disconnection from original national social ties (McEwan, 2011). Similarly, research found that frequent use of internet social media—Facebook, for instance—reduces homesickness in both the short and long term but decreases local social skills in the short term (Billedo, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2020) and negatively impacts perceived social support in the long term (Billedo, Kerkhof, Finkenauer & Ganzeboom, 2019). In a study of 342 American university students, researchers found that Facebook usage was positively correlated with online social satisfaction but negatively correlated with offline social satisfaction, and that introverted individuals perceived more social support and achieved greater well-being through Facebook than extroverted individuals (Hu, Kim, Siwek, & Wilder, 2017). Survey data from Chinese international students in Japan showed that using social networks for entertainment increased students' loneliness (Guo, Li & Ito, 2014). Similarly, research indicates that during the COVID-19 pandemic, frequent use of social networks to obtain pandemic-related information is closely associated with higher anxiety and depression levels (Gao, et al., 2020). Therefore, the World Health Organization recommends that to protect mental health during the pandemic, people should reduce their attention to COVID-19 information, limit information consumption to fixed times such as once or twice daily, and obtain information from reliable sources while rejecting rumors and misinformation (World Health Organization, 2020). Currently, there is no definitive conclusion about the impact of social media tools on international students' cultural adaptation and mental health. Future research must be more nuanced, examining multiple dimensions such as usage time, purpose, and interaction groups to reveal clearer relationships between social media and mental health and improve the precision and effectiveness of internet-based psychological interventions.

4. Summary and Outlook

Existing research has provided basic descriptions, explanations, and analyses of influencing factors and intervention methods for international student mental health, significantly advancing our understanding of what mental health symptoms exist, what triggers them, and which intervention strategies are most effective. However, current research still has limitations. First, the relationship between internet social media use and cultural adaptation and mental health levels remains ambiguous, with insufficient evidence for clear, rigorous, and detailed conclusions. Future research requires more sophisticated causal and lon-

itudinal studies, particularly examining how factors such as the type, purpose, and duration of internet social media use affect Chinese international students' cross-cultural adaptation and mental health and the underlying mechanisms. Second, given the scarcity of effective intervention programs for international student mental health and cultural adaptation, especially regarding the development and effectiveness testing of online counseling and therapy interventions, researchers should invest more time and effort. Finally, current research focuses primarily on international student populations themselves, neglecting the micro-environments and social networks in which they are embedded. For instance, educational institutions and surrounding social circles in host countries and regions significantly influence individual students' mental health and cultural adaptation, yet research directly addressing contextual variables is extremely limited and therefore deserves more attention.

In summary, as psychologists increasingly focus on the psychology and behavior of Chinese international student populations, research from different psychological perspectives is gradually accumulating and maturing. Future work requires large-scale surveys, refined behavioral experiments, in-depth case analyses, and effective interventions to improve overseas students' academic achievement, social integration, mental health, cultural adaptation, and subjective well-being. Achieving this ambitious goal requires collaborative efforts from psychologists, psychological counselors, educators, policymakers, parents, teachers, government agencies, and multiple other stakeholders. We hope this article provides valuable scientific reference for academic research and practical applications in this field.

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The Influencing Factors and Intervention Strategies of the Mental Health of Chinese International Students

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Abstract: This article systematically sorts out the influencing factors of the mental health problems of Chinese International students. We point out that the impacts of Confucian culture, language barrier, academic stress, social relations and discrimination on the mental health of Chinese International students. Moreover, we synthesize intervention techniques for mental health problems based on three aspects: social relations, cognitive and behavior, and Internet social media, which may inspire new and effective interventions for Chinese International students in the future. We hope that this integrated review can better inform international educators, cultural psychology researchers, psychological counselors and other relevant groups to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the acculturation difficulties and mental issues faced by Chinese International students, which will ultimately facilitate the development of effective psychological interventions.

Keywords: Chinese International students, Mental health, Acculturation difficulties, Mental Intervention, Social media

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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