

## Psychological Structure and Formation Mechanisms of Stereotypes Toward Chinese International Student Groups

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### Abstract

Chinese international students overseas face complex and diverse stereotypes in international contexts. These stereotypes encompass high competence in scientific domains, yet low competence in English expression, critical thinking, and innovation; in daily interactions, Chinese international students are perceived as having a high-warmth image characterized by politeness and modesty, but also a low-warmth image associated with exclusive socialization with Chinese individuals and low moral standards. This article reviews and critiques the key mechanisms underlying the formation and maintenance of these stereotypes, including media portrayal, direct contact, neo-racism, and multicultural experiences, among others. Future research should further investigate the positive effects, negative effects, dynamic evolution, and coping strategies of stereotypes toward Chinese international student groups, employing multi-perspective, multi-level, and multi-paradigm cross-integration methods to better describe, explain, and address the psychological structure of stereotypes and their theoretical interpretations faced by this population in international contexts, ultimately enhancing the mental health and subjective well-being of Chinese international student groups from both theoretical construction and practical application perspectives.

### Full Text

## Psychological Structure and Formation Mechanisms of Stereotypes Toward Chinese International Students

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## Abstract

Chinese international students encounter complex and multifaceted stereotypes in global contexts. These stereotypes span from high competence in scientific fields to low competence in English communication, critical thinking, and innovation. In daily interactions, Chinese students are perceived as both highly warm—polite and modest—and low in warmth—socializing exclusively with fellow Chinese and lacking moral integrity. This paper reviews and examines the key mechanisms shaping the formation and maintenance of these stereotypes, including media portrayal, direct contact, neo-racism, and multicultural experiences. Future research should further elucidate the positive and negative effects of stereotypes, their dynamic evolution, and coping strategies. Employing multi-perspective, multi-level, and multi-paradigm integrative approaches will better describe, explain, and address the psychological structure and theoretical underpinnings of stereotypes faced by Chinese international students, ultimately enhancing their mental health and subjective well-being through both theoretical construction and practical application.

**Keywords:** Chinese international students, stereotypes, cultural adaptation, multicultural experiences, mental health

## Introduction

Globalization has propelled the internationalization of education and facilitated cross-cultural mobility and integration. For Chinese students, studying abroad has become a crucial pathway to obtaining international education, broadening global perspectives, and achieving academic success. Since 2012, the number of Chinese students pursuing overseas education has continuously risen. According to 2020–2021 academic year data, over 372,000 Chinese students were enrolled in U.S. institutions, comprising a dominant segment of the international student population (Valdez, 2015; Zu, 2022). This trend is similarly evident in other major host countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Adams, 2023), underscoring the central role and significance of Chinese international students in global education (中国教育在线, 2022).

In cross-cultural interactions, stereotypes function as simplified cognitive structures that provide essential cues for quickly understanding unfamiliar groups (Gohdes, 2017). Mounting evidence reveals that Chinese international students confront numerous stereotypes, with research indicating that they experience more severe stereotype threat compared to their international peers from other countries (Pekerti et al., 2020). These stereotypes not only exacerbate cultural divides with host communities and increase difficulties in social integration (Spencer-Rodgers, 2001) but may also intensify conflicts in self-identity and cultural identity (Berry, 2005), thereby triggering mental health issues such as anxiety and depression and diminishing their collective self-esteem (Lian & Wallace, 2018; Yu et al., 2023). Therefore, this paper systematically reviews and examines the types of stereotypes faced by Chinese international students and their underlying formation mechanisms. These theoretical elaborations hold significant implications for enhancing the well-being of Chinese international students and advancing international education practices.

## 2. What Stereotypes Do People Hold About Chinese International Students?

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) offers a parsimonious theoretical framework for understanding stereotypes in intergroup interactions. Based on extensive research by Fiske (2012) and colleagues, the SCM categorizes stereotypes into two primary dimensions: competence and warmth. The competence dimension pertains to evaluations of a group's intelligence, skills, and capabilities, while the warmth dimension reflects perceptions of the group's friendliness, trustworthiness, and moral character. These two dimensions jointly shape impressions and evaluations of specific groups and guide actual social behaviors, such as prejudice and discrimination. Below, we analyze and elaborate on the psychological structure of stereotypes confronting Chinese international students through the lens of these two SCM dimensions.

### 2.1 Competence Dimension

Regarding competence, Chinese international students encounter discipline-specific stereotypes. Due to their outstanding performance in mathematics and science, they are often perceived as high achievers in these fields (Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Stein et al., 2019). However, this seemingly complimentary evaluation masks underlying doubts about their higher-level intellectual abilities and exerts substantial psychological pressure on these students (Chen & Wen, 2021). Additionally, some domestic students experience negative emotions such as fear or jealousy, feeling threatened by Chinese students who are "too smart" (Ruble & Zhang, 2013).

In terms of language expression, Chinese international students are perceived as having weak English proficiency (Heng, 2018). In actual foreign language communication, they frequently encounter language barriers and expression difficul-

ties, leading to their capabilities in language skills being viewed as inadequate (Heng, 2019; Zhang-Wu & Brisk, 2021). This lack of fluency results in a “double deficit” stereotype: their multilingual competencies remain unrecognized while simultaneously being labeled as having “poor English” (Bodis, 2021). Beyond the stereotypes stemming from language barriers themselves, Chinese students who speak English with a Chinese accent are perceived as difficult to understand and respect (McDonough et al., 2022). Native English speakers often consequently regard non-native speakers with heavy accents as less intelligent, less educated, and more reluctant to interact or cooperate with them (Wang et al., 2017). Remarkably, even Chinese students who are fluent and accent-free in English cannot escape linguistic stereotyping. Such stereotypes arise from preconceived negative notions about English speakers based on race, ethnicity, or nationality (Dovchin, 2020). Consequently, regardless of their actual English proficiency, individuals who are not expected to excel in a particular language may still be labeled as having “poor pronunciation” or “low proficiency” (Piller, 2016). Even when English expression is excellent, if the speaker’s face appears Asian, people often unconsciously assume their English carries an Asian accent (Dovchin, 2020; Eisenclas & Michael, 2019). Accompanying the impression of low English ability, Chinese international students are perceived as unwilling to ask questions or challenge authoritative viewpoints, lacking critical thinking and independent thought (Chien, 2016; Peng, 2021). They are seen as passive and cautious in expressing opinions, classroom participation, and teamwork, requiring extended time to adapt to Western classroom environments that encourage open discussion, and relying heavily on guidance from instructors and peers (Peng, 2021; Heng, 2018). Furthermore, they face accusations of academic misconduct (Mittelmeier et al., 2023) and are viewed as lacking individuality and creativity (Chen & Wen, 2021).

## 2.2 Warmth Dimension

In the warmth dimension, stereotypes about Chinese international students similarly exhibit polarization. Multiple studies indicate that in daily interactions, Chinese students are appreciated for their politeness, modesty, and emphasis on social etiquette, presenting a “model minority” image (Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Ritter, 2013; Stein et al., 2019). However, in other social contexts, they are perceived as reserved, socially awkward, and inclined to socialize exclusively with fellow Chinese, becoming a culturally marginalized group (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). This may result from the combined constraints of language proficiency and unfamiliarity with local culture, which limit their social interactions. They can only obtain social support through connections with other Chinese peers, leading host communities to form stereotypes such as “Chinese only socialize with Chinese” and “difficulty integrating into local culture” (Chen & Zhou, 2019; Yu & Moskal, 2019; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Regarding moral character, Chinese international students are perceived as not prioritizing environmental behaviors (Stein et al., 2019), and students from mainland China are seen as deficient in educational attainment, moral cultivation, and behavioral standards (Lade-

gaard, 2012). Additionally, due to recent displays of wealth by some Chinese students—such as driving luxury cars and purchasing high-end goods—Chinese international students have been labeled as “coming from ultra-wealthy families,” conveying low warmth dimension information and provoking resentment and exclusion among host country citizens (Xie et al., 2021).

Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese international students experienced increased low-warmth stereotypes (Ma & Miller, 2021). Because the virus was first identified in China, these students were erroneously perceived as disease vectors and subsequently labeled as “perpetual foreigners” and “scapegoats for economic competition” (Yan et al., 2022; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). This led students to feel unwelcome by locals and increased their social pressure when interacting with domestic students, resulting in additional negative labels (Ji & Chen, 2023; Koo et al., 2023). The persistence of this “non-contact status” not only solidified mutual misunderstandings and divides but also further intensified existing stereotypes (Pekerti et al., 2020; Quinton, 2019).

### 3. Formation Mechanisms of Stereotypes Toward Chinese International Students

Based on the preceding review, we find that host countries’ competence stereotypes toward Chinese international students vary by discipline but generally lean toward low competence. While some positive impressions of modesty and politeness exist in the warmth dimension, most perceptions are negative. Therefore, further exploring the formation mechanisms of these stereotypes will help us understand their psychological underpinnings and inform future policy development and social interactions to improve this phenomenon.

Social Cognitive Theory and Social Identity Theory provide theoretical foundations for explaining the formation and maintenance of stereotypes about specific groups. Social Cognitive Theory posits that individuals abstract meaning from information resources through their own perceptual and cognitive processes, then actively or passively collect information to match it with corresponding concepts in their cognitive environment, thereby forming fixed attitudes and characteristic evaluations of a particular group or phenomenon. This suggests that both individual cognition and external environmental information jointly influence stereotypes (Font et al., 2016). Social Identity Theory further emphasizes the impact of ingroup-outgroup perception on social thinking, noting that distinguishing between groups deepens perceptions of outgroup homogeneity. This not only creates fixed impressions but may also lead to intergroup prejudice and conflict when group categorization is salient, resulting in negative evaluations of outgroups (Dovidio et al., 2010). Consequently, information received by host communities through media portrayal, personal interaction experiences with Chinese international students, and their own neo-racist attitudes and multicultural experiences may play crucial roles in the formation and solidification of stereotypes about Chinese international students.

Below, we analyze the formation, intensification, and diffusion of stereotypes toward Chinese international students from these four perspectives.

### 3.1 Media Portrayal

Authoritative media play a vital role in shaping perceptions and attitudes toward Chinese international students. Current Western media coverage of Chinese students is often rooted in a long-standing ambivalence, portraying China as both an enticing market and a potential threat—an “Other.” This contradictory stance prompts Western media to adopt an “Othering” approach in their reporting (Abelmann & Kang, 2014). Such coverage reflects colonialist mentalities and Eurocentrism, implying that cross-cultural exchange operates within an unequal power system: host countries are constructed as centers of international higher education, while international students are depicted as “pilgrims” aspiring to Western educational models (Mittelmeier et al., 2023). This academic imperialist perspective maintains the superior status of Western students while enhancing their sense of cultural identity security. However, the “Othering” of Chinese students and their portrayal as threats to domestic students significantly influences the formation and solidification of stereotypes. Media Othering primarily manifests through emphasis on academic competence, cultural differences, and linguistic-racial characteristics (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Yao & Mwangi, 2022; Mittelmeier et al., 2023). By constructing Chinese international students as linguistically incompetent, academically dishonest, and socially withdrawn, Western media not only undermines these students’ social status but also exacerbates their integration difficulties (Chen & Wen, 2021; Mittelmeier et al., 2023; Ruble & Zhang, 2013). During the pandemic, Western media further portrayed Chinese international students as virus carriers, scapegoats for the pandemic, and cash cows, reinforcing the long-standing “yellow peril” narrative and intensifying stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination among local populations (Lee, 2007; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). Therefore, when host country residents lack authentic contact with Chinese international students, authoritative media’s “Othering” reports and their social influence generate numerous negative stereotypes, further exacerbating social divides and prejudicial discrimination between local groups and Chinese international students.

### 3.2 Direct Contact

Media-shaped stereotypes establish psychological expectations for actual contact between Chinese international students and local communities. When these preset images encounter the actual behaviors of Chinese students, existing stereotypes are often further deepened and reinforced. Differences between Chinese and Western educational models additionally intensify these stereotypes. In classroom cultures that encourage group collaboration and active participation, Chinese international students’ behavior is often perceived as too quiet, unwilling to engage in discussions, and lacking critical thinking skills (Cao et al., 2021). Language proficiency issues not only affect their comprehension of

course content but also make it difficult for them to grasp group members' viewpoints in real-time during collaborative work, limiting their effective contributions to teams (Niroo & Williams, 2022; Wu, 2015; Zhang-Wu & Brisk, 2021). Furthermore, classroom habits influenced by collectivist culture lead Chinese international students to maintain caution and deference to authority in class, passively receiving knowledge rather than actively challenging authority (Chen & Zhou, 2019; Xiao, 2021; Zhu & O' Sullivan, 2022). Although they have the interest and ability to participate in discussions, concerns about being perceived as "showing off" by instructors and peers or about "making mistakes" in public often lead them to remain silent to avoid negative evaluations (Wang, 2016). These classroom habits formed within China's education system may appear unfamiliar or even strange to those unfamiliar with Western educational systems, resulting in misunderstandings and further stereotype formation and solidification in foreign universities. These behavioral stereotypes in turn reinforce local groups' perceptions of Chinese international students as having "poor English," "disliking social interaction," and "lacking critical thinking," shaping views on both their academic abilities and personality traits.

### 3.3 Neo-Racism

Beyond external factors and characteristics of the Chinese international student community itself, individual differences among local community members also play a key role in intensifying this phenomenon. Despite receiving identical media information and interacting with the same Chinese student population, different local communities develop significantly different stereotypes, primarily attributable to the influence of neo-racism. Neo-racism distinguishes ingroups and outgroups based on culture, specific nationality, and national order, providing a theoretical explanation for the negative cultural and racial stereotypes experienced by Chinese international students (Koo et al., 2023; Lee & Rice, 2007). Extensive research demonstrates that Chinese international students have experienced or are experiencing race-based stereotypes, such as those concerning physical appearance and English accents, which are essentially racial stereotypes (Houshmand et al., 2014; Yeo et al., 2019; Zhang-Wu, 2018). For example, Wong et al. (2014) noted that Asian male international students in American society are often stereotyped as having lower masculinity. In linguistic stereotyping, Lindemann's (2005) research shows that when evaluating international students' English proficiency, American students tend to categorize them into linguistic regions based on race, generally perceiving Asian international students as having poorer English skills, particularly Chinese students. This evidence indicates that local students' neo-racism is a significant factor influencing their stereotypes of Chinese international students, especially negative ones. Although racism in Western societies is diminishing with social progress, the current complex international situation has led to the resurgence of racist, conservative, and right-wing authoritarian ideologies. The neo-racism faced by Chinese international students thus intensifies and solidifies negative stereotypes among local populations.

### 3.4 Multicultural Experiences

Following stereotype formation, the absence of authentic contact and social interaction with individuals from different cultural backgrounds further deepens and spreads these stereotypes (Ritter, 2016). For instance, Xie et al. (2021) found that due to limited interaction and understanding of Chinese international students, American students tend to overgeneralize characteristics observed in a small subset to the entire group. While multicultural experiences generally help reduce stereotypes about outgroup members (Tadmor et al., 2012), negative multicultural experiences can conversely reinforce and solidify negative stereotypes (Affinito et al., 2023; Paolini et al., 2010). For example, the stereotype of “super wealthy Chinese” originates from the high economic status and consumption levels of some Chinese international students. After contact with these economically advantaged students, local students may strengthen stereotypes such as “luxury-loving,” “nouveau riche,” and “second-generation wealthy,” generalizing them to the entire Chinese international student population (Louie & Qin, 2019; Xie et al., 2021). This overgeneralization of negative stereotypes may obscure other characteristics of Chinese international students, fuel tension between groups, and gradually escalate negative attitudes toward individual Chinese students into exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination against the entire group.

## 4. Future Research Directions

### 4.1 Revealing the Dynamic Evolution of Stereotypes Toward Chinese International Students

Current research on stereotypes of Chinese international students primarily focuses on stereotype issues encountered during early stages of study abroad and coping strategies, failing to fully explore the dynamic changes in these stereotypes over time. Chinese international students face different challenges at various stages of their overseas experience. During initial cultural adaptation, they typically encounter difficulties with language barriers, cultural adjustment, and limited social networks (Yuerong et al., 2017; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Over time, students gradually transition from culture shock to recovery and adaptation phases, with these initial challenges alleviating accordingly (Liu et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2018). Although the duration of study abroad facilitates deeper cultural adaptation, as students’ concerns shift toward future uncertainties such as employment, visas, and immigration (Duong, 2020), stereotypes may transform from academic competence issues to questions about workplace readiness and long-term residency. How stereotypes of Chinese international students dynamically change with the progression of their overseas experience, the specific impacts of these dynamic changes on their long-term adaptation and career development, and the similarities and differences with stereotypes of local Asian residents require further in-depth investigation. Moreover, future research should adopt a more dialectical perspective on stereotypes. Although typically viewed as negative, stereotypes may in some cases strengthen Chinese interna-

tional students' national identity and patriotic sentiments. This psychological reaction may stem from cultural values, patriotic education received in China, and unique experiences abroad, collectively shaping students' understanding of national identity, cultural identity, and rational patriotism (Verkuyten, 2018; Zhao, 2020).

## 4.2 Integrating Multiple Perspectives, Levels, and Paradigms

First, regarding research perspectives, existing studies examining stereotypes experienced by Chinese international students often lack integration of multiple viewpoints. For example, Ruble and Zhang (2013) primarily explored stereotypes of Chinese international students from an American perspective, while Xie et al. (2021) examined stereotypes from the students' own perspective, investigating their perceptions of stereotypes held by American students. Particularly when studying the impact of stereotypes on students' mental health, research predominantly relies on Chinese international students' self-perceptions (e.g., exploring only the relationship between perceived stereotypes and psychological stress), neglecting the perspectives of host countries or mainstream cultural groups. This single-perspective approach can exaggerate relationships between variables and lead to systematic biases in findings (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To comprehensively explore the psychological structure and complex impacts of stereotypes, future research should adopt more integrated perspectives and combined subject-object research approaches.

Second, regarding research methods, current studies on stereotypes of Chinese international students primarily rely on self-reported interview and questionnaire data to identify stereotype types and influencing factors. Although such data provide direct insight into students' subjective experiences, their subjectivity may be influenced by participants' emotions and memory (Tempelaar et al., 2020), and may produce biases and distortions due to self-lenience (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009). Future research could adopt methodological triangulation, incorporating observational methods, laboratory experiments, field experiments, case studies, qualitative research, big data social media network analysis, artificial intelligence algorithms, and machine learning to further investigate what stereotypes different cultural groups hold about Chinese international students, how these stereotypes change dynamically, what factors influence them, and the underlying explanatory mechanisms. Combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to construct theoretical frameworks will provide more robust empirical evidence and scientific reference for knowledge translation and policy development.

## 4.3 The Complex Impact of Multicultural Experiences on Stereotypes

The influence of multicultural experiences on stereotypes is complex and nuanced. While multicultural experiences are generally believed to broaden individuals' thinking and openness, thereby reducing stereotypes about different cultural groups (e.g., Sparkman et al., 2016; Tadmor et al., 2018), recent re-

search has found that negative intergroup interactions can instead reinforce negative stereotypes (Affinito et al., 2023). For example, direct contact with some wealthy Chinese international students strengthened negative stereotypes among American local students toward this group (Xie et al., 2021). Additionally, contact with Asian students may reduce American students' positive attitudes toward African American and Latinx students and even increase their levels of symbolic racism and social dominance orientation (Laar et al., 2005). This double-edged sword effect of multicultural experiences provides new research directions for better understanding and improving stereotypes encountered by Chinese international students. Future research could combine multicultural experience theory with intergroup contact theory to further investigate the psychological and behavioral consequences of positive versus negative contact in interactions between Chinese international students and local students, and what forms of contact are most beneficial for reducing negative stereotypes held by host groups.

#### 4.4 Developing Comprehensive Coping Strategies

In strategies to alleviate stereotypes, most recommendations focus on students' own efforts and improvements, such as enhancing language proficiency and promoting cross-cultural communication to better integrate into local communities (Arkoudis et al., 2019). However, cultural integration involves not only international students but also requires active participation from local students (Kunst et al., 2021). Even when international students proactively engage with local communities, such initiatives may provoke local questioning of students' commitment to their original cultural identity, thereby increasing cultural integration difficulties and even generating new negative stereotypes (Kunst et al., 2019; Zou & Petkanopoulou, 2023). Moreover, stereotype formation results from multiple factors including individual, group, societal, and significant others' behaviors. Taking linguistic stereotypes as an example, they are influenced not only by students' language proficiency but also by media portrayal (Mittelmeier et al., 2023) and racist attitudes (Dovchin, 2020). Therefore, the stereotype issue is not a unilateral challenge for international students alone; it also reflects the attitudes of mainstream social groups and host country cultures.

Only with active participation and equal interaction from majority groups can effective cultural adaptation and stereotype reduction be achieved. For instance, governments and social institutions can formulate and implement anti-discrimination policies to ensure everyone lives and studies in an equal, just, and open environment, adopting preventive measures to help international students better integrate into local society (Ramia, 2018). Furthermore, universities can jointly establish support groups for international students, encouraging them to report and address discrimination promptly to protect their legitimate rights and interests (Yao et al., 2022). In summary, comprehensive attention and collaborative mechanisms among multiple institutions are key pathways to improving the overall well-being of Chinese international students and advancing

international education practices.

## 5. Conclusion

The mental health of Chinese international students and the stereotypes they face constitute a multidimensional and complex social issue. First, media coverage tends to emphasize negative information, and this biased information dissemination profoundly influences public perceptions and attitudes toward Chinese international students, leading many local populations in various countries to form adverse preconceptions before actual contact. Second, due to differences in values, behavioral habits, and communication styles between China and the West, Chinese international students' linguistic expression and behavior are easily misunderstood, further exacerbating negative stereotypes. Additionally, the rise of neo-racism not only intensifies prejudice based on racial and cultural differences but also reinforces the spread and deterioration of these stereotypes in local communities.

Future scientific questions worth exploring include (but are not limited to): (1) What stereotypes do people in different countries and regions hold about Chinese international students? (2) How do stereotypes of Chinese international students change dynamically over time and with shifting international situations? (3) What factors influence stereotypes of Chinese international students? (4) How can we effectively change public perceptions of Chinese international students to promote more equitable cross-cultural exchange and cooperation? (5) What educational policies should universities develop and implement to help Chinese international students better adapt to host country culture while maintaining their home country cultural identity? Many unanswered questions remain regarding the stereotypes faced by Chinese international students and their social effects, requiring in-depth exploration in future research and practice. We hope this paper provides valuable theoretical guidance for future scientific inquiry and knowledge translation, contributing positively to improving the overall well-being and mental health of Chinese international students.

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