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Impact of Peer Dynamics and Only-Children Experience on Academic Motivation among Chinese International Graduate Students in the U.S.

Chang Wang
University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

Rebeca Mireles-Rios
University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

ABSTRACT

Chinese international graduate students (CIGs), growing up without siblings, under China's One-Child policy, are particularly impacted by peer dynamics. This study explored the influence of peer dynamics and family structure on the academic motivation of CIGs in the U.S., using Bandura's self-efficacy theory as a framework. A single-case study approach involved six in-depth interviews. Findings showed that CIGs, with high academic self-efficacy, favor limited and balanced peer interactions, forming deep connections with co-national peers while maintaining primarily academic interactions with host and other international peers. These diverse interactions affect academic motivation both positively and negatively, with personality traits playing a crucial role in shaping these peer interactions.

Keywords: Chinese international students, graduate students, peer influence, academic motivation, One-Child Policy

In the 2022-2023 academic year, the U.S. hosted 289,526 students from China, a 9% decrease from the previous year. Of these, 43.5% (126,028) were graduate students (Institute of International Education). Chinese International Graduate Students (CIGs) in this study are defined as individuals from mainland China who temporarily reside in the U.S. to pursue graduate-level education on a student visa, specifically enrolled in degree-granting programs rather than exchange or non-

degree programs. Unlike many undergraduates, most Chinese graduate students pursue education abroad after completing their studies in China, motivated by the desire to access superior academic resources and expand their social and professional networks (Cheng, 2018; Yang et al., 2023). Notably, over the past five years, students from prestigious universities in China such as Peking, Tsinghua, have increasingly pursued graduate degrees abroad, with nearly 17% choosing this path in 2023 compared to about 6% from universities ranked around 50th to 60th. Therefore, CIGs represent a high-performing group, making it important to explore the factors driving their academic motivation.

China's One-Child Policy, enacted in 1980 to control rapid population growth, was enforced more strictly in urban areas, where families were generally limited to one child, while rural families were sometimes allowed exceptions (Library of Congress, 2008; Wikipedia, 2024). This stricter enforcement in urban regions, where compliance was more practical due to closer monitoring and economic incentives, led to a predominance of only-children in cities (Rodriguez, 2023). Most Chinese children born between 1980 to 2016 grew up without siblings, leading to unique social interactions and potential psychological impacts (Rasmussen, 2017). This policy has resulted in only-children being more influenced by their parents and peers (Feng, 2013), shaping unique personality traits and behaviors among CIGs compared to their international peers. It shifted traditional Chinese cultural values and family dynamics, resulting in increased anxiety, egocentrism, independent thinking, and lower social skills (Fan, 2016; Rasmussen, 2017). Consequently, only-children often experience higher academic pressure, lower self-confidence, and greater mental stress (Cai & Feng, 2021), intensified by being their family's primary focus of expectations. Despite these challenges, peer support can mitigate psychological distress and improve self-efficacy and academic achievement (Katsumoto, 2022; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Growing up in China's competitive education system, CIGs rely heavily on strong peer relationships for success, making it essential to explore how peer dynamics and the only-children experience influence their academic motivation.

This study focuses on how CIGs' experiences as both only-children and peers shape their academic motivation. Although much research has examined peer influence broadly, little attention has been given to the unique traits and experiences of CIGs. The psychological effects of the One-Child Policy and shifts in the educational landscape necessitate an exploration of how peer interactions impact CIGs' academic motivation.

Research Questions

This research, grounded in semi-structured interviews, seeks to address the following key research questions:

RQ_1: How do CIGs describe their only-children experience, and how has it influenced their social development and academic motivation?

RQ_2: How do CIGs perceive the impact of peer interactions on their academic motivation and performance in a new educational setting?

RQ_3: In what ways do peer interactions within academic and social contexts support or challenges CIGs, especially in relation to their only-children experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Only-Children Experience

Growing up without siblings often reshapes how only children interact with peers. Without siblings to rely on, they may place higher value on peer relationships for companions and emotional support, leading to deeper and more meaningful friendships (Falbo & Poston, 1993). However, this dependence could also make them more vulnerable to peer pressure or challenges in managing conflicts (Chen et al., 2013; Falbo & Polit, 1986). Only children often develop unique communication styles and negotiation skills, largely shaped by their frequent and dominant interactions with parents. These adult-centered interactions can lead to more mature expressions and an enhanced ability to engage conversations with authority figures (Chen & French, 2008; McDonald & Asher, 2018). Lacking sibling interactions may also affect a child's overall social skills, making it harder to connect in wider social circles.

The policy's influence on mental health is also significant. Only children in China experience higher academic pressure and parental expectations, as they are the sole focus of their parents' aspirations (Chen et al., 2000). This leads to increased anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation, which can affect their self-esteem and overall well-being. (Falbo & Poston, 1993).

Implications for Only-Children Graduate Students

Effects of the one-child policy extend into higher education and graduate studies. Only-children graduates often face special challenges and pressures that shape their academic experiences and outcomes. They may exhibit higher levels of academic motivation and self-efficacy due to considerable parental investment in their education (Cai & Feng, 2021; Feng, 2013). However, this also can be a source of stress and pressure to succeed (Falbo & Polit, 1986; Fong, 2004).

Additionally, studies have shown that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of graduate students' academic motivation and success. High self-efficacy leads to increased effort, persistence, and resilience in facing academic challenges (Chemers et al., 2001; Richardson et al., 2012), which are essential for graduate-level work. Graduate students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to engage

in self-regulated learning and effectively manage the demands of their programs (Artino Jr., 2012; Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2000). The intense focus on academic achievement, instilled by parents and reinforced by China's education system, continues to impact only children as they pursue advanced degrees (Feng, 2013). The pressure to excel, combined with the challenges of adapting to a new educational environment, highlights the need for a deeper understanding of this group.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Cultural Transitioning Groups

Recent research has explored the complexities of cross-cultural adaptation among cultural transitioning groups, such as international students, migrants, and expatriates, focusing on how they navigate new environments while maintaining their cultural identities. Ward and Szabó (2023) provide an overview of the interplay between acculturation, cultural identity, and well-being, emphasizing the impact of cultural transitions on individuals' psychological adaptation. Their work underscores the importance of maintaining a balanced cultural identity for achieving positive well-being in a new cultural setting. Anderson (1994) adds that cross-cultural adaptation is not a simple, linear progression but rather a non-linear process involving "transition experiences" where individuals repeatedly adapt to new challenges. This perspective is particularly relevant for students navigating complex academic and social landscapes, highlighting the dynamic and varied nature of their adjustment journeys. International students in the U.S. face three main challenges: academic difficulties, social interaction complexities, and emotional struggles (Gebhard, 2012). These challenges illustrate the multifaceted nature of adaptation, making targeted support essential for successful transitions.

Recent Insights on Self-Efficacy in Cross-Cultural Context

The self-efficacy of culturally transitioning students is shaped significantly by the cultural environments they navigate, both in their home and host context. Jin et al. (2023) and Liu et al. (2022) emphasize that cultural values, such as power distance and collectivism influence self-efficacy, emphasizing that students from high-power-distance and collectivism backgrounds, like CIGs, often develop self-efficacy based on group achievements and external validation. When transitioning to individualistic academic settings, such as those in Western countries, these students may struggle to adapt to new expectations of self-reliance and independence, which can undermine their academic confidence. Merolla (2017) finds that students in culturally diverse settings often face uncertainty about the effectiveness of their efforts, even when they possess high self-efficacy, due to mixed cultural signals that make translating confidence into academic success more difficult.

Challenges and Adaptation Needs

Chinese international graduate students face unique challenges in adapting to the U.S. academic environment, as their experiences often differ from those of undergraduates. Quan et al. (2016) note that graduate students are typically more mature and academically focused but often lack the time for deep cross-cultural engagement due to their rigorous academic schedules. This time constraint makes efficient adaptation and robust peer support networks crucial for their success. The non-linear adaptation model of Anderson (1994) is particularly relevant here, as CIGs navigate a series of "transition experiences," adapting continuously to new academic and social norms.

Social and institutional challenges also play a significant role in shaping the experiences of CIGs. They encounter difficulties with academic language (Zhou, 2022; Zhou et al., 2018), cultural differences in classroom interactions, and mental distress such as loneliness and frustration (Lin & Scherz, 2014). The U.S. emphasis on student proactivity and independence contrasts sharply with the Chinese model, where passive learning and reliance on faculty guidance are more common (Li & Collins, 2018). This shift requires CIGs to adjust their expectations and strategies, which can be difficult without adequate institutional support (Huang, 2012). Additionally, intercultural pragmatic differences add to these challenges, for example, Chinese graduate students often use indirect methods to express disagreement, contrasting with American students' more direct approach (Cai et al., 2024). This difference reflects deeper cultural norms and can impact classroom dynamics and peer interactions, further complicating CIGs' adaptation.

The Role of Peer Interactions and Social Networks

Multinational peer interactions are a crucial part of CIGs' adaptation process, helping to bridge the cultural and academic gaps they face. Peer support and inclusion are vital for boosting motivation and emotional well-being, providing a sense of belonging in new environments (Heng, 2017). Like other international students, CIGs build networks with co-national, host-national, and international peers, each serving different needs (Bochner et al., 1977; Meng et al., 2021). Co-national peers provide emotional support and a sense of familiarity, which helps reduce initial adaptation stress (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Meanwhile, interactions with host-national peers can enhance academic experiences by offering new insights (Perrucci & Hu, 1995). However, when these interactions are limited mainly to academic settings, they may not lead to a deeper cultural understanding (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Rienties et al., 2012). This lack of broader social engagement with host-nationals can leave CIGs feeling isolated, contributing to anxiety, depression, and alienation (Chen, 1999).

Effective adaptation also involves overcoming language barriers and understanding cultural norms, essential for engaging more deeply with host-national peers (Li et al., 2014). The Need for Cognitive Closure (NCC) model, which addresses individuals' tolerance for ambiguity (Kruglanski, 1990), plays a role here. Students with a high NCC may find the uncertainties

of cross-cultural interactions more challenging, impacting their ability to form new connections and integrate into social networks. Conversely, those more open to ambiguity may adapt more readily, taking advantage of diverse peer interactions to support their adaptation.

These peer interactions, alongside institutional support, are vital for CIGs as they navigate both academic and social transitions. While co-national networks provide initial support, building meaningful relationships with host-national peers is critical for enhancing their understanding of the academic system and improving their overall well-being (Li & Collins, 2018). However, sensitivity to cultural differences and the desire to maintain "face" can make seeking help from peers or institutions more challenging, further complicating their adaptation process (Wang & Freed, 2021).

Factors influence Academic Motivation

Chinese international students face unique challenges that shape their academic motivation. Gang and Chen (2010) found that the factors such as the perceived significance of academic success to family, English proficiency, and social interactions with peers are key predictors of the academic performance of all international students. The high-risk avoidance seen in students from Confucius-heritage cultures, especially when struggling with English, can further diminish their motivation to learn (Li et al., 2010; Zhang, 2016). Moreover, Hodgson and Simoni (1995) noted that students who do not perceive institutional support often struggle both academically and psychologically.

Research Gap

While peer influence on academic motivation is well-studied, most research focuses on adolescents and specific regions, leaving a gap in understanding international students, particularly CIGs. As a mature and research-driven group, CIGs constitute a significant part of the international student population in U.S. higher education, bringing diverse cultural perspectives to academic discourse (Wang & Freed, 2021) and contributing to economic growth (Mackie, 2023a, 2023b). However, their unique challenges and intercultural transitions are underexplored, especially how peer interactions influence their academic motivation. Existing research often overlooks the distinct dynamics that CIGs face compared to undergraduates.

Moreover, the influence of being only-children, a result of China's One-Child Policy, on CIGs' self-efficacy and academic behavior is largely neglected. Few studies address how these unique experiences shape their adaptation and motivation. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the impact of peer interactions and only-children experiences on CIGs' academic motivation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand how these unique experiences influence academic motivation, this study draws on Self-Efficacy theory as a foundational framework for examining the connection between peer interactions, only-children experiences, and CIG's self-beliefs and behaviors. Self-Efficacy theory, developed by Bandura, posits that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to perform tasks successfully significantly influence their choices, effort, and persistence (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Four principal sources of self-efficacy are identified (Table 1): mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. These sources offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between personal beliefs, behaviors, and the social environment, making it the foundation for examining the academic and social experiences of CIGs.

Sources of Self-Efficacy: Peer Interactions and Only-Children Experiences

The experiences of CIGs can be better understood through the lens of self-efficacy. Mastery experiences, shaped by the One-Child Policy, are strengthened by concentrated parental attention and resources, fostering a strong belief in personal academic success (Feng, 2013). High parental expectations boost these mastery experiences, as CIGs view their academic successes as key moments that build confidence. Vicarious experiences are important, as observing peers' success boosts confidence but also adds pressure. Verbal persuasion from family and peers provides essential encouragement, though it often comes with the burden of high expectations. Physiological and emotional states further influence how CIGs perceive their abilities, making effectively managing stress and focus necessary for overcoming academic challenges. These sources collectively shape CIGs' self-efficacy, with familial expectations and social support being key influences on academic journeys.

Table 1: Principal Sources of Self-Efficacy

Source of Self-Efficacy	Description
Mastery Experiences	Successes build self-efficacy, while failure diminish it
Vicarious Experiences	Observing other's successes can strengthen one's beliefs in their own abilities
Verbal Persuasion	Encouragement from others can enhance self-belief in one's capabilities
Physiological and Emotional States	Positive moods and emotional states enhance self-efficacy beliefs, while stress and anxiety can undermine it

Note. Adapted from *Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change* by A. Bandura, 1977, *Psychological Review, 84*(2), p.195. Copyright 1977 by the American Psychological Association.

METHOD

Data Collection

Procedures and Participants

To ensure a diverse and representative sample, the study used criteria-based, convenience, and snowball sampling. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: they were full-time Chinese international students enrolled in graduate programs for their first in-person study abroad experience. All participants were born and raised in urban areas of mainland China under the one-child policy and had completed their prior education in China. Additionally, participants had less than one year of study experience in English-speaking countries. The sample included both Master's and Ph.D. students to ensure a diverse representation of academic experiences. Initially, three participants were recruited through researcher's network within the CIG community, who then referred three more, totaling six participants.

The sample consisted of four females and two males, with three pursuing Master's degrees and three pursuing Ph.D. degrees (Table 2). The average age is 25.83 years. Informed consent was obtained from all participants through an institutional review board form, ensuring ethical compliance and understanding of the study's scope, their rights, and confidentiality measures.

Table 2: Participants Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Sojourn Stay	Major	Educational Level	English level	Cultural Integration
Susie	Female	29	5 years	East Asian Studies	Ph.D.	Advanced	Moderate
Tiffany	Female	24	2 years	Media Art Technology	Master's	Advanced	Moderate
Jasmine	Female	25	2 years	Education	Master's	Advanced	Moderate
Ada	Female	25	2 years	Computer Science	Master's	Fluent	Low
Lim	Male	25	3 years	Geography	Ph.D.	Advanced	Moderate
Alex	Male	27	4 years	Computer Science	Ph.D.	Advanced	Low

Note. The Level of English level and Cultural Integration were self-identified by participants.

Interview Procedures

WeChat, a widely used social media platform among Chinese populations, was chosen over email due to its demonstrated effectiveness in similar research contexts (Moffa & Di Gregorio, 2023). It was employed to distribute consent forms, collect demographic data, and facilitate ongoing communication with participants. The researcher's insider status within the CIG community offered valuable cultural insights, deepening the research. However, this also necessitated careful reflexivity to mitigate potential biases.

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview protocol. Participants first submitted demographic information via WeChat, and formal interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted via Zoom in either Chinese or English, based on participant preference (Bhatia, 2017). Five participants chose Chinese, and one preferred English. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with a rigorous translation process applied to the Chinese interviews to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

This study followed a single-case study approach, treating each participant's narrative as a distinct subcase, enabling comparative analysis across cases (Yin, 2017). This method is well-suited for capturing the complex influences of culture, education, and policy on students' lives, providing in-depth insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method is particularly effective for exploring phenomena deeply embedded in their social environments, enhancing understanding and potential generalizability (Stake, 1995).

A systematic, multi-step data analysis procedure was implemented. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework, the process was designed to provide clear and systematic identification of patterns and themes (Table 3)

Table 3: Overview of Six-Step Thematic Analysis Process

Step	Description
Familiarization	Transcripts were carefully read and re-read to gain a thorough understanding of the data
Coding	NVivo 20 was used to systematically code the transcript based on Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy and themes related to peer dynamics and only-children experience
Theme Development	Codes were grouped into broader themes related to academic motivation, peer interaction, and only-children experience
Themes Review	Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data and aligned with the research questions
Defining Themes	Clear definitions were created for each theme, linking them to Bandura's theoretical framework and research questions
Writing up	The final results were written, integrating the thematic findings with Bandura's self-efficacy theory to form a comprehensive narrative

To enhance the dependability of the findings, a member-checking process was employed. Participants were invited to review their transcripts and corresponding themes to ensure accuracy and alignment with their perspectives.

This process ensured the credibility of the data interpretation. Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Committee, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. By integrating self-efficacy, this framework offers a comprehensive view of how these internal beliefs, shaped by familial and cultural backgrounds, drive CIGs' academic motivation.

RESULTS

The data analysis revealed three key themes showing how peer interactions and academic motivation are influenced by the unique experiences of being an only-child. These themes emerged from both within-case and cross-case analyses. Academic motivation was captured through interview questions and analyzed using Bandura's four principal sources of self-efficacy.

One-Child Policy Effects: Amplified Self-Efficacy

Participants demonstrated high self-efficacy, largely shaped by their upbringing under One-Child Policy. The concentrated parental investment led to greater independence and self-reliance in academic settings, as these only-children were often placed at the center of their families' attention and expectations. Their confidence was reinforced by mastery experiences, such as personal accomplishments, vicarious experiences from observing others' success, and verbal encouragement from parents and peers, and the ability to regulate emotional states.

For example, Tiffany explained how her academic confidence was driven by her personal accomplishments, a reflection of mastery experiences: "My academic confidence is not influenced by others. It's my own impression and self-belief." Similarly, Susie emphasized the importance of self-reliance: "In our program, we mostly work independently…my primary engagement and dedication still depend on myself." These mastery experiences, where participants succeed through their own efforts, align with Bandura's argument that self-efficacy is strengthened by repeated personal success, especially for only-children who are expected to excel academically due to unique family dynamics (Bandura, 1997; Chemers et al., 2001).

Vicarious experiences also played a significant role in reinforcing self-efficacy. Tiffany used competition with friends as motivation, seeing them as targets to match or surpass. Ada, however, experienced more emotional intensity in her competitive interactions, blending anxiety and determination. Although observing others' success can enhance self-efficacy, it may also trigger if comparisons feel unfavorable (Bandura, 1997).

Verbal persuasion, particularly from family, further influenced participants' self-efficacy. Jasmine shared, "Parents care too much, afraid I won't get the best." Though overwhelming, this pressure acts as verbal persuasion by reinforcing her belief in her ability to meet high expectations. In the case of only-children, family expectations are especially influential, as they often represent the family's sole

hope for success, intensifying both the pressure to succeed and the confidence in their abilities (Cai & Feng, 2021; Feng, 2013).

Finally, participants' ability to manage emotional states, a skill often developed through solitary activities due to their only-children status, supported their self-efficacy. Alex and Ada both found solitude helpful in maintaining focus and reducing stress. As Bandura (1997) explains, controlling emotional and physiological states can reduce anxiety and strengthen self-efficacy. Alex shared, "I prefer spending some days alone, enjoying my own company," demonstrating how solitude helped him recharge and stay self-motivated. Similarly, Ada embraced self-sufficiency through solitary activities, explaining, "I watched some dramas, read some novels, I don't feel the need for social interaction." By managing their emotions through solitude, a common trait among only-children, both participants maintained the focus and motivation needed to succeed academically.

Dual Influences of Peer Interactions on Academic Motivation

While strong self-efficacy is a key driver of academic motivation for CIGs, peer interactions had both positive and negative effects on their motivation.

Favorable Peer Influence

Peers provided positive reinforcement and vicarious experiences that boosted self-efficacy. Five out of six participants shared how peers positively influenced their academic motivation. Susie talked about how observing her peers' accomplishments inspired her: "If students from our school find good jobs or even get tenure, it would give me confidence." This reflects Bandura's (1997) idea that seeing others succeed increases one's own belief in their abilities. Verbal encouragement from peers also enhances self-efficacy. Susie recounted how peer support motivated her: "Her encouragement motivated me not to give up", illustrating how verbal persuasion from peers can reinforce one's belief in their abilities.

In addition to boosting self-efficacy, peer interactions help participants develop academic skills, persevere through challenges, and maintain an enjoyable learning environment. Tiffany highlighted the benefits of academic exchanges and conferences for proactive engagement and networking. Jasmine and Lim emphasized the importance of positive reinforcement and peer attitudes in maintaining motivation. Jasmine said, "Positive encouragement from peers keeps me moving on despite obstacles." Lim added, "Peer attitude influences me; I can't be the one dragging the group down."

Positive peer interactions also help expand valuable social connections and future career opportunities. Despite the solitary nature of humanities research, Susie observed that peer interactions could lead to fruitful collaborations. Jasmine echoed, "Peers can give me guidance on my future job."

Adverse Peer Influences

Negative peer interactions could undermine CIGs' academic motivation, leading to procrastination, reduced effort, and a tendency toward mediocrity. Four out of six participants reported such experiences. Ada, for instance, described her experience with a peer's lack of effort made her feel less pressured to excel: "I left everything until the last minute and just managed to get through it in an ordinary way." This aligns with research that suggests peer influence can affect academic engagement, especially when peers display negative or disengaged behaviors (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Similarly, Alex described how minimal effort among his peers led to barely meeting assignment requirements: "We barely managed to meet the assignment's requirements." This illustrates how negative peer behaviors can contribute to lowered academic standards, consistent with findings from Manski (1993), who observed that peer dynamics can lead to a decline in academic performance when group motivation is low.

Additionally, comparing oneself to high-achieving peers triggered feelings of envy and self-doubt. Lim expressed how interacting with successful peers evoked negative emotions and made him question his own abilities. This reflects the role of negative vicarious experiences, where comparing oneself to successful peers can lower self-efficacy and motivation (Bandura, 1997). Alex shared a plagiarism incident that caused significant anxiety: "I was really scared of doing this and, also, I'm quite alert." Such incidents reflect the psychological strain that can result from academic challenges and peer pressure, particularly in competitive environments, as noted by Lin & Scherz (2014), who highlighted the mental distress faced by international students in navigating both social and academic pressures.

Diverse and Balanced Intercultural Peer Interactions

In a multicultural environment, CIGs navigate interactions with local, international, and co-national peers by maintaining a balanced and distributed approach. Deep friendships are often formed with Chinese peers, whereas interactions with hosts and other international peers remain more academic and relatively superficial. Conversations with Chinese peers often focused on life and emotions, while interactions with foreign peers were more academic. Susie shared, "It's relatively easier to chat and discuss academic matters with students from your project. Even during dinners or activities, we end up discussing academic topics." Jasmine further reinforced this observation, explaining that her peer interactions were largely confined to academic settings: "During the seminar, we discuss the readings, but after school, I don't have any connections with them."

A common experience for CIGs during graduate studies in the U.S. was limited peer interactions, with intimate connections primarily within small circles. Tiffany described peer dynamics as casual and not too intense, while Susie observed that most peers in her cohort were reserved and low-key. Jasmine's peer interactions were largely restricted to those involved in the same academic projects, with additional emotional support provided by friends from her church.

All six participants expressed that most intercultural interactions mostly occurred within academic settings, with social bonds were primarily formed with Chinese peers outside of these contexts. Language barriers and cultural differences limited the depth of interactions with diverse peers. Lim pointed out, "With Americans, even if I like them, there's a language barrier... We can only be polite and have smooth and kind of superficial conversations." Ada shared a similar standpoint, emphasizing that interactions with peers from different cultural backgrounds often remained surface-level. Tiffany observed a hierarchy of friendships, where Chinese friends are closest, followed by foreign friends, and then other classmates. She found that interactions with Chinese peers led to deeper friendships, while interactions with peers from other countries remained more casual. Alex added that interactions with non-Chinese peers were balanced between casual and academic engagement, without being overly intense or intimate.

Participants exhibited diversified and equitable peer interactions, influenced more by individual personality traits than cultural backgrounds. As Ada mentioned, “It’s not about where they’re from, but who they are as individuals.” Participants maintained a harmonious and even distribution of connections. As Susie mentioned, “I interact with whoever I’m willing to engage with” emphasizing the impact of individual traits over cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, CIGs’ diverse and balanced intercultural peer interactions bolster self-efficacy and drive academic and personal motivation. Emotional support from Chinese peers provides a sense of belonging, while engagement with host and other international peers offers new perspectives and innovative academic approaches.

DISCUSSION

This study explores CIGs’ academic journeys, focusing on their only-children experience and diverse cultural peer interactions. The One-Child policy’s focus on individual achievement has nurtured strong self-efficacy among CIGs. The findings reveal both positive and negative peer influences on academic motivation, as CIGs balance emotional support from monocultural friendships and academic growth from multicultural exchanges. Self-efficacy drives their preference for like-minded peers, shaping their academic experiences. These insights offer valuable guidance for academic institutions to optimize peer dynamics and better support the academic motivation and success of CIGs.

The Impact of Only-Children Experience

The only-children experience significantly shapes CIGs’ academic trajectories. Growing up with high parental expectations and intense peer competitions nurtured strong self-efficacy from an early age. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy gives individuals confidence in their ability to manage learning experiences and outcomes. Consequently, CIGs may exhibit proactive learning behaviors and resilience, effectively navigating the academic

and social landscapes of their host countries. This strong sense of efficacy encouraged CIGs to engage meaningfully with both Chinese and international peers, seeing these interactions as opportunities to broaden their knowledge and support networks. Positive peer interactions further bolster their self-efficacy, reinforcing their mastery over their academic journey.

High self-efficacy also enhances CIGs' ability to leverage peer networks for academic success. This aligns with findings by Doménech-Betoret et al. (2017), which suggest that strong self-efficacy improves the ability to utilize peer network resources. The personal beliefs and values instilled through their upbringing, combined with successful peer interactions, plays an important role in shaping CIGs' academic motivations.

In sum, the only-children experience fosters strong self-efficacy, indirectly preparing CIGs for positive peer interactions and enhancing their academic motivation. Self-efficacy drives learning engagement and resilience, and proactive approach to overcoming challenges and achieving academic success.

Diverse and balanced Peer Interaction

Peer interactions among CIGs are complex and multidimensional, shaped by the nature of their social engagements within the transnational educational settings. The foundational friendship model proposed by Bochner et al. (1977) suggests that overseas students tend to form deep monocultural friendships, which act as a vital source of emotional support in unfamiliar environments. This adaptive mechanism is reflected in CIGs' interactions, as they often rely on culturally similar peers for a sense of belonging and emotional security, while also engaging with diverse peer groups for academic collaboration.

Close friendships with Chinese peers reflect collectivist values of group harmony, cooperation, and interdependence (Cherry, 2022), fostering a shared sense of identity and enriching CIGs' educational experiences by strengthening their self-efficacy and academic motivation. This sense of belonging and acceptance within their peer networks allows CIGs to face academic and personal challenges with greater confidence, knowing they have a supportive community to rely on (Chirkov et al., 2003).

Interactions with host and international peers offer new perspectives and knowledge, enhancing CIGs' academic growth. These diverse and balanced peer interactions are essential for CIGs' holistic adaptation, as they contribute to both personal well-being and academic success. The combination of emotional security from monocultural friendships and the intellectual enrichment gained from diverse peer interactions equips CIGs with the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive in cross-cultural academic environments.

Impact of Peer Dynamics on Academic Motivation

This study highlights the dual impact of peer interactions on academic motivation. Positive interactions, such as collaborative learning and knowledge exchange, enhance academic skills and boost self-efficacy. Bandura (1977)

argued that individuals with higher self-efficacy leads to greater persistence in tackling challenging tasks. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning with knowledgeable peers stimulates academic motivation. These positive peer interactions contribute to self-efficacy by fostering successful academic collaboration, providing vicarious learning experiences, offering verbal persuasion, and reducing stress through supportive feedback, all of which enhance motivation.

Conversely, negative peer interactions can undermine self-efficacy, leading to doubt, increased stress, and discouragement. A lack of support or excessive competition can result in diminished effort, reduced collaboration, and a tendency toward mediocrity, causing CIGs to disengage from academic content. Such interactions often shift students toward avoidance goals, focusing on avoiding failure rather than pursuing success, which impedes intrinsic motivation and limits academic engagement.

Positive peer interactions significantly enhance CIGs' self-efficacy, encouraging deeper engagement in academic work and resilience in facing challenges. However, negative peer interactions can diminish intrinsic drive and collaborative spirit, potentially hindering academic success. This contrast underscores the need to foster positive peer relationships to support both the academic and personal growth of CIGs in a new academic environment.

Personality-Driven Peer Interactions

A key finding of this study is the role of personality on peer interaction among CIGs. Preferences for peers with similar personality traits reflect social capital theory's insights into forming strong, beneficial social networks (Bourdieu, 2002; Lin, 1999). These choices are influenced by individual beliefs in one's capabilities. Interacting with like-minded peers boosts CIGs' self-efficacy by providing predictable and controllable interactions, reducing uncertainty, and fostering competence. These relationships positively contribute to CIGs' academic and personal growth, offering intellectual stimulation, academic support, and emotional resonance, thus enriching their overall educational experience.

The emphasis on fostering self-efficacy and independence, particularly under the One-Child Policy, may also lead CIGs to select peers with similar traits. According to attribution theory, individuals attribute outcomes to internal or external factors, which in turn affect decisions like peer selection. CIGs who attribute success to personal capabilities often prefer peers with similar traits, believing these interactions will support their academic pursuits. Conversely, those with external attributions may be less selective in their peer choices, which can influence the dynamics of peer interactions and affect motivation and engagement in academic activities.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the need for tailored support for CIGs in academic institutions. To effectively support CIGs, institutions should offer specialized counseling, adopt inclusive teaching methods, and establish peer mentoring programs. These strategies can help CIGs manage the unique challenges they face, while also encouraging their independence and strengthening self-efficacy. Additionally, institutions should foster an environment that encourages positive peer interactions through collaborative learning opportunities and cross-cultural exchange programs. Workshops on cultural competence and communication skills can help CIGs build strong, supportive peer networks. Creating feedback mechanisms for students to share their peer interaction experiences will enable institutions to continuously improve their support strategies.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations, including a small sample size, a focus on a single institution, and the lack of comparative analysis between only-children and those with siblings. The cross-sectional design offers only a snapshot of CIGs experience. Future research should adopt a longitudinal design to track changes in self-efficacy and academic motivation over time, providing deeper insights into how these constructs evolve with peer interactions and only-children experiences.

Additionally, future research should integrate novel theoretical approaches to better understand the adaptation processes of culturally transitioning groups like CIGs. Theories such as acculturation and social capital could deepen the understanding of how CIGs build social networks and adapt in new cultural environments. The Need for Cognitive Closure framework could explore how CIGs' desire for certainty influences their academic adjustment, while the Affect, Behavior, and Cognition (ABC) model could offer a more nuanced understanding of how emotional, behavioral, and cognitive factors shape CIGs' adaptation and academic success.

For methodological advancements, future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative interviews and quantitative measures like the Need for Cognitive Closure (NCC) scale. This would capture both personal perspectives and measurable factors related to CIGs' adaptation and motivation. Computational textual analysis could systematically explore participants' narratives and identify emerging themes with greater precision. Combined with longitudinal studies, these methods will offer deeper insights into CIGs' cross-cultural adaptation and progression.

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☐ *None*
☐ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
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Author bios

Chang Wang, MA, is a doctoral student in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA. Her research focuses on the transnational experiences of Chinese international students in the U.S., only-children experience, and the impact of peer dynamics on academic motivation within higher education institutions. Email: changwang@ucsb.edu

Rebeca Mireles-Rios, PhD, is an associate professor in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA. Her research focuses on Latinx students' perceptions of teacher support, the role of maternal expectations on education communication, peer relationships, and student trajectories into higher education.
Email: rmireles@education.ucsb.edu

Appendix A

Interview Questions

Peer Influence on Only-Children Chinese International Graduate Students' Academic

1) What inspired you to come study in the U.S. and pursue graduate studies?

2) What goals do you hope to achieve by studying in the U.S. and pursuing higher education here?

3) How do you think your interactions with your peers in the U.S. have influenced your academic motivation? Do you think observing your peer's academic behaviors and achievements has impacted your own approach to studying?

4) On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is your academic performance and success to you personally? (1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest)? Can you explain why achieving academic success is meaningful to you?

5) Can you rate your satisfaction with your academic performance now from 1 to 10 (1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest)? Why do you give yourself this score? Do you believe your satisfaction is influenced by your peers' perceptions of success?

6) The one-child policy in China has had a significant impact on family structures and relationships. How do you think your experiences as an only child, or growing up with limited siblings, have influenced your perceptions of peer influence on academic motivation? Do you think these experiences might shape how you approach interactions with peers and value their opinions?

7) As a Chinese international graduate student, have you observed any differences in how peers from China versus peers from other countries approach academic challenges or handle academic pressures? How do you think these differences might impact your own academic motivation and coping strategies?

8) How have you interacted with other students in your program, both from China and other countries, and how has this influenced your engagement and investment in your graduate studies? Can you think of specific instances where peer interactions have affected your academic motivation positively or negatively?

9) Can you recall specific instances where interactions with peers, whether from China or other countries, have significantly influenced your academic motivation? What behaviors, comments, or actions from your peers have positively impacted your academic drive?

10) In contrast, have you ever experienced negative peer influences on your academic motivation or witnessed instances where peer competition or pressure hindered your or others' academic progress? How do you navigate and cope with such situations?

11) How do you perceive the differences, if any, in the ways Chinese cultural norms and values versus American cultural norms and values influence peer interactions and academic motivation within your graduate program?

12) Have you found that students in your program who share similar academic goals have a greater impact on your motivation and engagement in your studies? Does your experience as an only child influence the social dynamics that shape the formation of these peer groups?

13) How do your interactions with peers and your experience as an only child influence your self-perception and confidence in your academic abilities? How do you manage the pressures or expectations from your peers to succeed academically, and do you find this pressure to be more motivating or stressful?

14) How do you think your relationships with other students in your program, including fellow international students, might influence your future academic and career goals? Additionally, do you believe that the experience of being an only child affects the way you interact socially, and if so, how might this shape those relationships?

15) In the context of being a Chinese international graduate student, do you think your interaction with peers from China differs from your interactions with students from other countries or cultures? How do these cross-cultural interactions impact your academic motivation and overall experience as an international student in the U.S.?

This is the end of the interview! Thank you for your cooperation in answering these questions.