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From Challenges to Coping Strategies: A Study on Academic Integration and Psychological Well-Being Among International Students at Chinese Universities

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ABSTRACT: International students in China face interrelated cultural, academic, and psychological challenges that shape their adaptation and well-being. This study explored these difficulties and the coping strategies that students employ in Chinese higher education. Drawing on Berry's acculturation theory and Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 international students across six locations. Thematic analysis identified key obstacles, including language barriers, unfamiliar pedagogies, delayed stipends, high academic demands, and perceived discrimination. These factors contribute to acculturative stress, homesickness, social isolation, and depressive

symptoms. Students nonetheless demonstrated resilience through emotion-focused coping, such as peer support, virtual family contact, and religious or cultural practices, and problem-focused strategies, including structured study habits, institutional navigation, and language improvement. The findings show that institutional limitations, particularly inadequate mental health services and weak language support, can heighten psychological distress.

Keywords: Academic integration, Acculturative stress, Psychological well-being, Coping strategies, Higher education in China

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility has increased markedly worldwide, highlighting the distinctive features of global education over the last two decades (Baas, 2019; Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020). Motivated by the quest for quality education, improved job prospects, cross-cultural experiences, and personal growth, millions of students relocate each year from their home countries to study abroad (Altbach, 2004; Baas, 2019; Holtbrügge & Engelhard, 2016; Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020). As of 2022, the global population of international students exceeded 6 million (Fan & Wang, 2022), indicating a consistent rise in cross-border academic migration, notwithstanding recent challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend is reshaping educational landscapes and compelling host nations to accommodate increasingly diverse student populations while addressing the complex academic and psychological needs that arise from them (Fan & Wang, 2022; Hirai et al., 2015; Rienties et al., 2012).

China has rapidly emerged as a significant host country within this global context. Traditionally known as a major “sender” of international students, China has, in recent years, also come much closer to becoming one of the top “receivers” of international students, making it the best place in Asia to study (Ma et al., 2024; Ma & Zhao, 2018) and the third globally, right behind the U.S. and UK (Wang & Kanungo, 2020). This shift is driven by scholarship initiatives such as the Chinese Government Scholarship, increasing institutional partnerships, and the growing global recognition of Chinese universities. These developments reflect China’s broader higher education internationalization policy under initiatives such as “Study in China,” the Belt and Road Education Action Plan, and the Double World-Class University Project (Cao & Meng, 2021; Wen et al., 2022). These policies aim to increase China’s global academic influence and soft power (Dai et al., 2023). Understanding international students’ lived experiences is therefore

essential for evaluating how effectively these policies translate into inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Regardless of the above developments, cultural and academic integration remains a significant challenge for international students in China (Larbi & Fu, 2017; Li, 2012; Li et al., 2023). Challenges, such as adjusting to diverse languages and pedagogical approaches, unexpected institutional structures, limited academic support, and disparities between students' desires and institutional realities, frequently contribute to psychological distress. (Berry, 2005; Cao et al., 2017; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). These pressures compromise academic performance and may also affect students' long-term well-being and contentment, as well as the worldwide reputation of host institutions. (Ding, 2016; Gong et al., 2021). The distinctive traits of Chinese higher education—including its knowledge-oriented curriculum, instructor-focused pedagogy, the preeminence of Mandarin in education, and the significance of networks such as WeChat for interaction—indicate particular challenges in setting the integration process in China apart from that in Western contexts (Mao & Ji, 2024; Mao et al., 2023; Wen et al., 2018).

Although prior research has examined the adjustment experiences of international students in Western contexts (Berlanga & Corti, 2025; Larbi et al., 2022), limited qualitative attention has been given to how cultural, institutional, and linguistic structures in China shape their adaptation and coping processes (Ansari Lari, 2025; Prasath et al., 2022). Much of the literature relies on quantitative surveys, leaving the subjective and emotional dimensions of students' integration underexplored. Addressing this gap is critical to understanding how institutional and cultural contexts influence psychological well-being and adaptation. Considering the previously highlighted difficulties, the present study, guided by earlier quantitative survey findings, employs qualitative methods to explore the academic, linguistic, and psychological stress experienced by international students in China, with a particular focus on the coping strategies they adopted to integrate into their environment. The main goal is to present diverse perspectives on various aspects of international students' integration in Chinese universities by uncovering their real experiences and examining how they navigate integration barriers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Student Mobility and Academic Integration

International students' mobility growth worldwide has led to the conversion of higher education institutions; host countries must consider both challenges and possibilities in integrating various student populations (Baas, 2019; Holtbrügge & Engelhard, 2016; Hubbard & Rexeisen, 2020). The goal of an enhanced educational standard, improved job prospects, and international exposure significantly motivates academic migration (Cao et al., 2017; Li et al., 2023). However, academic integration in host countries remains a demanding process, especially for students integrating into an international academic framework,

pedagogical practices, and institutional expectations (Ding, 2016; Gong et al., 2021).

Evaluation strategies, teacher interaction, awareness of academic integration policies, and classroom engagement are key elements for academic integration (Brunsting et al., 2021; Ruggeri et al., 2020). Students face challenges integrating academically into new environments, including faculty interaction and classroom engagement, and have difficulty adjusting academically to new institutions, including classroom engagement, assessment methods, faculty contact, and understanding compliance rules (Evans et al., 2017). Moreover, these students do not have access to personalized introduction programs or school rules that meet their specific academic needs (Brunsting et al., 2021; Knerr, 2015; Mahmood & Burke, 2018). Recent studies (e.g., Castro-Montoya, 2025) reaffirm Tinto's (1993) view that successful student retention depends on academic and social integration, emphasizing the role of institutional belonging and faculty interaction. In the Chinese context, this framework helps explain how teacher-centered pedagogy and limited opportunities for feedback weaken students' sense of inclusion and engagement.

Psychological Well-being and Acculturative Stress

International students may find it hard to adjust to different social and academic settings, and academic integration is important for their mental health (Andrade, 2006; Rienties et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2015). International students may experience considerable emotional and mental stress as they adjust to different social and academic settings. This is why academic blending is so important for their mental health (Berry, 1992; Ward & Kus, 2012)). Homesickness, anxiety, and stress are common feelings in the early stages of academic transfer (Ding, 2016; Nauta et al., 2020; Gong et al., 2021). Research has indicated that academic motivation, success, and concentration are adversely affected by psychological issues (Hirai et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2017; Camacho-Morles et al., 2021).

Culturally acceptable mental health therapy is not always available at the center, which makes the problems even worse (Li et al., 2023; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Berry, 2005). International students find counseling services culturally contradictory and inaccessible due to language barriers (Mao & Ji, 2024; Wen et al., 2018; Bhugra, 2004). The psychological well-being and academic success of international students are adversely affected if emotional stress is not addressed. Berry's (1997) acculturation theory clarifies how cultural distance and weak host support increase the risk of marginalization, thereby increasing acculturative stress. Recent research supports this link (see Ayhan & Bilgin, 2024; Castro-Montoya et al., 2024), showing that integration-oriented strategies predict lower anxiety and better well-being.

Language Proficiency and Structural Barriers

Academic achievement and social integration among international students are profoundly based on effective communication (Lashari et al., 2023; Rui, 2014). International students' ability to interact with faculty, participate in discussions, and understand course content is inadequate due to a language barrier (Young et al., 2013). Mandarin is the predominant language for everyday interactions and administrative discourse in China, despite the growing prevalence of English in educational curricula (Mao & Ji, 2024; Wen et al., 2018). Dual language competence presents problems for pupils in academic tasks, healthcare access, and public services, notwithstanding their ability to manage English academic responsibilities (Yu et al., 2011).

Prior research suggests that a confluence of stresses may lead to persistent academic inequities, necessitating the creation of supplementary peer support networks and the availability of language translation options (Yu et al., 2019; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Students without familiarity with local communication customs face heightened difficulties when digital platforms such as WeChat are used for academic collaboration (Kuang & Wu, 2019; Wen et al., 2018). Consistent with Tinto's (1993) view that limited language proficiency restricts academic and social participation, it reduces institutional attachment and engagement. Recent work (Zhang et al., 2024) highlights that language accessibility is a decisive factor for both integration and psychological adaptation in Chinese universities.

The Chinese Higher Education Environment

The Chinese higher education system prioritizes information-centric learning, unlike the interactive, critical-thinking methodologies used in the West, where educators guide students through memorization (Li, 2012; Yang, 2008). International students are handled by a special grade system with strict standards and final evaluations (Li et al., 2020). International students encounter challenges that the Chinese academic support structure (Cao et al., 2021) does not adequately address. Language support, educational support services, and student orientation programs are examples of services that are either poorly designed or inconsistently offered (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Shan et al., 2020). Students have a harder time receiving quick help when there are problems with the structure, which makes their school problems worse and makes them feel more alone (Gong et al., 2021; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Jin & Wang, 2018; Tian et al., 2020). Moreover, recent research suggests that the expansion of China's internationalization policy has outpaced the implementation of inclusive campus practices (Mao & Ji, 2024). This policy-practice gap underscores the need for qualitative insights into students' lived experiences to complement existing survey-based evidence.

Coping strategies and student resilience

International students' autonomy in adapting to their new environment has been overlooked, as their emotional well-being and academic success are significantly influenced by their coping strategies, even though institutional deficiencies are acknowledged (Akhtar & Kroener-Herwig, 2019; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Malau-Aduli, 2011). To address language barriers and develop a peer support network to overcome these challenges, proactive strategies include establishing personalized study programs, seeking external guidance, and using digital technologies (Akhtar & Kroener-Herwig, 2019; Cao et al., 2021). Some students receive emotional support from their cultural and conation groups, whereas others use withdrawal or avoidance strategies to manage their emotions (Chai et al., 2012; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). While research in Western settings has extensively examined such strategies (Baghoori et al., 2024; Cao et al., 2021; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013), studies inside the Chinese context remain rare.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is shaped by two theoretical lenses: Berry's (1997) acculturation theory and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory. Berry's framework outlines four acculturation strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—which explain how individuals navigate cultural transitions in a new environment. The extent to which individuals preserve their cultural heritage influences the strategies they use when interacting with the host community. This strategy is particularly beneficial in international education because it helps students understand how they navigate academic and social life in a host nation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Berry, 2005, 2006). This study's model clarified how international students in China view their identities in relation to their cultural heritage and the institutional expectations of Chinese universities. Their strategies, whether integrative (engaging both home and host cultures), separative (retaining home culture while avoiding the host), or marginal (disconnected from both), are analyzed in the context of the educational and psychological obstacles they encounter.

Additionally, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory provides a psychological perspective on how individuals respond to stress. The theory distinguishes between problem-focused coping, which entails efforts to change the stressful situation, and emotion-focused coping, which aims to regulate the emotional response to stress. This distinction is especially crucial for grasping the spectrum of mechanisms used by international students, such as interacting with institutional resources, developing language skills, or seeking peer support,(Arkoudis et al., 2013; Arthur, 2017). In the context of this study, these coping skills are used to evaluate students' adaptive reactions to stressors related to language barriers, academic adjustment, and cultural dislocation, as both of these frameworks together present a holistic view that ties sociocultural adaptation with individual psychological resilience, thereby enabling a thorough

analysis of how international students negotiate integration challenges in the context of Chinese higher education.

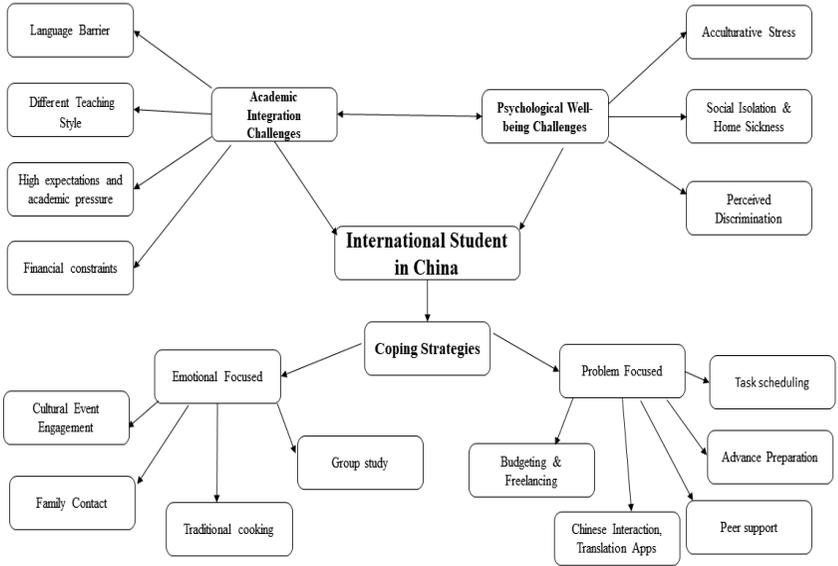


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Academic and Psychological Challenges and Coping Strategies among International Students in China

THE CURRENT STUDY

Despite a growing body of literature on the adjustment experiences of international students, a substantial gap persists in qualitative research on the academic integration issues international students face in China. Many existing studies have focused on Western contexts (Baghoori et al., 2024; Cao et al., 2021; Chai et al., 2012; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013), frequently overlooking the particular educational environments, cultural expectations, and language hurdles that comprise the Chinese higher education system. Moreover, prior research has noted the negative consequences of academic pressure on students' psychological well-being (Clabaugh et al., 2021; Córdova Olivera et al., 2023; Franzen et al., 2021), and little attention has been given to the strategies international students use to address these difficulties. This research aims to address this deficiency by examining the challenges international students in China face in language, academics, and psychological well-being. It seeks to comprehend the self-directed

coping strategies these students use to alleviate the effects of these problems and to facilitate their social and academic adjustment.

METHOD

This qualitative research employs a phenomenological method to investigate the intricacies of acculturative stress and coping mechanisms among international students in China. The phenomenological approach focuses on comprehending individuals' lived experiences, providing insights into their perceptions, interpretations, and navigation of reality within a particular context (Ahmed et al., 2025; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological method emphasizes personal narratives, enabling an in-depth exploration of participants' emotions, perspectives, and adaptation strategies as they navigate the challenges of an international academic setting (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Purposive sampling was employed in the qualitative phase to select 30 international students representing various academic levels, financial backgrounds, and cultural contexts. This nonrandom approach was designed to improve the depth and relevance of the investigation, consequently enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings (Campbell et al., 2020). As Creswell and Poth (2016) emphasize, qualitative researchers must deliberately select participants who represent a range of relevant viewpoints and can thus provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse academic fields, financial backgrounds (scholarship and self-financed), and cultural backgrounds, thereby capturing a broad range of international students' experiences. The sample consisted of thirty international students, with the majority from Pakistan (10), followed by India (2) and Myanmar (3), and smaller numbers from Bangladesh, Sudan, West Africa, Indonesia, Guinea, South Korea, Mali, Kenya, Algeria, Russia, Mexico, Iran, Afghanistan, Singapore, and Sri Lanka (one each). The sample included students at the bachelor's level (4), master's level (13), doctoral level (12), and one language program student. The participants' majors were Social Sciences and Business (10), Engineering and Technology (11), Natural and Life Sciences (5), and Linguistics and Humanities (4). The participants were enrolled in 11 institutions across six major cities in China, with the highest representation in Wuhan (21), followed by Nanjing (2), Beijing, Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Chongqing (one each).

Throughout the interview process, most participants—especially those from Pakistan—shared a language and cultural background with the researchers. The common language of Urdu enabled a deeper and more nuanced understanding of participants' emotional expressions, idiomatic language, and culturally embedded experiences. While this cultural closeness helped foster trust and richer data collection, it may also have influenced the researchers' interpretive lens. Therefore, during coding and theme development, extra care was taken to maintain clarity and remain open to perspectives from students of different cultural backgrounds.

Data collection

This study, conducted from March 2023 to October 2024, employed semistructured interviews to collect data on participants' academic and psychological adjustment experiences (six months after enrollment) and their coping strategies (one year after enrollment). The interviews were conducted in two phases to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges international students face and their coping strategies. The initial phase occurred approximately six months after participants commenced enrollment in their respective universities and began attending academic courses and interacting with the campus environment. This stage aimed to investigate the initial cultural, academic, linguistic, and psychological challenges students face during the early phase of their transition. The second phase of the interviews took place after the students completed one full year of study. At this point, the focus shifted to how participants had managed the problems discussed earlier.

A semistructured design was used for the interviews, which were organized around the main topics related to the study's goals. This method ensured that basic topics were covered while still allowing more important problems to be discussed as they arose during the interviews (Adams, 2015). In line with recommendations by Creswell and Poth (2016), participants were encouraged to talk openly and truthfully about their experiences, thereby minimizing the risk of socially desirable responses. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, which, as Silverman (2017) suggested, was adequate to gather deep insights while retaining participant involvement. A team of three interviewers—RM, WA, and FS—conducted the interviews, each focusing on a different thematic area assigned to them. Most interviews were conducted in English; however, approximately ten participants preferred to speak in their native language (Urdu). This language flexibility enabled them to express their thoughts and emotions more clearly. To accommodate this, interviewers fluent in the relevant native languages conducted the sessions and translated the transcripts into English for analysis. All the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. As a token of appreciation, the participants received small gifts such as notebooks or USB drives, as well as digital red envelopes (via WeChat) containing a random monetary amount between 10–20 RMB (Chinese currency).

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed via thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to segment, categorize, summarize, and reconstruct narrative data to communicate core findings more effectively (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 1 provides an example of the theme-generation process (see Table 1).

Table 1: Example of Themes Generation

Statements from Participants	Codes	Coding	Theme
<i>“Even though my course is in English, professors often switch to Mandarin. I have to rely on translation apps to understand.”</i>	Language barrier, Difficulty in lectures	Language comprehension struggles	Academic Integration Challenges
<i>“I feel isolated because I do not have many local friends, and group discussions are difficult”.</i>	Social exclusion, Communication gap	Emotional distress	Psychological Well-being Challenges
<i>“My seniors guided me in everything from assignments completion to finding local food spots”.</i>	Peer support, Informal mentoring	Peer-support mechanisms	Coping Strategies

A systematic coding procedure was employed in three stages: initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding. In the first stage, initial coding involved a detailed, line-by-line examination of each transcript to identify theoretical possibilities within the data (Ahmad et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025; Joffe, 2011). The participant statements were thoroughly examined to generate concise initial codes that captured key attributes of the data concerning the research questions. For example, the statements *“I do not have many local friends”* and *“I feel isolated”* were categorized as *“communication gap,”* *“social exclusion,”* and *“limited peer interaction.”* The initial codes operated as interpretive labels that established the foundation for more in-depth thematic development. The second step, focused coding, included evaluating and combining initial codes to assess their significance and connection to general patterns.

This phase included grouping comparable codes and eliminating those considered redundant or irrelevant. Categories such as *“homesickness”* and *“experiencing isolation”* were consolidated under the broad category of *“emotional distress,”* which then evolved into the main theme of *“Psychological Well-being Challenges.”* This step was essential in condensing multiple codes into coherent, high-level categories that addressed the core phenomena under investigation. In the final stage, axial coding was applied to refine and structure the emerging themes and subthemes. This involved systematically revisiting the coded data to conceptualize how different categories related to each other and how they contributed to the overarching research questions (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

NVivo (Version 14) software was used to manage and organize the coding process, given its compatibility with thematic analysis (Zamawe, 2015). To reduce researcher bias and enhance the credibility of the findings, cross-coding was performed. Interviewer RM coded the transcripts originally conducted by WA, whereas interviewer SM cross-coded the transcripts from FS. The themes identified in the early stages of analysis served as the basis for constructing final thematic categories and subcategories, enabling a structured and comprehensive interpretation of the data.

Ethical Consideration

This study received formal ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China (ethical approval number: S156). Before data collection, all participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and scope, and written consent was obtained. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

FINDINGS

Socioeconomic Background

Table 2 presents an overview of the participants' demographic characteristics (see Table 2). The study included 30 international students from Pakistan, India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sudan, West Africa, Indonesia, Guinea, South Korea, Mali, Kenya, Algeria, Russia, Mexico, Iran, Afghanistan, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. The sex distribution was equal, with 15 male and 15 female participants. The majority of participants were between 21 and 30 years old, an age range typically associated with student life. Nine participants were aged 31-40 years, and only one respondent was above 40 years. Most of the participants were single, while eight were married.

With respect to financial support, 17 participants were recipients of the China Scholarship Council (CSC), whereas four received funding from the MOFCOM scholarship. Eight students were self-financed, either through personal funds or family support, and one respondent reported receiving funding from ANSO. The duration of stay in China varied among the participants. Three students had lived in China for less than 1 year, 11 for 1 to 2 years, 5 for 3 to 5 years, and 9 for 6 to 8 years. Two participants had lived in China for ten years. The participants were enrolled in different degree programs: 12 were pursuing doctoral studies, 14 were master's students, 3 were undergraduates, and 1 was in a language program.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the participants

ID	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Country of Origin	Degree enrolled	Funding Source
P-1	Male	27	Single	Afghanistan	Masters	CSC
P-2	Male	38	Married	Sudan	Masters	MOFCOM
P-3	Female	29	Single	Pakistan	Doctoral	Self
P-4	Male	25	Single	West Africa	Bachelor	Self
P-5	Female	27	Single	Russia	Masters	CSC
P-6	Female	30	Single	Indonesia	Masters	CSC
P-7	Male	20	Single	Guinea	Language	Self
P-8	Male	25	Single	Pakistan	Masters	Self
P-9	Male	25	Single	Pakistan	Masters	CSC
P-10	Female	24	Single	Mexico	Bachelor	Self
P-11	Female	25	Single	Pakistan	Masters	CSC
P-12	Male	21	Single	South Korea	Bachelor	CSC
P-13	Female	27	Single	Iran	Masters	Self
P-14	Female	35	Single	Pakistan	Doctoral	CSC
P-15	Male	50	Married	Mali	Doctoral	Self
P-16	Female	36	Single	Myanmar	Doctoral	MOFCOM
P-17	Male	32	Married	Pakistan	Masters	CSC
P-18	Male	31	Married	Kenya	Masters	CSC
P-19	Female	36	Married	Myanmar	Masters	MOFCOM
P-20	Male	28	Married	Pakistan	Doctoral	ANSO
P-21	Female	27	Married	Pakistan	Doctoral	CSC
P-22	Female	29	Single	Singapore	Masters	Self
P-23	Male	25	Single	Pakistan	Doctoral	CSC
P-24	Female	34	Single	Myanmar	Doctoral	MOFCOM
P-25	Male	29	Single	India	Masters	CSC
P-26	Female	36	Single	Sri Lanka	Doctoral	CSC
P-27	Female	29	Single	Pakistan	Doctoral	CSC
P-28	Male	25	Married	Bangladesh	Doctoral	CSC
P-29	Male	25	Single	India	Masters	CSC
P-30	Female	30	Single	Algeria	Doctoral	CSC

Note. CSC=Chinese Scholarship Council; MOFCOM=Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China Scholarship; ANSO= Alliance of International Science Organizations.

Academic Integration Challenges

Table 3 presents the academic challenges highlighted by participants, such as instructional methods, language barriers, high academic expectations, and financial constraints, all of which play a key role in psychological distress and academic integration (see Table 3). Most participants (17 out of 30) stated that significant academic integration challenges emerged from differences in teaching

techniques and classroom engagement between Chinese universities and those of their home countries. The formal nature of teacher–student interactions and limited opportunities for participation heightened their feelings of disconnection and marginalization. Additionally, although they were enrolled in English–medium programs, the language barrier remained a critical challenge, affecting lecture comprehension, assignment completion, and communication with instructors.

Most participants (19 out of 30) also reported that the pressure from high academic standards, unclear grading criteria, and demands for research publications increased their stress, particularly for those without adequate support. Furthermore, financial instability emerged as another significant factor affecting students’ academic focus and emotional health, as many participants (22 out of 30) reported that delayed stipends, unexpected medical expenses, and the burden of self-financing hindered their ability to concentrate on their studies and increased their stress levels.

Table 3: Academic Integration Challenges

Major Theme	Subthemes	Statements from Participants
Academic Integration Challenges	Teaching technique and classroom engagement	<p><i>“In Pakistan, when I do not understand anything, I take help from my seniors and Professors, but here the methods are different, and sometimes they help you with your queries whereas sometimes they simply refuse by saying ‘Do by yourself.’” (P-30)</i></p> <p><i>“Russian teachers focus on individual creativity and critical thinking in friendly environments, but here, teachers focus more on group learning and less on individual creativity. I often feel invisible in class.” (P-5)</i></p>
	High expectations and academic pressure	<p><i>“Publication requirements are extremely stressful. The pressure to publish alongside completing coursework is mentally exhausting. Research tasks are not too much, but translating Chinese to English and understanding things takes time.” (P-23)</i></p> <p><i>“Sometimes I don’t know what the professor expects. The grading system is unclear, and that adds to my anxiety.” (P-17)</i></p>

Financial constraints and academic stress	<p><i>“You can imagine I am borrowing money to pay for myself and my studies, which is stressful and affecting my academic performance.” (P-15)</i></p> <p><i>“Scholarship stipend is not enough. If I visit the hospital for any health issue, my budget will be disturbed... Today, is the 23rd day of the month, and we have not received a stipend yet. How can we spend our whole month without money? It is a continuous stress” (P-7)</i></p>
Language and communication challenges	<p><i>“The first challenge was the language barrier; even if you apply for an English course, your course’s primary language of instruction will still be Chinese. Therefore, there is still some misinterpretation in assignments and meetings.” (P-8)</i></p> <p><i>“I learned Chinese for one year... However, the Chinese I learned completely differs from the one they use in academics. I struggle by first translating and then understanding.” (P-10)</i></p>

Psychological Well-being Challenges

Table 4 shows the psychological well-being challenges that international students in China face due to acculturative stress, social isolation, homesickness, and perceived discrimination (see Table 4). A significant number of participants (22 out of 30) identified language barriers as one of the most substantial sources of stress. These barriers not only hinder their communication with their supervisors but also complicate their cultural understanding and social integration, leading to emotional strain and depression. The inability to communicate effectively hindered their ability to adjust to academic and social life in the host culture, leading to a sense of detachment.

Acculturative stress was widely reported by participants (29 out of 30), particularly in terms of adjusting to unfamiliar social norms, teaching styles, and everyday cultural practices. Social isolation and homesickness were common, as several participants (17 out of 30) stated that being away from family for a long time compounded their emotional distress. The absence of community members, both conational and familiar, further intensified their feelings of loneliness. Additionally, perceived discrimination—both social and institutional—further contributed to feelings of marginalization. Most of them (26 out of 30) reported experiencing exclusion in social settings and barriers to participating in extracurricular university activities due to their international student status, which impacts their emotional health, self-esteem, and sense of belonging.

Table 4: Psychological well-being challenges

Major theme	Subtheme	Statements from participants
Psychological well-being challenges	Acculturative stress	<p><i>“When I first came to China, it was hard to adjust to the way people interact. The customs, the festivals, and even how people behave in public spaces were very different from what I was used to.” (P-22)</i></p> <p><i>“I struggle to understand how things work culturally, how to behave in a group, when to speak, or how to address teachers. Here, everything feels unfamiliar and stressful.” (P-7)</i></p> <p><i>“The teaching style, food culture, and even small social etiquettes are different here. It takes a lot of time to adapt to all of this while studying.” (P-16)</i></p>
	Social Isolation & Homesickness	<p><i>“I miss my family a lot; you cannot imagine it. Since 2017 my arrival in China, I have been unable to revisit my home country. I have children, and being a father, it is not easy to stay away from family.” (P-28)</i></p> <p><i>“I feel alone here. I am the only student from Afghanistan. Sometimes, I need my countrymate and my family to share something.” (P-3)</i></p> <p><i>“As a Muslim, food is my first challenge in China. I have to translate ingredients before eating anything, which limited my options.” (P-11)</i></p> <p><i>“Sometimes I feel that everything is complex, and the effort is just too much. The stress transforms and becomes overwhelming, making me feel very low.” (P-22)</i></p> <p><i>“You feel like you are doing everything alone, and no one understands what you are going</i></p>

Discrimination and
its emotional toll

through. That loneliness turns into something heavier.” (P-14)

“Being far from home without emotional support makes even small problems feel ten times worse.” (P-3)

“One day, I sat next to a Chinese student in the cafeteria, and the moment I did, he moved to another table. I felt disrespect.” (P-15)

“I was a professional volleyball player in my country, but here, I was told I could not play in university competitions because I am not Chinese. That was an enormous disappointment.” (P-4)

“Discrimination makes us feel like outsiders even though we are students just like the locals. It affects our confidence.” (P-23)

Coping Strategies adopted by international students

Table 5 highlights the various coping strategies adopted by international students in China to manage academic, psychological, and cultural stressors (see Table 5). A large majority of participants (26 out of 30) reported adopting multiple methods to enhance their adjustment and well-being. For academic integration, 21 out of 30 reported adjusting to new teaching styles and classroom norms by seeking guidance from senior peers, observing Chinese students’ behavior, and preparing lessons in advance. In managing academic pressure and expectations, 18 out of 30 reported adopting structured routines, breaking assignments into manageable parts, using online translation apps while reading Chinese texts, and joining study groups for motivation and academic continuity.

To handle financial challenges, 27 out of 30 stated that they had limited their expenses, taken on freelance work, and shared accommodations to reduce monetary stress. Overcoming language and communication barriers was a significant theme, where participants (24 out of 30) reported actively learning Chinese phrases used in daily routines, using mobile applications (Baidu, Taoli) for language learning, and relying on recording and translation tools during lectures to enhance understanding. In addressing acculturative stress, the majority of them (22 out of 30) stated that they started to engage themselves in Chinese cultural activities and events, followed Chinese social media influencers, and educated themselves about Chinese traditions to feel more integrated and mentally prepared. Managing social isolation and homesickness was also prominent; the majority of them (28 out of 30) kept family photo albums, maintained daily video

calls with family, and cooked their home country meals, which offered emotional relief and a sense of cultural continuity.

Table 5: Coping strategies adopted by international students

Major theme	Subtheme	Statements from participants
Coping strategies	Adjusting to teaching styles and classroom norms	<p><i>“At first, I struggled with the teaching style, but later, I began preparing in advance by reviewing course material before class. This helped me follow along.”</i> (P-7)</p> <p><i>“I asked senior students from my country how to deal with the teachers and manage assignments? Their tips were very practical.”</i> (P-19)</p> <p><i>“I observed how Chinese students behave in class and slowly adjusted my participation style to blend in.”</i> (P-27)</p>
	Managing academic pressure and academic expectations	<p><i>“I created a weekly schedule and broke my assignments into smaller tasks to avoid last-minute panic. This is very useful for me”</i> (P-13)</p> <p><i>“I started using Chinese academic websites with the help of translation tools. It reduced the time I wasted trying to understand things.”</i> (P-10)</p> <p><i>“Sometimes I join study groups just to stay motivated. It helps me not feel left behind.”</i> (P-23)</p>
	Dealing with financial challenges	<p><i>“Now I limited my spending to essentials and plan my meals weekly to avoid running out of money before the stipend arrives.”</i> (P-15)</p> <p><i>“I take freelance projects online to support myself. It’s not easy, but it helps reduce stress about money.”</i> (P-7)</p> <p><i>“I share accommodation with friends to save costs and reduce the financial pressure.”</i> (P-21)</p>

Overcoming language and communication barriers		<p><i>“I made it my first priority to learn common Chinese phrases related to daily tasks. It made shopping and asking for help much easier.” (P-10)</i></p> <p><i>“I use language learning app[Baidu] every night for 20 minutes. It’s a small step, but it helps.” (P-8)</i></p> <p><i>“During class, if I don’t understand, I record the teacher’s word and translate it immediately which is very helpful” (P-17)</i></p>
Dealing with acculturative stress		<p><i>“I started attending cultural events, such as dragon boat, Chinese spring festival... even if I didn’t understand everything. It helps me feel less like a stranger.” (P-22)</i></p> <p><i>“I followed some Chinese influencers on social media and read about traditions online to mentally prepare myself for holidays and festivals.” (P-11)</i></p>
Managing social isolation and homesickness	social and	<p><i>“I keep a photo album of my family on my phone. Looking at it when I feel homesick brings me comfort.” (P-28)</i></p> <p><i>“Everyday I do video call with my family. It gives me emotional support.” (P-3)</i></p> <p><i>“I cook my traditional meals every weekend and store it. This is helping me in both ways, my cooking skill is increasing and while cooking I feel less stress.” (P-1)</i></p>

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the academic, cultural, and psychological challenges international students face in China, as well as the strategies they employ to address them. The participants mentioned several adjustment issues, including unfamiliar teaching techniques, academic stress, financial uncertainty, and ongoing language difficulty. These challenges often cause major psychological stress, such as homesickness, acculturative stress, and feelings of depression. Additionally, several students said they felt discriminated against and did not receive enough support from the institution, which made their problems

even worse. Numerous students continue to display the potential to adapt by adopting several strategies, irrespective of the situations they are in. Some of these are making better plans for their studies, trying to improve their Chinese communication, staying in touch with family members living abroad, and making social networks.

The three thematic categories identified in this study align with significant psychological frameworks that elucidate individual adaptation to stress and cultural transition. The findings of this study align closely with Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, particularly his four-dimensional model of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. As part of the integration strategy, many of the participants actively interacted with Chinese cultural norms—for example, they adjusted to the way the classroom worked, took part in local festivals, and improved their language skills—while keeping close ties to their home cultures through virtual family contact, food, and peer groups. Berry (1997) reported that this dual attitude reflects a conscious attempt to integrate into the host community while preserving one's cultural identity. Moreover, especially among students who shunned associating with local classmates due to linguistic or cultural difficulties and opting to stay inside the protection of conational groups, there were indications of a separation strategy. Experiences of social and institutional discrimination, as described by various participants, also caused some to feel marginalized, defined by psychological distance from both the home culture and the host culture. The variety of participants' statements shows that acculturation is not a straightforward process but rather marked by emotional ambivalence and contextual shifts.

Likewise, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory was seen as helpful in demonstrating the adaptive methods used by participants. Many of the coping strategies mentioned, such as creating academic routines, employing translation tools, or asking senior peers for advice, reflected problem-focused coping, in which individuals actively tried to control stress-causing circumstances. In contrast, strategies such as cooking traditional foods, video calling family members, or engaging in religious and cultural activities involve emotion-focused coping, which aims to control emotional reactions to stress. These findings validate the dual nature of coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman and reveal that international students often oscillate between these strategies depending on the nature of the challenge and the availability of support systems. The current study contributes to theoretical frameworks by illustrating that coping and acculturation are generally associated with group-level phenomena rather than solely individual psychological responses. The participants often rely on group approaches and conational peer networks, demonstrating that adaptation in the Chinese academic context is frequently socially negotiated rather than pursued in isolation.

The findings of this study align significantly with those of prior studies on international student adaptation, especially studies highlighting the numerous challenges of cultural, academic, and psychological adjustment (Gong et al., 2021; Hirai et al., 2015; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). In accordance with prior studies, language challenges are recognized as a significant impediment affecting

academic achievement, daily interactions, and mental health (Gao & Hua, 2021; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Similar to Singh and Jack (2022) observations, participants in this research indicated that language constraints hindered their capacity to engage with local students and professors, resulting in social disengagement and excessive dependence on translation applications or compatriot assistance. Furthermore, the issue of academic pressure—intensified by unclear grading standards, unfamiliar instructional methods, and mandatory publication requirements—reflects the concerns expressed in studies by (Brunsting et al., 2021; Ding, 2016; Pisaniello et al., 2019), which reveal that academic pressures may become a cause of chronic stress for international students.

The participants in this study described feelings such as sadness, helplessness, and worry, which support the psychological weaknesses that have already been identified by (Thurber & Walton, 2012) and Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), especially when institutional mental health resources are seen as difficult to access or not relevant to the culture (De Moissac et al., 2020; Mao & Ji, 2024). Furthermore, findings related to social isolation, homesickness, and the desire for culturally appropriate food align with the emotional and cultural dislocation reported in earlier studies (e.g., Sawir et al., 2008; Zhang, 2011). However, this study moves beyond existing research by providing a more nuanced understanding of coping as a collective process—students did not rely only on internal psychological resources but also leveraged social and cultural networks, peer mentorship, and institutional loopholes to navigate stress. This aligns with recent work by (Cao et al., 2021) Baghoori et al. (2024), which also emphasized the importance of informal support systems. The present study, however, offers a more thorough cultural and linguistic perspective, particular with respect to the Chinese setting, which shows how international students use multilayered solutions to balance emotional and structural pressures.

Implications

In addition to validating the applicability of current theories and prior studies, this study offers several new perspectives on international students' integration in China. A key finding is the recognition of coping mechanisms as multiscale, ranging from the individual's level to peer-driven group methods and institutional expectations. While Berry's (1997) and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) frameworks emphasize primarily individual-level processes, the participants in this study frequently characterized the use of collective coping mechanisms, such as informal cultural mentoring, conational academic groups, and shared lodging arrangements, to manage stress. Institutional challenges negatively affect the success of international students in social and cultural settings to which they are not accustomed. These problems can be fixed by conducting a thorough investigation and working together.

Language is a problem not only in academics but also in everyday life, especially when talking to the local government, healthcare facilities, and digital platforms such as WeChat. This study provides a more nuanced picture of its dual

nature. This result highlights the problems with teaching in English only, without providing appropriate language support in social or work situations. Finally, researchers have reported that international students do not rely on a single coping strategy; rather, they often use both problem- and emotion-focused strategies simultaneously. This flexible, situational coping strategy runs counter to the binary presumptions of Lazarus and Folkman's paradigm. Consequently, international students in China need to be able to address stress in the classroom and become accustomed to their new environment. Some of the things they can do include controlling their feelings and interacting with their classmates. The results suggest that schools should change their practices. They should not only offer introduction programs or mental health tools but also create a permanent space where everyone feels welcome and where academic, social, and language help is always available.

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