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## **Psychological Vulnerability and Well-Being of Chinese International Students in Southeast Asia's EMI Contexts: A Systematic Review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The rapid increase in the number of Chinese international students in English-medium instruction programs in Southeast Asia has raised concerns about their psychological well-being. Despite growing scholarly attention to international student mental health, a comprehensive, region-specific synthesis for Southeast Asia remains lacking. This review examined empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 on psychological outcomes, acculturative stress, and well-being among Chinese students in Southeast Asian higher education. Drawing on Berry's acculturation theory and Lazarus and Folkman's coping framework, this review identified recurring stressors, including English communication anxiety, localized challenges in English comprehension, heavy academic workloads, and cultural expectations related to religion, food, and gender norms. Protective factors such as social and family support, resilience, and self-efficacy reduce stress, whereas avoidance coping intensifies it. Methodological limitations included reliance on cross-sectional surveys, inconsistent adaptation of measurement instruments, and limited theoretical integration. The review highlights academic, sociocultural, and structural influences on student well-being and calls for theory-driven, multilevel research and context-sensitive policies to strengthen mental health support in EMI settings.*

**Keywords:** Chinese international students; psychological stress; well-being; English-medium instruction; acculturative stress; Southeast Asia.

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## INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia has become an increasingly attractive destination for Chinese international students because of the availability of English–medium instruction (EMI) programs, cultural proximity, and comparatively affordable tuition and living costs (Chen, 2025; Hayes & Wang, 2025; Lertpusit et al., 2025). In 2024, the Malaysia Global Education Services Centre recorded approximately 33,216 applications from Chinese students, making them the largest international student group (EMGS, 2024). Singapore reported more than 73,000 international students in the same year, with over 36,000 applications from China (Ying, 2025). Thailand has also experienced a significant rise, with 28,052 Chinese students enrolled across public and private universities, constituting 53% of the country’s international student population (TGPPRD, 2025).

International students often encounter substantial psychological stress when adapting to unfamiliar cultural and academic environments. Such pressures may contribute to emotional strain, mental health challenges, and difficulties in coping (Ingram & Luxton, 2005). Chinese international students are particularly vulnerable to anxiety, depression, homesickness, and identity-related concerns, especially when linguistic and cultural norms differ from those in their home context (Ji, 2021; Zhao, 2025). Students who are shaped by collectivist values and examination-focused educational practices frequently struggle to adjust to student-centered and EMI instructional settings. For example, Miao and Zhang (2024) identified cultural adaptation stress as a major source of psychological discomfort among Chinese students. Xie and Qi (2018) documented academic, social, and daily life challenges among Chinese students in Germany. In the United States, Lai et al. (2023) reported that even when sociocultural adjustment was satisfactory, academic and psychological difficulties persisted. These issues are often intensified by discrimination, acculturative stress, and limited social or institutional support (Xue & Kaur, 2025; Yu et al., 2019).

Language-related challenges and accent-based discrimination are widely reported in EMI environments (Park et al., 2017). Linguistic marginalization is associated with reduced self-esteem and heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms among Asian international students. In Australia, Dovchin (2020) described how students who faced ridicule related to their accents experienced social withdrawal, increased anxiety, and feelings of linguistic inferiority. Li et al. (2018) reported that East Asian students in the United States often face academic stress linked to divergent teaching approaches, demanding coursework, and strong family expectations. Similar patterns exist in Southeast Asia, where Chinese students frequently struggle with time management, unfamiliar academic norms, and the emotional strain of separation from home (Chen & Yang, 2015; Jiang, 2020; Zhang & Nimehchisalem, 2023).

In addition to experiencing academic and linguistic difficulties, Asian international students often report both overt and subtle racial and cultural discrimination, including xenophobic remarks and stereotyping on the basis of physical appearance or names (Philips, 2021; Yeo et al., 2019). Although many Chinese students rely on digital communities and peer networks for support

(Zhao, 2025), others experience declines in mental health and emotional engagement (Wahed & Hassan, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019). Such psychological challenges can undermine academic outcomes, hinder social integration, and affect long-term career development (Liu et al., 2019; Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Addressing the mental health needs of international students has therefore become a critical concern.

The multilingual and multicultural environment of Southeast Asia presents stressors that differ in both form and magnitude from those encountered in Western settings. As a result, the region provides an important context for examining whether existing acculturation and coping theories, which have largely emerged from Euro-American research, sufficiently explain how structural and cultural conditions shape the psychological well-being of Chinese students (Charoenpornsook & Thumvichit, 2025; Huiling & Ismail, 2022). The stressors commonly reported include linguistic insecurity tied to local varieties of English, unfamiliar pedagogical practices, and limited access to counseling or psychological support services (Dovchin, 2020; Park et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2025). While some students manage these challenges through personal resilience and external support, others report that prolonged emotional distress affects their academic performance, well-being, and overall life satisfaction (Weidi & JeeChing, 2023).

Despite the rapid increase in the number of Chinese students pursuing higher education in Southeast Asia, many continue to experience complex psychological and emotional challenges in EMI environments that extend beyond academic adjustment. Previous studies have identified persistent stressors such as language barriers, academic pressure, and limited social support (Lin et al., 2019; Jiang, 2020). Additional research indicates that psychological stress often manifests as language-related self-doubt, presentation anxiety, feelings of exclusion, and difficulties with emotional regulation (Chen et al., 2021; Qi & Haladin, 2022; Zhang & Yik, 2024). However, a comprehensive understanding of these challenges within Southeast Asian contexts remains limited.

To address this gap, the present study systematically reviews 23 empirical studies conducted in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. The purpose of this study is to examine how psychological vulnerability and well-being are shaped among Chinese international students in EMI higher education settings. The review is guided by the following research questions:

1. What psychological challenges do Chinese international students endure in Southeast Asian EMI environments?
2. What factors influence their mental health and well-being during academic and cultural transitions?
3. What theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches have been employed in studying these students' psychological vulnerability and well-being, and what gaps remain in the literature?

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Berry's (1997) acculturation model and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping. Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional lens for examining how Chinese international students navigate psychological stress and well-being within English-medium instruction (EMI) environments in Southeast Asia.

Berry's acculturation model outlines four strategies that individuals may use when adapting to a new cultural environment: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Integration, which allows individuals to maintain their cultural identity while actively engaging with the host culture, is generally associated with more positive psychological outcomes. However, Chinese students in Southeast Asia often encounter sociolinguistic and educational barriers that impede successful integration (Tuerxun et al., 2020). Linguistic insecurity, unfamiliar academic practices, and ethnic stereotyping may lead students to adopt separation or marginalization strategies. These strategies have been linked to greater emotional distress, reduced social belonging, and lower psychological well-being (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Dovchin, 2020; Zhang & Yik, 2024). In EMI settings, English proficiency functions not only as an academic requirement but also as a social gatekeeper, which may heighten stress for students who are still developing communicative competence (Zhang-Wu, 2018).

To further explain how students interpret and manage these acculturative challenges, this study also draws on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping. This model emphasizes the dynamic interaction between a person's cognitive appraisal of environmental stressors and the coping resources available to them. Chinese students frequently report academic overload, communication difficulties, and perceived discrimination as sources of stress. When coping resources such as emotional regulation skills, peer support, or institutional services are limited or not effectively utilized, these stressors may contribute to anxiety, depression, and academic disengagement. In contrast, students who display higher levels of resilience and who participate in supportive social networks tend to experience more favorable mental health outcomes, even when studying in demanding EMI environments (Chen, 2019; Fan et al., 2015).

## METHOD

A systematic review offers a structured way to identify, evaluate, and integrate empirical studies that address a clearly defined research question (Gough et al., 2017). In this study, the review process followed established methodological standards and incorporated multiple search strategies, including database searches, backward citation tracing, and targeted manual screening of central journals in the field. Higgins and Green (2008) emphasized that systematic reviews reduce potential bias by applying explicit eligibility criteria and consistent procedures for selecting studies, extracting information, and synthesizing evidence. By combining these procedures with a broad search across

diverse sources, the review strengthens the credibility of its findings and provides a sound basis for understanding the topic within an evidence-based framework.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGY**

The review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines and was registered in PROSPERO (CRD420251087074). Searches were carried out in seven major academic databases: Web of Science, PubMed, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, and Scopus. Google Scholar was used to capture additional studies that may not have been indexed in the main databases. To complement these searches, the reference lists of influential studies and earlier reviews were manually examined to ensure comprehensive coverage.

The search strategy was designed around three key components: the target population (“Chinese students” or “Chinese international students”), psychological constructs (“well-being,” “mental health,” “psychological stress,” “stress,” or “happiness”), and the regional focus (“Southeast Asia” or specific countries within the region). The terms were refined through initial trial searches and by reviewing retrieved titles, abstracts, and database-specific indexing. Boolean operators and database-specific functions (e.g., TITLE-ABS-KEY for Scopus and intitle for Google Scholar) were used to increase both precision and sensitivity. An overview of the search strings used in each database is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Keywords for article retrieval

<b>Database</b>	<b>Search Keywords</b>
PubMed/Springer/Taylor & Francis/Web of Science/Wiley Online	(“Chinese students” OR “Chinese international students”) AND (“well-being” OR “mental health” OR “psychological stress” OR “stress” OR “Happiness”) AND (“Southeast Asia” OR “Malaysia OR Singapore OR Thailand OR Philippines OR Laos OR Indonesia”)
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Chinese students” OR “Chinese international students”) AND (“cross-cultural adaptation” OR “cross-cultural adjustment” OR “acculturation”) AND (“academic adaptation” OR “academic adjustment”) OR (“sociocultural adaptation” OR “sociocultural adjustment”) OR (“psychological adaptation” OR “psychological adjustment”) OR (“depression” OR “well-being” OR “stress”) AND (“Malaysia” OR “Malaysian higher education”)
Google Scholar	intitle: “Chinese international students” or “Chinese students” AND (“well-being” OR “mental health” OR “psychological stress” OR “stress” OR “happiness”) AND (“Southeast Asia” OR “Malaysia OR Singapore OR Thailand”)

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: published in English, published between 2015 and 2025, examining psychological stress or well-being, and focusing on Chinese international students in Southeast Asia. The excluded records consisted of studies published before 2015, nonempirical publications (e.g., reviews, discussion papers, autobiographies, policy documents, preprints, and conference proceedings), studies unrelated to the topic, and research conducted outside Southeast Asia. A full summary of the inclusion and exclusion criteria is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2015-2025 (July)	<2015
Literature Type	Research paper	Review paper, discussion papers, autobiographies, preprints, government policy papers, and conference proceedings
Language	English	Non-English
Research Site	Southeast Asia	Non Southeast Asia
Research Object	Chinese students	Non-Chinese students

**Table 3:** Sample characteristics and study locations

Sample	Location	Articles
Chinese students	Malaysia (a public university)	Chen, (2025), Li et al., (2021), Shi et al., (2019), Xu et al., (2025), Zhang, & Nimehchisalem, (2023), Zhang & Yik, (2024).
	Malaysia (three universities and colleges)	Qi & Haladin (2022), Tuerxun et al., (2020).
	Malaysia (twelve universities)	Weidi & JeeChing, (2023).
	Malaysia	Jing, Pa & Awang, (2025), Yue et al., (2024), Zhao, (2025).
	Philippines Singapore Thailand (a private university)	Bantugan et al., (2024). Chen & Yang, (2015). Chen et al., (2021).

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	Thailand (two public universities)	Zheng et al., (2025).
	Thailand (three universities)	Cao, Lin, & Chen, (2022).
	Thailand	Chen, You & Chen, (2018), Jiang, (2020), Wei & Chang, (2022).
Chinese students as one of the samples	Malaysia (a public university)	Ching et al., (2023), Gan & Yuen Ling, (2019).
	Singapore	Nasirudeen & Josephine, (2015).

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### **Data Abstraction Procedure and Methodological Quality Assessment**

Using the selected keywords, an initial search across seven major academic databases produced 1,915 records, supplemented by three additional records identified through manual searching. A publication year filter was first applied, and studies published before 2015 were removed, resulting in the exclusion of 584 items. Duplicate records were then checked manually, and 34 items were removed. The remaining 1,334 records underwent screening for publication type, and 322 nonempirical publications were excluded. After this step, 1,012 records were screened for relevance to the Southeast Asian context and to Chinese international students, which resulted in the removal of 667 records. A total of 311 records remained and were examined at the abstract level. Through this screening, 39 studies were identified as potentially relevant and were selected for full-text review. These full texts were assessed via predetermined inclusion criteria related to research focus, empirical design, geographical context, and population relevance. A total of 23 studies satisfied all the criteria and were included in the final review.

Figure 1 presents a detailed overview of each stage of the screening process, while Figure 2 summarizes the characteristics of the included studies. The 23 studies encompassed a range of methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs. Surveys and interviews were the tools most commonly used for data collection. The included studies were conducted across Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines and frequently drew on theoretical perspectives such as the diathesis–stress model, ecological systems theory, and acculturation frameworks.

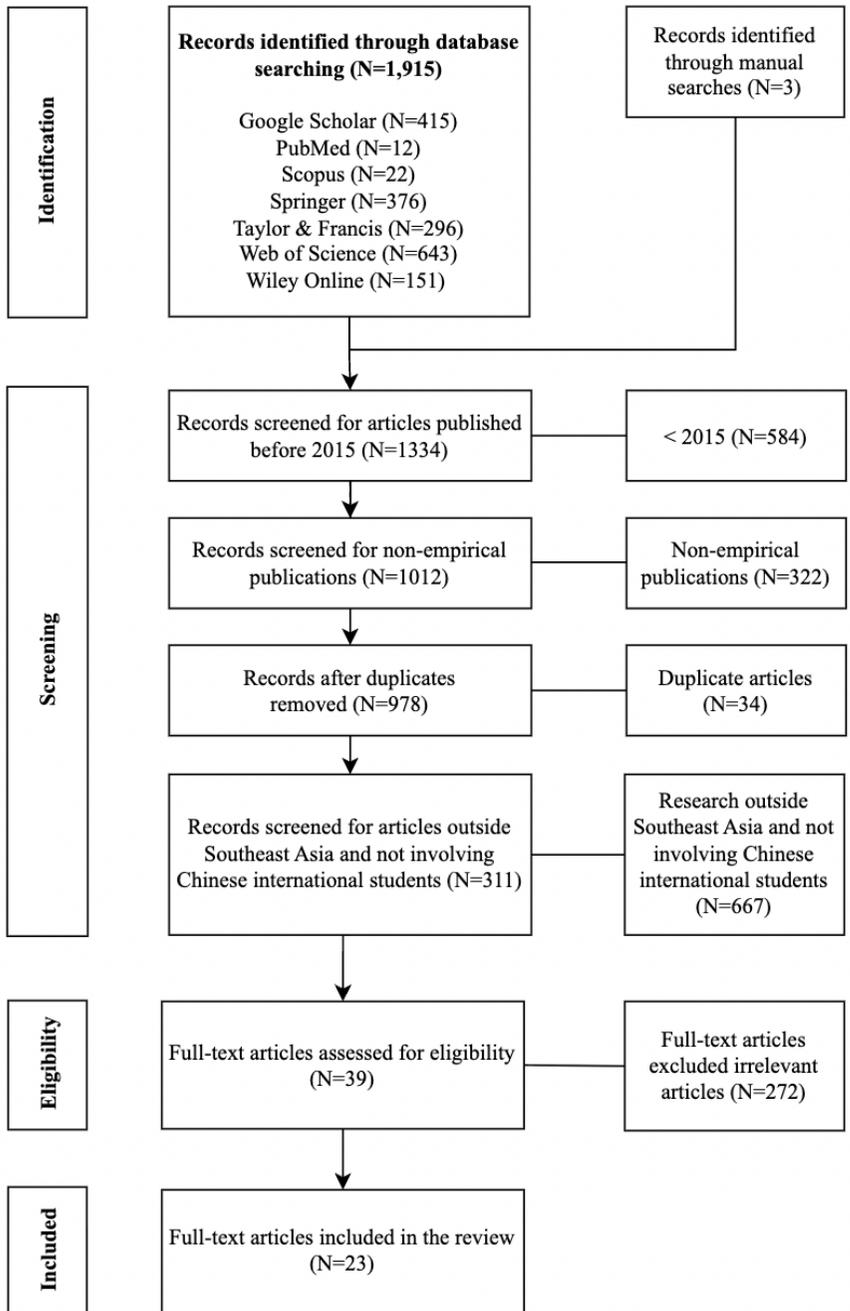
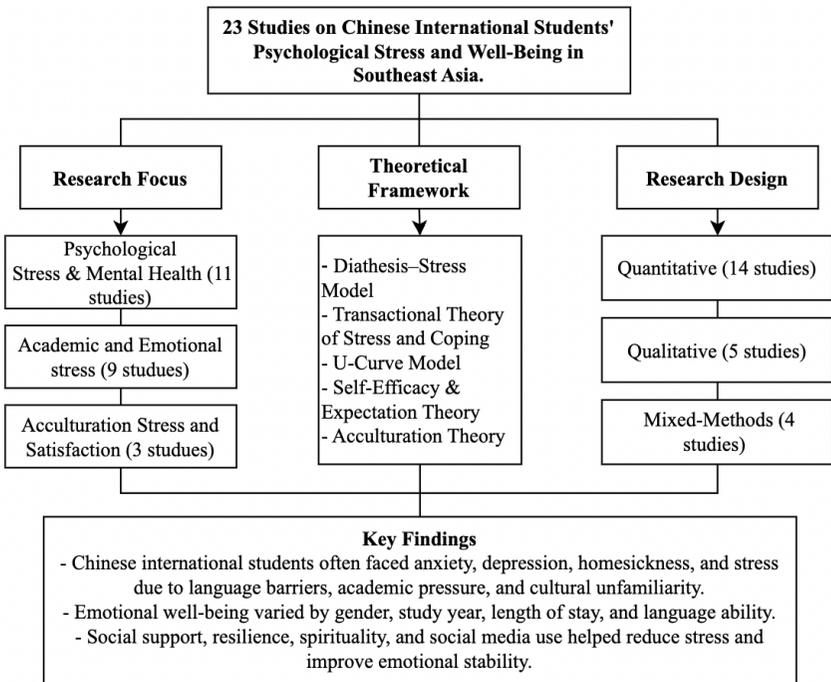


Figure 1: Flow diagram of the process of article selection



**Figure 2: Synthesis of commonalities in 23 studies**

The synthesis highlights shared thematic concerns across the literature, including stress, mental health challenges, and emotional resilience, among Chinese international students studying in English–medium instruction environments. These patterns reflect broader discussions in the field and point to gaps that warrant further inquiry. By examining recurring approaches and assumptions, this review provides an integrated perspective on current scholarship in this developing area (Snyder, 2019). The Appendix contains detailed information about all included studies.

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample characteristics**

The studies included in this review covered a broad range of sample sizes, institutional settings, and host countries, illustrating the diverse experiences of Chinese international students enrolled in English–medium instruction programs in Southeast Asia. Most of the research has been conducted in Malaysia and Thailand, with fewer studies based in Singapore and the Philippines. Malaysia was the most frequently cited research site. Although the regional distribution was relatively wide, a clear imbalance was noted. Public universities in Malaysia and

Thailand dominate the literature, whereas private institutions and transnational education programs are rarely examined (Chen et al., 2021; Qi & Haladin, 2022).

Sample sizes varied considerably across the studies. Several qualitative investigations have relied on small participant groups, often ranging from six to twelve individuals (Bantugan et al., 2024; Chen, 2025; Tuerxun et al., 2020). In contrast, quantitative studies tend to include much larger samples. For example, Cao et al. (2022) surveyed 1,000 participants, and Chen et al. (2021) reported data from more than 900 respondents. This range reflects methodological diversity; however, many qualitative studies do not provide sufficient demographic or contextual details. Important characteristics such as age, gender, academic major, length of stay, and previous overseas experience were frequently omitted. The lack of such information limits the ability to interpret the findings in context and may introduce bias, as unreported participant or environmental factors could have shaped the results.

A related concern involves the limited reporting of sampling strategies. Many studies did not specify whether participants were selected through purposive, convenience, or random sampling. Insufficient transparency in sampling procedures weakens the interpretability and generalizability of the findings and may obscure underlying patterns of psychological distress. In addition, some studies focused exclusively on Chinese international students (e.g., Zhao, 2025; Li et al., 2021), whereas others included them within broader international cohorts (e.g., Ching et al., 2023; Nasirudeen & Josephine, 2015). Incorporating Chinese students into larger mixed groups risks masking cultural and linguistic stressors that may be especially relevant for this population, including language-related anxiety, social disconnection, and academic pressure rooted in Confucian educational values.

Cross-national or cross-institutional comparisons have rarely been conducted. Few studies have investigated how institutional structures, national policies, or disciplinary differences might shape students' psychological outcomes. Moreover, important variables such as English language proficiency, resilience, coping strategies, and social support have been addressed inconsistently across the literature, despite their theoretical importance in understanding psychological adjustment in English-medium learning environments. The scarcity of systematic cross-national comparisons continues to limit the understanding of how different Southeast Asian contexts influence stress and coping patterns among Chinese international students.

### **Psychological challenges experienced by Chinese international students**

Across the 23 reviewed studies, psychological burden emerged as a persistent but inconsistently conceptualized aspect of Chinese students' transition to English-medium instruction in higher education in Southeast Asia. The reported symptom patterns included academic stress; performance and communication anxiety; depressive affect; homesickness and loneliness; and context-specific distress linked to religion, food, climate, and pandemic-related disruptions. Although constructs such as mental health, psychological distress, and well-being are variably defined, at least 14 of the 23 studies documented measurable symptoms

of anxiety, depression, or stress during adaptation (Bantugan et al., 2024; Cao, Lin, & Chen, 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Zhao, 2025).

Difficulties speaking English in front of peers, delivering presentations, and managing discipline-specific terminology were consistently reported as triggers for anticipatory anxiety and avoidance. Students frequently described somatic arousal, such as trembling and rapid heart rate, as well as heightened self-consciousness during oral academic tasks, particularly when lecturers or peers code-switched or used locally accented English, which increased comprehension demands (Xu et al., 2025; Zhang & Nimehchisalem, 2023; Zhang & Yik, 2024). Uncertainty regarding the academic recognition and comparative status of degrees earned in Southeast Asia further undermined confidence and contributed to lingering apprehension regarding the return on educational investment (Chen, 2025).

Large-scale surveys in Thailand reported elevated rates of stress-related mental health indicators, with some evidence of increased risk for self-injury and depressive symptoms among Chinese undergraduates exposed to high workload demands and perceived performance pressure (Cao, Lin, & Chen, 2022; Chen et al., 2021). Even students who reported relatively successful cross-cultural adjustment demonstrated deterioration in mental health when academic demands intensified, indicating that sociocultural comfort alone does not protect against internalizing symptoms (Chen, You, & Chen, 2018). Similarly, in Malaysian samples, clusters of low self-acceptance, diminished confidence, and elevated distress were observed among students reporting weak linguistic coping resources (Qi & Haladin, 2022; Weidi & JeeChing, 2023).

The early arrival period was repeatedly identified as psychologically vulnerable. Qualitative studies in Singapore highlighted marked stress and emotional disequilibrium during the initial phases of cultural exposure, which is consistent with U-curve models of transition shock (Chen & Yang, 2015). Homesickness, separation from family support networks, and difficulty establishing trusting peer relationships are associated with stronger feelings of sadness and disorientation, with Chinese students frequently among the most affected subgroups (Gan & Yuen Ling, 2019; Nasirudeen & Josephine, 2015). Longitudinal research in Thailand has indicated that early-stage fluctuations in psychological well-being do not necessarily predict later adjustment, underscoring the importance of tracking change over time (Jiang, 2020).

Culturally embedded routines also influence psychological outcomes. Chinese Muslim and non-Muslim students in Malaysia reported discomfort related to halal dietary practices, prayer schedules, and gendered interaction norms, which, combined with language barriers and financial uncertainty, heightened acculturative stress (Shi et al., 2019; Tuerxun et al., 2020). Many studies have reported that emotional fatigue is associated with limited access to familiar Chinese cuisine and intense academic workloads (Wei & Chang, 2022; Zheng et al., 2025). Environmental factors such as heat and humidity are aggravating stressors in Malaysia (Wei & Chang, 2022; Yue et al., 2024).

Network analysis of a Malaysian survey revealed central and bridging symptoms linking anxiety and depression among Chinese student-athletes,

suggesting that affective risk may be structured through symptom interdependencies rather than isolated factors (Jing, Pa, & Awang, 2025). Digital engagement has emerged as a double-edged coping mechanism, as online information seeking and social interaction sometimes alleviate loneliness but can also intensify negative emotions when interactions highlight social distance or academic uncertainty (Zhao, 2025). Pandemic-related disruptions to campus routines, mobility, and access to healthcare further destabilize emotional regulation during reentry phases (Bantugan et al., 2024). Overall, these findings indicate that psychological distress among Chinese students in Southeast Asia arises not only from academic and language demands but also from social, cultural, environmental, and healthcare system factors within host countries.

### **Influencing Factors**

The dataset indicates four broad clusters of factors influencing mental health and well-being outcomes among Chinese international students in Southeast Asian EMI contexts: linguistic and academic competencies; social and family support; coping and personal psychological capital; and cultural, environmental, and structural conditions in host societies. Although analytically separated here for clarity, these domains interact to shape students' psychological experiences.

### **Language and academic communication competence**

Limitations in English proficiency and the ability to negotiate multilingual communication in EMI classrooms are associated with increased anxiety, lower academic confidence, and broader psychological distress (Chen et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2025; Zhang & Nimehchisalem, 2023). Presentation and speaking anxiety are particularly sensitive to perceived pronunciation gaps, difficulty comprehending accents, and fear of public errors (Zhang & Nimehchisalem, 2023; Zhang & Yik, 2024). Students who reported difficulty understanding local English varieties or code-switching patterns presented higher stress levels and lower self-confidence (Qi & Haladin, 2022; Yue et al., 2024). Evidence from Thailand indicates that high academic workloads further exacerbate stress when language-mediated academic readiness is weak (Cao et al., 2022; Chen, You, & Chen, 2018).

### **Social and family support**

Perceived emotional, informational, and instrumental support from peers, family members, and academic staff plays a critical role in alleviating psychological distress and promoting well-being (Li et al., 2021; Zhao, 2025). Students who maintain regular contact with family or develop close-knit international peer networks report lower homesickness and fewer mood disturbances; however, such clustering sometimes limits engagement with host cultures (Gan & Yuen Ling, 2019; Nasirudeen & Josephine, 2015). Digital interactions also emerged as important coping resources. Evidence from Malaysia suggests that information-seeking and socially oriented use of social media can buffer negative emotions,

although the potential risks of overreliance on mediated communication remain underexplored (Zhao, 2025).

### **Coping capacity, self-efficacy, and psychological capital**

Students with higher efficacy beliefs, adaptive emotion regulation, and resilience reported better mental health, even under comparable stress loads (Jiang, 2020; Li et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2024). Conversely, avoidance coping, reluctance to seek help, and silence in the face of difficulty are associated with cumulative fatigue and discouragement (Chen & Yang, 2015; Chen, 2025; Zhang & Yik, 2024). Evidence also indicates that anxiety can be reduced as confidence improves, for example through repeated practice in academic presentations, underscoring the potential for skill-based interventions to mitigate distress (Zhang & Yik, 2024).

### **Cultural, environmental, and structural moderators**

The religious context, food systems, and broader living conditions further shape psychological trajectories. Chinese Muslim and non-Muslim students in Malaysian Islamic contexts reported homesickness, loneliness, and anxiety related to language barriers, religious practice, and financial strain (Shi et al., 2019; Tuerxun et al., 2020). Negative prior exposure to Islamic countries predicts subsequent emotional resistance during adaptation, demonstrating that prior experience is not uniformly protective (Shi et al., 2019). Cultural shock phases, particularly in Singapore, produce transient spikes in homesickness and depressed mood (Chen & Yang, 2015). In Thailand, access to familiar cuisine and relief from climate discomfort are salient factors in stress experiences (Wei & Chang, 2022). Early-stage misinterpretation of host norms combined with limited psychological resources further intensifies stress in Malaysian settings (Yue et al., 2024). Hence, psychological outcomes rarely result from a single factor. Cumulative burdens across linguistic, sociocultural, and structural domains provide a more accurate explanation for variations in distress and well-being, although few studies have statistically modeled these interactions.

### **Theoretical frameworks and methodological gaps**

Theoretical application is uneven across studies. Some studies have adopted the Diathesis–Stress Model (Cao et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021), the Cognitive Triad Model (Chen et al., 2021), the U-Curve Hypothesis (Chen & Yang, 2015; Tuerxun et al., 2020), the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Li et al., 2021), Self-Efficacy and Expectation Theories (Zhang & Yik, 2024), and Acculturation Theory (Zhao, 2025). However, many studies lack explicit conceptual grounding, and even when frameworks are cited, their integration into analysis is often superficial, limiting theory-driven interpretation.

Quantitative designs predominated (14 of 23 studies), typically relying on single-time-point measurements. Only one study included longitudinal tracking of psychological well-being (Jiang, 2020). Three studies applied mixed methods designs to enrich the understanding of anxiety and stress processes, although their duration was limited (Wei & Chang, 2022; Zhang & Nimehchisalem, 2023; Zhang & Yik, 2024). Qualitative studies have provided culturally specific insights into

homesickness, shame, and religious disharmony (Bantugan et al., 2024; Chen & Yang, 2015; Zheng et al., 2025), but the sample sizes have been small, single-point, and lack systematic triangulation (Chen, 2025; Tuerxun et al., 2020).

The measurement rigor was inconsistent. Some large-scale surveys have applied confirmatory factor analysis or structural modeling (Cao et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2025; Yue et al., 2024; Zhao, 2025), and one study employed partial least squares structural equation modeling to examine mediation by resilience and spirituality (Li et al., 2021). Regression and group comparison approaches are common but often lack measurement invariance checks across academic stages or gender (Chen et al., 2021; Gan & Yuen Ling, 2019). Innovative analytics, such as symptom network analysis among student athletes (Jing et al., 2025) and multivariate logistic models linking resilience and living arrangements to pandemic-related distress (Ching et al., 2023), are rare. Cultural adaptation of instruments for Chinese students in Southeast Asia has frequently been undocumented, and construct labeling has been inconsistent (e.g., psychological health and life satisfaction have been used interchangeably) (Qi & Haladin, 2022; Weidi & JeeChing, 2023). In multiethnic samples, Chinese participants are often not analyzed separately, and measurement equivalence is unreported, limiting interpretability (Ching et al., 2023; Gan & Yuen Ling, 2019; Nasirudeen & Josephine, 2015).

The sample size and generalizability were limited. Most studies were conducted in Malaysia, followed by Thailand, with minimal evidence from Singapore and the Philippines (Bantugan et al., 2024; Chen & Yang, 2015). Large multiethnic surveys rarely provide subgroup analyses to isolate Chinese-specific outcomes (Ching et al., 2023; Gan & Yuen Ling, 2019; Nasirudeen & Josephine, 2015). Small qualitative studies offered depth but lacked statistical power, with a median sample size of approximately 220, ranging from 6--1,000. Geographically, 14 of the 23 studies were conducted in Malaysia, six in Thailand, and only a few in Singapore and the Philippines, limiting their generalizability to under-researched contexts such as Brunei, Indonesia, and Vietnam (Bantugan et al., 2024; Chen & Yang, 2015).

Future research should prioritize multisite, longitudinal, theory-driven studies that integrate culturally validated psychological measures with contextual data on language policy, religious practice, and student services. Without such advances, institutional interventions addressing mental health risks in Southeast Asian EMI settings will remain underinformed.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this review indicate that the psychological vulnerability of Chinese international students in Southeast Asia's EMI context results from a complex interplay of academic, sociocultural, and structural stressors. This configuration distinguishes the region from Western and Anglophone settings, which have dominated research on international student mental health. Studies in the United States, Australia, and Europe consistently highlight language barriers, academic workload, and discrimination as primary sources of psychological stress

among international students (Dovchin, 2020; Park et al., 2017). While similar challenges have been observed in Southeast Asia, additional region-specific stressors have emerged from its multicultural and religiously diverse environment. Halal dietary practices, gendered social norms, and tropical climate discomfort have been identified as persistent stressors in Malaysia and Thailand (Shi et al., 2019; Wei & Chang, 2022). These factors are rarely discussed in the Western-focused literature, suggesting that existing theories of psychological adaptation developed in Euro-American contexts do not fully capture the influence of environmental and religious-cultural conditions on acculturation in Southeast Asia.

The evidence further suggests that sociocultural comfort does not automatically lead to psychological well-being. In Western contexts, integration is often associated with better mental health, enhanced sociocultural competence, and overall well-being (Hui et al., 2015; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Some Chinese students in Southeast Asia show integration tendencies, particularly when supported by peer networks and improved language skills (Li et al., 2021; Zhao, 2025). However, opportunities for genuine integration are frequently constrained by structural and cultural barriers. Studies in Thailand, for example, indicate that students who adapt socially still report depressive symptoms when faced with high academic workload and performance pressure (Chen et al., 2021; Chen, You, & Chen, 2018). In Malaysia, students reported discomfort related to dietary restrictions and gendered social norms in Islamic contexts (Tuerxun et al., 2020). Unlike in Western settings, where separation is often a voluntary cultural strategy, in Southeast Asia, separation can be shaped by institutional and religious conditions. Consequently, acculturation strategies among Chinese students in this region are strongly influenced by structural constraints rather than purely individual choices.

Furthermore, the assumption that sociocultural adaptation predicts psychological well-being was not consistently supported. In Thailand, students reporting sociocultural comfort continue to experience significant stress and depressive symptoms under heavy academic workloads (Chen et al., 2021; Chen, You, & Chen, 2018). These findings refine Berry's (1997) model by demonstrating that academic stress in EMI contexts acts as a structural moderator of acculturation outcomes. Adaptation strategies are influenced not only by individual preferences but also by institutional and educational conditions that constrain opportunities for integration.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping provides a dynamic perspective by focusing on how individuals appraise stressors and mobilize coping resources. Studies consistently show that students with greater resilience and self-efficacy experience better psychological outcomes despite similar stress exposure (Jiang, 2020; Yue et al., 2024). However, coping is often constrained by cultural norms that discourage help-seeking and encourage avoidance to protect personal and family reputation. Avoidance behaviors, such as remaining silent in class or refraining from seeking assistance, are common among Chinese students (Chen, 2025; Zhang & Yik, 2024). Although avoidance also occurs in Western contexts, its prevalence in Southeast Asia, where localized

English varieties and frequent code-switching heighten insecurity, indicates that coping theories must account for region-specific linguistic environments (Qi & Haladin, 2022; Yue et al., 2024). The evidence that repeated academic practice, such as presentation training, reduces anxiety (Zhang & Yik, 2024) highlights the potential for modifying stress appraisal. However, institutional interventions targeting these skill-based pathways remain limited.

Similarly, the role of social support networks is complex. Contact with family and close-knit Chinese peer groups helps reduce homesickness and emotional distress (Li et al., 2021; Zhao, 2025). However, excessive reliance on these networks can limit engagement with host communities and delay integrative adaptation, a pattern also reported in Singapore (Gan & Yuen Ling, 2019). Coping strategies that provide immediate relief may inadvertently perpetuate long-term acculturative stress.

This review also highlights the methodological and theoretical weaknesses in current Southeast Asian research. Although frameworks such as the Diathesis–Stress Model or Berry’s acculturation theory are frequently cited, they are often applied descriptively rather than analytically. Few studies have examined how structural factors, including national language policies, institutional support, or religious norms, mediate the relationship between acculturation strategies and psychological outcomes. The predominance of cross-sectional quantitative designs limits the understanding of temporal changes, although longitudinal evidence from Thailand suggests that psychological well-being fluctuates rather than follows a linear trajectory (Jiang, 2020). Inconsistent use of culturally validated measures further reduces comparability, with constructs such as psychological health and life satisfaction defined differently across studies (Qi & Haladin, 2022; Weidi & JeeChing, 2023). Compared with Western research, which increasingly employs structural equation modeling and network analysis to examine symptom interactions (Jing et al., 2025), studies in Southeast Asia remain methodologically conservative.

Overall, the findings suggest that individual-level models that focus solely on personal resources or acculturation preferences are insufficient to account for the psychological stress patterns observed in Southeast Asia. The evidence underscores the need for an integrated approach that incorporates cultural, institutional, and environmental factors. Future research should critically re-examine the theoretical assumptions and employ more rigorous methods. Without such advances, interventions aimed at improving mental health risk oversimplify the complex processes shaping psychological adaptation in Southeast Asia’s EMI context.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

This review underscores the imperative for contextually sensitive interventions in Southeast Asian EMI settings, where Chinese international students experience psychological stress influenced not only by academic and linguistic challenges but also by culturally specific factors such as religious norms, dietary practices, and environmental conditions. Universities should develop mental health services that address these unique stressors, including providing culturally diverse dining

options, orientation programs on local cultural and religious norms, and guidance for climate adaptation. Faculty training in inclusive communication is essential, as localized English varieties and frequent code switching can increase linguistic insecurity. Structured academic skill-building, such as presentation workshops and peer-assisted learning, could enhance students' self-efficacy and reduce avoidance coping behaviors.

Although social and family networks are protective against loneliness, they may inadvertently reinforce separationist tendencies if not paired with intercultural engagement. Universities should implement initiatives such as mentorship programs and collaborative activities that encourage meaningful interaction with host communities, thereby promoting integrative acculturation and long-term psychological well-being.

Future research should move beyond cross-sectional designs by adopting longitudinal and mixed methods approaches that capture temporal changes in adaptation. Such approaches are critical for refining stress-coping and acculturation models within Southeast Asia's distinct EMI contexts. Theoretical development should integrate ecological and structural perspectives into existing frameworks, recognizing that students' adaptation strategies are shaped by institutional and sociocultural constraints rather than individual choices alone. Furthermore, research should extend beyond Malaysia and Thailand to include underexplored countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Brunei, allowing cross-national comparisons that reflect the diversity of Southeast Asia's EMI environments.

By aligning institutional interventions with these empirically informed insights and promoting theory-driven, contextually grounded research, higher education stakeholders can more effectively support the psychological resilience, academic performance, and overall well-being of Chinese international students in the region.

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**APPENDIX**  
**Information about the selected articles**

Author/Year	Sample Characteristics	Focus	Theory	Research Design	Data Collection Methods	Analytic Method	Site	Main Findings
Bantugan et al., (2024)	N=12, Chinese students	Mental health	1. Integrating Ecological Systems Theory (EST), 2. Health Belief Model (HBM), 3. Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC)	A Qualitative Inquiry	Online inquiry	Not listed	Philippines	Chinese international students returning to face-to-face study in the Philippines reported ongoing concerns about COVID-19, mental health, lifestyle disruptions, and access to healthcare.
Cao, Lin, & Chen, (2022)	N=1000, Chinese students	Mental health disorders	Diathesis-Stress Model	Quantitative	Online questionnaires	1. Confirmatory factor analysis, 2. Linear Structural Relations (LISREL)	Thailand (three universities)	Chinese international students in Thailand experienced varying levels of mental health challenges after the pandemic, influenced by their length of stay, gender, and academic year.
Chen, (2025)	N=7, Chinese students	Emotional experience	Not listed	A narrative inquiry	Interviews	Thematic analysis	Malaysia (a public university)	Chinese international students in Malaysia's EMI programs experienced anxiety, insecurity, and

								disappointment due to language barriers, pedagogical practices, and academic unfamiliarity, with emotions of shame and concern about the social recognition of Southeast Asian degrees persisting after graduation.
Chen et al., (2021)	N=900, Chinese students	Mental health issues	1. Diathesis–Stress Model 2. Cognitive Triad Model	Quantitative	Online questionnaires	1. T test 2. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) 3. Regression analysis	Thailand (a private university)	International mainland Chinese college students in Thailand faced significant life adaptation and mental health challenges, particularly among female students, juniors, and those who had stayed for more than one year, with family and interpersonal relationships, emotions, and self-worth being key predictors of mental health disorders. Additionally, longer stays and lower adaptability were associated with increased risks of self-injury and depression
Chen & Yang, (2015)	N=21, Chinese students	Psychological stress	U-curve model	Qualitative	In-depth interviews	Conventional content analysis	Singapore	Chinese international students experienced significant negative emotions such as homesickness,

								anxiety, frustration, and depression after the initial honeymoon phase of arrival, particularly during the cultural shock stage.
Chen, You & Chen, (2018)	N=900, Chinese students	Mental health	Not listed	Quantitative	Questionnaires	1. Confirmatory factor analyses. 2. One-way ANOVA.	Thailand	Chinese international students reported low but present levels of mental health issues, with sophomores and juniors showing significantly higher levels of negative emotions than other academic groups, and longer stays in Thailand were associated with slightly worsened mental health despite better cross-cultural adaptation.
Ching et al., (2023)	N=302, Malay 161 (51.8%) Chinese 57 (18.3%) Indian 82 (26.4%) Others 11 (3.5%)	Psychological distress	Not listed	A cross-sectional study	Online questionnaires	1. Chi-square test 2. Multivariate logistic regression analysis	Malaysia (a public university)	Over 40% of medical students experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety, and nearly one-third reported stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher resilience, better quality of life, older age, and living at home were linked to lower levels of psychological distress

Gan & Yuen Ling, (2019)	N=149, Malay 70 (47%) Chinese 72 (48.3%) Indians 7 (4.7%)	Anxiety and depression	Not listed	A cross-sectional study	Questionnaires	1. Chi-square or t test 2. Multiple linear regression analysis	Malaysia (a public university)	A significant proportion of Malaysian senior medical students experienced symptoms of anxiety (33%) and depression (11%), which were associated with lower quality of life (QOL) scores across multiple domains. Ethnicity, depression, and anxiety symptoms significantly predicted lower QOL, particularly in psychological, social, and environmental aspects
Jiang, (2020)	N=95, Chinese students	Psychological Well-being	Academic self-efficacy	A longitudinal design	Questionnaires	1. Descriptive Statistics, 2. Correlation Analysis.	Thailand	Chinese international students in Thailand experienced moderately high academic stress and relatively low academic self-efficacy at the beginning of their studies, which may reflect early-stage adjustment challenges.
Jing, Pa & Awang, (2025).	N=219, Chinese students	Anxiety and depression	Not listed	A cross-sectional study	Questionnaires	1. Network analysis. 2. Correlation analysis. 3. Descriptive Statistics.	Malaysia	Chinese international student-athletes commonly experienced negative emotional symptoms such as nervousness, guilt, and sleep problems, which emerged as central or bridging symptoms in the anxiety-depression network.

Li et al. (2021)	N=300, Chinese students	Psychological well-being	Transactional Theory (Lazarus, 1991)	Quantitative	Questionnaires	The partial least square structural equation modeling (PLSSEM) technique	A public university	Perceived social support significantly enhances psychological well-being by reducing stress, with resiliency and spirituality acting as partial mediators that strengthen students' internal coping capacity and emotional stability in English-medium academic environments.
Nasirudeen & Josephine, (2015)	N=392 Cambodia 1 (0.28%) China 221 (62.1%) India 2 (0.56%) Indonesia 2 (0.56%) Malaysia 73 (20.5) Myanmar 53 (14.8) Nepal 1 (0.28) Vietnam 3 (0.84)	Acculturative stress	Not listed	A cross-sectional, quantitative research design	Questionnaires	1. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) 2. Pearson bivariate correlation analysis. 3. Descriptive statistics	Singapore	Chinese and Myanmar international students reported higher levels of acculturative stress, including culture shock, perceived discrimination, and perceived hate, compared to Malaysian students. Additionally, students with lower English proficiency, limited financial resources, and shorter stays in Singapore experienced more intense homesickness and emotional distress.
Qi & Haladin (2022).	N=239, Chinese students	Psychology health	Not listed	Quantitative	Questionnaires	1. Regression analysis. 2. Mahala Nobis' distance.	Three universities	Chinese international students exhibited relatively low levels of psychological positive psychology health, with limited language

								competence contributing to negative emotional states such as low self-acceptance and confidence.
Shi et al. (2019)	N=200, Chinese students	Psychological adaptation	Not listed	Cross-sectional survey	Questionnaires	Regression analysis	A public university	Prior experience in Islamic countries had a significant negative impact on Chinese students, suggesting that negative past experiences may evoke emotional discomfort or resistance during the adaptation process.
Tuerxun et al. (2020)	N=6, Chinese students	Psychological adjustment	The U-Curve Hypothesis (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 2003)	Qualitative	Semistructured interviews	Three C's of Analysis	Three universities and colleges	Chinese-Muslim international students in Malaysia experienced notable negative emotions, including homesickness, loneliness, anxiety, and academic stress, primarily stemming from language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, and financial strain.
Wei & Chang, (2022)	N=378, Chinese students	Stress level	Not listed	A mixed method	Semistructured interviews and questionnaires	1. Descriptive Statistics 2. Thematic Coding	Thailand	Chinese graduate students in Thailand experienced a notably high level of stress, with the most significant emotional strain stemming from limited access to Chinese cuisine and heavy academic workloads.

Weidi & JeeChing (2023)	N=490, Chinese students	Life satisfaction	Not listed	Quantitative	Questionnaires	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Composite reliability.</li> <li>2. Average variance extracted value.</li> <li>3. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values.</li> </ol>	Malaysia (twelve universities)	While most Chinese university students in Malaysia reported high life satisfaction, a minority experienced moderate to low satisfaction, which was associated with elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and limited use of emotion regulation strategies.
Xu et al., (2025)	N = 300, Chinese students	Emotional expression	Not listed	Quantitative	Questionnaires	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Exploratory factor analysis,</li> <li>2. Confirmatory factor analysis</li> </ol>	Malaysia (a public university)	Chinese international students often associated generalized emotional intensity with negative experiences such as anxiety, homesickness, and emotional regulation challenges, particularly when emotional expressions lacked specific context.
Yue et al. (2024)	N=100, Chinese students	Psychological resources	Social cognitive model	Quantitative	Questionnaires	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Demographic evaluation.</li> <li>2. KMO and Bartlett's test.</li> <li>3. Descriptive statistics.</li> <li>4. Regression analysis.</li> </ol>	Malaysia	Chinese international students in Malaysia experienced psychological challenges such as stress and cultural misunderstanding during their adaptation, particularly in the early stages.

						5. Correlation analysis.		
Zhang, & Nimechisalem, (2023)	N=50, Chinese students	Speaking Anxiety	Not listed	An explanatory mixed study	Questionnaires and semistructured interviews	1. Independent samples T Test. 2. Descriptive and inferential statistics 3. Thematic analysis	Malaysia (a public university)	Chinese students experienced significantly higher levels of speaking anxiety in face-to-face classes than in online settings, primarily due to fear of face-to-face communication, peer pressure, and environmental changes. Negative emotions such as embarrassment, nervousness, and fear were intensified by being the center of attention, sudden shifts in study environments, and unfamiliarity with using English in public.
Zhang & Yik, (2024)	N=21, Chinese students	Presentation Anxiety	1. Self-efficacy theory 2. Expectation theory	A mixed-methods approach	Semistructured interviews and questionnaires	Not listed	Malaysia (a public university)	The majority of Chinese international students experienced significant public speaking anxiety, as evidenced by stuttering, hand tremors, overuse of filler words, and heavy reliance on scripts. This anxiety creates both psychological and emotional barriers to effective academic communication.

Zhao, (2025)	N=438, Chinese students	Psychological adaptation	Acculturation theory	Quantitative	Online questionnaires	1. Descriptive and inferential analysis, 2. Correlation analysis, 3. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)	Malaysia	Negative emotions among Chinese international students in Malaysia were alleviated through social media use, particularly when motivated by information seeking and social connection.
Zheng et al., (2025)	N=40, Chinese students	Academic stress	Grounded theory	Qualitative	In person or online interviews	Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.	Thailand (two public universities)	Five major sources of academic adaptation stress among Chinese international students in Thailand: language adaptation, time management, student-teacher relationships, self-efficacy, and external expectations, with language adaptation stress emerging as the most significant. Master's students experienced greater stress related to language and time, while doctoral students faced higher pressure from role conflict and external expectations.