Article

Understanding Academic Performance Abroad: Family Background and Cultural Capital among Chinese Students in Japanese Higher Education

Ran Jiao
Ritsumeikan University, Japan

Orcid ID:0009-0009-6634-6043

ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the influence of family background on the academic performance of Chinese international students by following twenty-one students over two years and employing a case study approach that integrates interviews and observations. This research develops an analytical framework for understanding academic success abroad, drawing on the concepts of cultural capital and academic engagement. Using constructive grounded theory and thematic analysis, the study examines students' performance in three key areas: their ability to achieve high grades, their strategies for solving academic problems, and their classroom participation. The findings reveal that students from affluent families are more likely to draw on economic capital to address academic challenges and tend to express greater confidence in their views in class. However, students from working-class backgrounds rely more on independent reading to address academic questions and are more likely to remain passive in class rather than actively participating in discussions.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the number of Chinese students pursuing higher education abroad has grown rapidly, making them among the largest international student groups worldwide (Jiao, 2025). While previous research has examined linguistic challenges, cultural adjustment and institutional support as key factors in shaping the academic experiences of international students, the role of family background in shaping their academic performance has received less attention. This study examines how family background influences the academic performance and engagement strategies of first-generation Chinese international students at Japanese universities.

The importance of family background in education has long been recognized in sociological studies. Paul Willis (1978), in his survey of working-class youth in Britain, demonstrated how schools reproduce social inequality through a "counterschool culture". Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu, in the French context, highlighted how children of elites mobilize inherited cultural capital to maintain privilege. Together, these studies show that family origins exert a lasting influence on students' educational trajectories, enabling those from affluent families to achieve their aspirations while limiting opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schools have thus been understood as institutions that reproduce social stratification.

Research in educational sociology and higher education has further explored the influence of family origins. Studies consistently conclude that socioeconomic background and cultural capital play important roles in shaping students' academic performance during university life (Collins, 2019).

Chinese scholars have extended these insights to the context of domestic education (Lin, 2020; Li & Guo, 2021). Zheng Yajun (2023), for example, investigated outcome differentiation in two elite Chinese universities. Her findings show that students from affluent families tend to be goal-driven and adept at leveraging their cultural capital, whereas those from disadvantaged families often lack knowledge of the university system and struggle to develop cultural and social capital. Zheng concludes by identifying two distinct student groups, thereby illustrating how cultural capital and self-perception shape stratification in higher education. Her study reinforces the argument that education reproduces inequality through the mechanisms of social origin.

Building on this scholarship, the present study shifts the focus to Chinese students studying overseas, a group whose academic engagement remains underexplored. Existing studies of Chinese international students have primarily focused on their motivations for studying abroad and their destination choice patterns. However, little is known about how they navigate academic life once abroad or how family background influences this process.

This study addresses this question by focusing on first-generation Chinese international students in Japan, the third most popular destination for Chinese students (Centre for China and Globalization, n.d.). Japan is particularly relevant because of its cultural proximity to China, affordable tuition, and high recognition of Japanese qualifications in the Chinese labor market (Jiao, 2025). However, how

students from different family backgrounds engage academically during their studies in Japan, and the strategies they employ when encountering academic problems, remain unexplored.

By investigating these issues, the present study seeks to illuminate how family origin influences both academic performance and academic engagement strategies abroad. In doing so, it contributes to the literature on educational stratification, enriches the understanding of Chinese students' overseas experiences, and provides insights for educators and policymakers seeking to promote equitable academic integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarding whether family background influences higher education, functionalists typically argue that it has little or no effect on students' academic performance (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Bukodi et al., 2023). Mare (1980), Treiman and Yip (2016) believe that the standard for selecting talent in higher education is academic achievement rather than family background. Supporters of "social selection theory" believe that after students who have undergone multiple selections enroll in college, regardless of which class they come from, they will have strong homogeneity in academic performance, personal ambition, and comprehensive ability (Mayhew et al., 2016).

In contrast, the conflict theory of reproduction holds that family background continues to have an impact on the process of academic engagement. After examining the content and methods of instruction in schools and campus culture, European and American sociologists such as Bourdieu, Bernstein, and Parsons tend to argue that there is a clear class bias in schools (Greve, 2013; Parsons, 1991). The values and behavior patterns of the middle class are more in line with the school education process, whereas children from the lower or working class lack the corresponding cultural capital and thus are inferior in academics and nonacademic life (DiMaggio, 1997; Nash, 1990; Willis, 1978). This study suggests that students' family background continues to have an impact on their academic engagement in college.

This is why this study tends to hold the opinion of conflict theory. The Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) was one of the earliest large-scale studies to highlight that family background exerts a stronger influence on students' academic outcomes than schools or communities do. Since then, a series of empirical studies have consistently confirmed that socioeconomic status significantly shapes students' academic achievement (Peaker, 1971; White, 1980; Sirin, 2005; Cheadle, 2008).

Building on Coleman's findings, subsequent studies have sought to explain the mechanisms through which family background influences educational outcomes. Antonio Gramsci stated that studying is the process of adaptation; it is a behavior that students gain from their family (Mayo, 2008). Although his statement was originally from an empirical observation, it is true that family cultural practices alter children's academic performance at school.

Bourdieu (1989) developed his idea through the lens of symbolic power. He emphasized the cultural interconnection between school and family. According to the theory of cultural reproduction, he believes that family capital, such as language skills, awareness of culture, diet, and lifestyle, has a great influence on students' performance in educational institutions. Students from different social classes usually inherit different habits from their parents. Students from advantaged families are more likely to establish their network and extend their circle of friends in the school with financial support to participate in different social clubs and social activities, whereas students from disadvantaged families are usually eliminated from this social network because of the lack of financial support.

Alexander W. Astin, as a representative scholar, developed the theory of student participation in 1970 to illustrate how the learning experience, social engagement, academic achievement, and school activity are important components of student engagement in the school (Astin, 2014).

Similarly, Vincent Tinto proposed the student engagement theory in 1978. This theory posits that students experience a sense of separation when they enroll in university. They attempt to communicate with newcomers at the university, endeavor to mitigate distress in this new field, and will somehow incorporate the new value and action model into it. This process is reflected in two aspects: academic engagement and social engagement.

Academic engagement refers to students' acceptance of the school's normative requirements, such as earning credit and attending classes. Social engagement refers to students' coordination with the university's social environment. If students fail to experience the separate-engagement process, they will be unable to engage effectively in the university environment, leading to negative emotions.

Kuh (2009) also proposed a theory of student engagement. This theory suggests that the more time students devote to or participate in school-based educational events and activities, the more likely they are to achieve positive educational outcomes. His conclusion is somewhat similar to Astin's findings. Both scholars believe that school is a special field that can affect students.

This theoretical result also reflects Bourdieu's field theory. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, students from disadvantaged backgrounds have low investment and integration in school. Chinese researchers have also used Bourdieu's theory to study rural students at elite universities in Shanghai and have developed a similar theory: rural students are less well integrated into university life than urban students (Zheng, 2023). However, this result has also been criticized by sociologists and anthropologists because such research results will directly lead to the theoretical view that students' inability to integrate is entirely due to their different classes, while ignoring the examination of the students' own changes in the university field.

In short, three theoretical perspectives are particularly influential. Human capital theory argues that education constitutes an investment in human capital and that families' investment decisions are shaped by cost–benefit considerations. Owing to resource constraints, low-income families often underinvest in their

children's education, thereby negatively affecting their children's academic achievement (Becker, 1964). Cultural capital theory emphasizes how family cultural resources and dispositions shape children's educational expectations and performance. Families with abundant cultural capital tend to be more familiar with the rules of schooling and can provide richer educational resources, whereas families with limited cultural capital often struggle to support their children's academic development (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Social capital theory highlights the role of parental involvement and networks. Parents with high socioeconomic status are more likely to communicate with teachers and engage in their children's education, thereby enhancing their academic performance (Coleman, 1988).

However, when focusing on international students, the situation is somewhat different. Studies have suggested that most Chinese students who study abroad come from middle-class families rather than from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Martin, 2020; Jiao, 2024; Jiao 2025). While the gap between poor and affluent families is less visible among international students, significant differences still exist between middle-class and elite families. Elite families typically possess greater reserves of cultural and social capital, which they can mobilize to support their children's academic success abroad. Therefore, even in an overseas context, students from different class backgrounds may exhibit distinct academic trajectories.
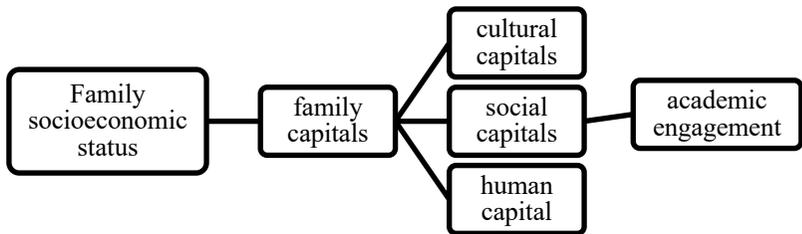

Figure 1 Analytical framework

To analyze how family background influences international students, this study draws on the concept of academic engagement as a central component of its analytical framework (see Figure 1).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs constructivism as the epistemological foundation and hermeneutics as its research methodology. Constructivism is a learning theory that emphasizes the active role of learners in building their own understanding. It is also an approach to learning in which individuals actively construct their knowledge through deep engagement (Elliott et al., 2000). Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation; its aim is to explore the meaning behind human intentions, beliefs, and actions. Thus, the present study employs a case study approach, using in-depth follow-up interviews as the primary research instrument (Gomm et al., 2009).

This research approach is adopted for two primary reasons. First, the follow-up study method serves to validate the authenticity of the interview content. Second, it facilitates the observation of changes interviewees undergo and the identification of the factors that influence their final decisions about their desired future and the kind of life they aspire to achieve.

Nevertheless, the case study method has long been criticized for its limitations in terms of generalizability and representativeness. Some scholars have argued that the purpose of conducting case study research is to collect personal stories. This is because these narratives are meaningful because macrolevel social developments are often reflected in individual experiences. Thus, by studying personal stories, the interviewer can gain insight into the process of social construction and social development. Case studies can contribute to the development of new social theories grounded in the lived experiences of individuals (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Gomm et al., 2009).

Selection of Interviewees

Regarding case selection, this study employs a group case study design and purposive sampling to recruit interviewees. The selection process specifically targets individuals from a research group who consented to participate in a short-term follow-up study.

In addition, this research focuses on students pursuing master's degrees because enrolling in a master's program is considerably more challenging, time-intensive, and academically demanding. As a result, they are more likely to establish clear academic goals before their studies commence and to make decisions based on a thorough evaluation throughout their academic studies (Lin, 2020).

The recruitment process for interviewees began by establishing contacts with professors at University M, as gaining access to classrooms and attending classes with interviewees required the instructors' consent. With the assistance of professors, twenty-three graduate students in the social sciences were successfully recruited. However, during follow-up observations, the interviewer discovered that two of the graduate students rarely attended classes and expressed a negative attitude toward participating in interviews. Therefore, the interviewer decided to remove them from the interviewee list. Ultimately, the study selected 21

interviewees: 12 female students, labeled F1-F12, and 9 male students, labeled M1-M9.

Data collection process

This study adopts a longitudinal approach, maintaining contact with participants from enrollment through graduation. The interviewees were contacted bimonthly for brief conversations about their school life. In addition to conducting individual interviews, the study included group interviews to capture participants' shared experiences and collective reflections. The group interviews were conducted as bimonthly focus group discussions. The interviewees were divided into four groups (Groups A to D) according to the alphabetical order of their family names. Each group comprised five interviewees, except Group D, which comprised six members. During the group interviews, the interviewees were invited to share their experiences in academic life, daily life, and the challenges they encountered during their studies. These sessions provided a forum for students to engage in collaborative reflection and to exchange insights on prevalent issues and coping strategies. The combination of individual and group interviews facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of their university experiences and academic engagement strategies.

In addition to conducting interviews, this study employs intensive observations as part of the research process, including classroom observations, observations of school life, interactions during leisure activities, and informal chatting during class breaks, to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees. A total of twenty-one interviewees from University M were observed over a brief yet intensive period, during which the interviewer was immersed in the daily lives of the interviewees, learning and working alongside each interviewee in their respective roles. This immersive approach was adopted to facilitate a nuanced understanding of the interviewees' experiences at university. The study culminated in recorded interviews with each individual to ensure a comprehensive integration of observational and interview data.

Interview Process

A semistructured interview was used to conduct the in-depth interviews. To explore more background stories and their engagement processes at University M, this study uses progressive focusing as the method for collecting individual stories. The progressive focus starts with general profile information collection and, through the data collection process, allows for a more detailed description of their personal stories in the host country for further analysis (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Creswell et al., 2007).

There are two types of interviews: an individual interview involves two interlocutors, including the interviewer and the interviewee. For this type of interview, the interviewer aims to understand the interviewee's personal life story, including their school education, private life experiences, personal attitudes toward studying overseas, and opinions on their parents' role in cultivating them

to become a student overseas. This type of interview takes place in the research office or a place that has no interruptions from outside. Both the interviewer and the interviewees can focus on their questions and answers. Interviewers can easily follow interviewees' answers and comment on their reactions through their verbal responses.

The second type of interview is a group discussion that is conducted after thematic analysis. Interviewees who share common behavioral patterns will be grouped. The interviewer will invite different groups of interviewees to meet for afternoon tea, either in a café or in the university lounge. This type of interview aims to explore comparisons between different groups and encourage interviewees to express their opinions about other groups. This process is more likely to resemble a casual discussion, as it includes many personal opinions, including prejudiced views toward other groups. This type of interview will be recorded on a password-protected hard drive.

In-class observation

During the in-class observations, the interviewer attended the seminar alongside the interviewees but remained a passive observer, refraining from any interaction during the lessons. The interviewer focused on documenting the interviewees' behaviors in class, recording their actions from two perspectives: first, whether they actively participated in class discussions, and second, their general behavior during the seminar, including phone use and posture.

The interviewer adopted a nonparticipatory observation approach and did not interact with the interviewees during the seminar. To minimize discomfort and avoid influencing interviewees' natural behaviors, the interviewer sat at the back of the classroom and refrained from offering any suggestions or evaluations regarding interviewees' class participation. Additionally, the interviewer remained silent throughout the seminar and did not respond when the interviewee asked about their classroom performance.

In addition to taking notes, the interviewer also recorded short video clips of the interviewees' interactions with the professor. These short videos were securely stored on a password-protected hard disk and were used exclusively for analysis.

Data Analysis

All the recordings were transcribed via the voice recognition software iFLY tech. The first few sentences of each interview, with small talk and personal chat such as greetings, warm-up sentences, etc., have been omitted, as they are not relevant to the research. Additionally, fillers such as "um," "oh," "ah,", etc., have been omitted for better readability.

Thematic coding was used as the analytical method; it is widely employed in qualitative analysis to identify patterns and develop theories, even across diverse subjects (Williams & Moser, 2019). There were three phases in data interpretation. The first phase of data analysis was open coding (see Table 1). In this initial stage, all transcripts were analyzed line by line, and each line was

labeled with an open code to describe its main idea. The second phase involved categorizing the open coding. During this procedure, all open codes are categorized based on their similarities to generate a common pattern across hundreds of open codes. In the final phase, themes were extracted from different categories. The analysis aimed to align the interpretation as closely as possible with the interviewees' responses.

The second phase involved categorizing the open coding. During this procedure, all open codes are categorized based on their similarities to generate a common pattern across hundreds of open codes.

In the final phase, themes were extracted from different categories. The analysis aimed to align the interpretation as closely as possible with the interviewees' responses. Therefore, constructivist grounded theory was used to elaborate on the themes that emerged from the qualitative data (Charmaz,2017; Glaser et al., 1968; Strauss, 1987).

Table 1: Sample of Data Analysis

Manuscript	Open Coding	Category	Theme
M2: For me, the most important part of studying is getting good grades. If I want to apply for a PhD, I have to keep my academic record strong. Luckily, all my grades thus far in graduate school are A's, and honestly, I do not think it is that difficult to get straight A's here.	Good grades PhD Record A	Maintain good grades	Grades

RESULTS

This section aims to present interviewees' attitudes toward academic studies at University M and their strategies for solving problems encountered during their studies. It subsequently presents the results of in-class observations on how Chinese students perform during class. Finally, the strategies interviewees use when encountering academic problems at University M are discussed.

Academic Performance and Engagement

This section aims to discuss the interviewees' attitudes toward academic grades at the university. Additionally, it explores different strategies and learning tools to maintain academic records.

Studying with Pleasure: Trying to Seek Help from Others

When M8 started his graduate studies in Japan, he did not have clear prospects for his future, followed the graduate school curriculum and actively participated in different courses at the college. He stated in the interview that "grades mean everything for a student."

M8: I do not know what I will do after receiving this Master's degree because I cannot control the future. However, the only thing I can control is my grades. Writing essays and actively participating in class discussions are easier for me than achieving high scores on written exams. As a Chinese student, I care deeply about my academic performance, and I am willing to do whatever it takes to maintain good grades on my transcript.

M8 mentioned the phrase "grades are everything" four times during his interview. He used his school experience as an example to demonstrate the importance of achieving good grades. For Chinese students, studying is not an enjoyable process of learning new skills; it is regarded as an assessment mechanism that involves evaluating a student's academic performance through test-taking. The results of each examination determine a student's academic ranking in the classroom. Students are labeled on the basis of their grades as either "good" or "bad" students and are treated differently by others as a result. This means that students with high grades tend to enjoy greater reputations among peers and receive more preferential support from schoolteachers.

M8 is not the only interviewee who emphasized the importance of academic performance at university. M2 expressed a similar view when discussing the value of maintaining good grades.

M2: For me, the most important part of studying is getting good grades. If I want to apply for a PhD, I have to keep my academic record strong. Luckily, all my grades thus far in graduate school are A's, and honestly, I do not think it is that difficult to get straight A's here. Compared with the Chinese education system, the professors here are more generous in regard to grading. In addition to that, I sometimes pay for online proofreading services to get more professional feedback on my papers. They are not cheap, but I can afford it, and I think it's worth it if it helps me keep up with my grades.

M2 made a concerted effort to maintain strong academic performance. He frequently sought support from the university's writing tutorial sessions and proactively paid for online proofreading services. He considered the investment in these services to be worthwhile to ensure high grades in his academic work. M2 provided a receipt during the interview that showed the cost of proofreading one assignment. The fee was approximately 900 RMB for a 3000-word paper. He explained that the price varies depending on the type of assignment, and he selected the standard service for his term papers. Additionally, M2 mentioned that he had recommended this proofreading service to other interviewees, and M8 later confirmed that he had used the service to proofread his Master's thesis before submission.

Previous studies by Li Chunling, Guo Yaping (2021), and Zhao Bihua (2011) examined the effectiveness of social origins on educational achievement. Their

results show that the mechanism of cultural reproduction has a significant influence on students from less prestigious universities, whereas its impact is less pronounced on students from elite and vocational colleges. The cases from this study also reflect that interviewees with a wealthy family background have more advantages and greater possibilities of achieving better academic performance at university.

Proofreading services were not the only popular method among the interviewees. The other common strategy for these interviewees was to consult online resources to obtain the academic information they needed. F3 mentioned in the interview that she subscribes to some paid accounts and purchases academic tools, such as translation software, to help her maintain her academic performance.

F3: I like to use Xiaohongshu[1] because I can find many articles related to my study topics. Some people provide guidance on reading papers, whereas others summarize academic tools, which saves me much reading time. I use a translator to read complicated, long articles. I do not think it is necessary to force myself to read in a language I do not fully understand. Chinese is the language I am most familiar with, and doing academic work in my native language is much faster than using English or Japanese.

Chinese scholars such as Cui Zhisong (2024) and Liu Zetong (2022) have discussed the relationship between academic achievement and students' academic performance in the digital era. The results revealed that internet browsing has a double-edged sword effect. From a positive perspective, internet browsing can effectively relieve academic pressure and provide a means of psychological adjustment. Moreover, through its information retrieval function, students can obtain professional knowledge related to their personal interests, while the algorithm-based personalized recommendation system creates a continuous supply of knowledge, thereby expanding the dimension of learning and enhancing their cognitive level. This digital learning model not only enriches the traditional form of education but also provides new possibilities for independent learning.

F3 is a representative case in this study, demonstrating a great interest in browsing the internet and conducting independent learning through online recommendations. Although she considers maintaining academic performance a central concern in the continuous learning process, F3 does not limit herself to the traditional passive mode of learning. Instead, she demonstrates significant instrumental learning strategies, effectively integrating and utilizing a wide range of learning resources to optimize the effectiveness of her learning. She voluntarily used a translator to read long texts, which is a typical technology-mediated cultural tool that complements her own language deficiencies. F3 explicitly stated that she pursued "good grades" to "have the opportunity to apply for a PhD" and

---

[1] Xiaohongshu (little red book) is a platform where users can share their life, diary, personal experiences, and short videos. It combines elements of Instagram, allowing users to build communities through visually contents.

to be "prepared" even if she did not pursue a PhD in the future. Her learning strategy was not motivated by academic interest or challenge but rather was based on opportunity rationality.

In Japanese culture, there is a distinct Senpai–Kohai (senior–junior) relationship, which dictates that juniors in schools must show great respect to their seniors and follow their instructions without question. In contrast, this *Senpai–Kohai* dynamic is absent in Chinese schools. While younger students in China may address older students as "senior" or "senior sister/brother," this does not entail the same level of deference or submissiveness seen in Japanese campus culture. Most interviewees were aware of this cultural norm upon entering Japanese campuses, and their professors often emphasized and reinforced this *Senpai–Khai* relationship during classes, encouraging juniors to show respect toward their seniors.

F3: I met my *senpai* in 2021. She is a doctoral student, and we have a good relationship outside of school. We often go to restaurants together, celebrate festivals together, and I even invite her over to my apartment for dinner. Recently, I even went on a trip with my *senpai*.

F3 mentioned in the interview that she often spends time with her *senpai*, who is a doctoral student. She frequently discusses academic questions with her *senpai,* and she learns a lot from her *senpai* during each conversation.

For F3, when she encounters problems in her studies that cannot be resolved through online resources, she turns to her *senpai* for guidance and believes in reciprocating by offering something in return, such as treating them to a meal. F6 employs a similar strategy to F3's, stating, "I think if I ask my *senpai* for help, I buy my *senpai* a cup of coffee." Both F3 and F6 adapted to the *Senpai-Kohai* culture and even integrated it into their daily routines after enrolling in the university. In their interviews, they expressed that this cultural pattern brought them significant care and support from their seniors, highlighting the benefits they gained through these relationships. F3 and F6 are not the only ones who directly turn to their *senpai* for help when facing problems. Most opportunity-following interviewees adopt similar strategies. M1 stated, "If my *senpai* is busy with his work, I would turn to online inquiry or consult academic professionals, but these services are not free, I have to pay for them". F3 activated the cultural tool of interpersonal relationships during her study overseas; her understanding of intellectual help is not defined exclusively in terms of utilitarianism or institutional mentorship but is internalized in the logic of the value of "exchange of knowledge for knowledge". F3's understanding of academic assistance is not limited to institutionalized forms such as official mentorship or formal tutoring. Instead, she views help as being embedded within a relational ethic of mutual exchange.

In addition, they occasionally display a sense of fear toward their professors. Although their professors are friendly and willing to help, they approach their professors with great caution when asking questions. Additionally, they often give presents to their professors during holidays, considering it a habit. Their behavior also aligns with Chinese cultural values, where students are expected to show respect to their supervisors.

However, another group of interviewees demonstrated difficulty maintaining academic records during the interviews; they mentioned that studying abroad is stressful and that it is difficult for them to maintain their academic performance.

Struggling with Studying

F11 feels that adapting to academic learning in Japan is a challenge for her. One reason is that Chinese examinations are based on objective questions, such as multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions. High school teachers grade exam papers using standard answers, and students receive their final exam results based on the exact number of correct answers. Therefore, students must memorize everything before they take the exam. However, the social science department at University M uses a more subjective grading method. There are no standard answers to these exams. Students are encouraged to express their own ideas in their final academic writing and in-class presentations.

F11: It was quite different from what I had experienced at a Chinese university. This Japanese university does not have written exams with standard answers. Professors in our program assess our academic performance through essay writing, in-class presentations, and discussions. I had not taken any formal academic writing lessons before I came here, so I needed to spend more time learning academic writing, research methods, citation styles, and how to find academic papers online. I found this a bit difficult. I do not like bothering my classmates, and I prefer to explore the answers by myself. I read some posts on Xiaohongshu and WeChat subscription accounts, where many people share tips online and teach how to conduct research. I also prefer to explore the answers through reading books and articles.

Although Chinese students learn how to write an essay at the undergraduate level, they have not learned how to write an academic paper in English. This means that they cannot compose sufficient tools to help them deal with this academic challenge at University M. They need to spend more time on self-learning and attending classes to compensate for the gaps in academic training when studying in Japan. F11 candidly acknowledged her initial struggle with the Japanese academic system. Compared with the Chinese university evaluation system, which emphasizes standardized answers and uniform testing, the Japanese context demands greater individual research ability and expressive competence. This shift rendered her previous learning strategies ineffective, prompting her to actively seek new strategies that could bridge the gap. M9 used a similar strategy when facing academic challenges in his studies in Japan.

M9: I did not know what coding in qualitative research was, as I had not learned it during my undergraduate studies. Therefore, I borrowed some books from the library and went through the book in a month. It was quite enjoyable to learn something new, although it was time-consuming.

M9 considered the library a primary resource for overcoming academic challenges in his studies. Both M9 and F11 tended to spend more time in the library, preferring to read books from cover to cover. They believed that this approach allowed them to broaden their knowledge and gain deeper insights into

their academic fields. In addition to going to the library regularly and reading books to pursue knowledge related to academic learning, they had a loose connection with their *senpai* and academic supervisors.

M5 is a hard-working student who actively participates in class discussions and shows no fear in discussing his ideas with his professors at graduate school. He seems to prefer asking his supervisors and fellow students for help. However, M5 mentioned during the interview, "Although I ask my *senpai* some general research questions, I do not expect to receive clear answers from them. We have different research interests. I just need someone to lead me to the door, and I will start reading on my own." M5 expressed his passion for research and stated that he would like to spend more time in the library. M5 demonstrates strong self-esteem and does not want his professors to be disappointed in him because of his academic performance. F5, F11, and M9 demonstrate similar levels of self-esteem in their studies. They intend to put more effort into after-class learning and to prove that they can perform better in academic studies.

In-class performance

During the interviews, the interviewees actively participated in class discussions, which contrasts with the findings of Zhu Haiping and Helen O'Sullivan (2022), who concluded that Chinese international students often remain silent during class discussions. In this study, the interviewees demonstrated different levels of classroom participation. This section presents the findings of the data analysis of in-class observations.

Actively Engaged

During the classroom observations, a recurring pattern known as the "no cold field strategy" phenomenon was identified. This phenomenon refers to situations where when classroom discussions fall into silence, certain interviewees choose to speak up to maintain engagement and ensure that the conversation continues (Zhou et al., 2005). However, despite their active participation in discussions, these interviewees rarely initiate questions on their own.

F3: I worked as a teaching assistant during my undergraduate studies, and I would feel uncomfortable if no students participated in the discussion. That is why I wanted to speak up, even though I was actually very nervous. After all, there were times when the professor asked questions that I could not fully answer, but I still thought it was better to say something rather than staying completely silent.

F3's experience as a teaching assistant gave her a unique cultural tool to use in class participation. Since she had taken on a teaching role in the college, she could not be afraid to speak in front of others. In a post-class interview, she explained why she was willing to speak up even when she could not answer questions perfectly: "My dad kind of intentionally trained me to speak in public. Every year at his company's annual gala, he would set me up to perform in a show or something, so I just got used to it." F3 also mentioned in the interview that she

always brings her laptop to class and looks up the questions her professors ask so she can respond more confidently. M4 actively participated in class and made an effort to answer questions when the class was quiet.

M4: I just do not like the feeling when no one is talking. I do not want to reinforce the stereotype that Chinese students are introverted and do not like to speak. My father also encouraged me to talk in public. I am not afraid to make mistakes.

During the interviews, M4 often aligned his behavior with that of other Chinese students, seeing himself as part of a collective cultural identity. F7 also agreed with M4's opinion and positively participated in group discussions.

F7: I am here to learn, and if I do not understand something, I have to ask. Back at my previous university, I had access to multiple support systems, whether it was consulting my academic counsellor, reaching out to the class president, or simply turning to my three roommates in our shared dormitory whenever I needed clarification.

F7 frequently mentioned words such as "counsellor" and "roommate" during the interviews. Although University M offers academic counseling programs, there is no specific counsellor available to directly assist students with their problems. Since Japanese universities rarely provide dormitories, students are required to rent apartments, where the typical arrangement is one person per room. As a result, F7's familiar strategies could not help her adapt quickly to the new campus life, and the professor became the only person she could turn to. F9 also maintains a positive attitude toward answering questions. During the interview, she mentioned that while studying at a university in China, she served on the publicity committee and was skilled at communicating with others, which made her unafraid to speak in front of crowds.

Through in-class observations, it was found that interviewees F3, F7, F9, and M4 not only actively participated in classroom discussions but also consistently sought to demonstrate their engagement, as many of them had prior experience speaking in public and were accustomed to expressing their opinions in front of others. Although their initial lack of academic strategies limited their ability to respond effectively to questions, they gradually became more capable of contributing to discussions as they expanded their toolkits through readings and deepened their understanding of the subject matter.

Negatively Engaged

F2, F5, and F6 are highly engaged in taking notes and participating in class-related activities but are reluctant to speak up during discussions. They often bring their laptops to class and use speech-to-text software to transcribe the professor's lectures.

F5 was not very active in class discussions. She explained that she felt uncomfortable speaking in front of others: "I am a bit introverted. Although my high school teacher asked me to serve as the math class representative, my role was limited to collecting homework. I do not enjoy being in the spotlight too much."

The phrase "not enjoying being in the spotlight" was not only mentioned by F5 but also appeared in M6's responses. The working-class interviewees tended to remain silent and participated only in class discussions when directly called upon by the professor. M6 explained his reluctance to speak in class: "Perhaps it is because, since childhood, I was taught to raise my hand to answer questions rather than actively ask them. I was considered a 'good boy,' and as a good boy, I was expected to be quiet and focus on completing my homework diligently."

M6 used the term "good boy" to describe his behavior in class. During a group discussion, F5 agreed with M6's perspective, whereas F10 and F11 shared similar experiences in their interviews. F10 explained, "When I enrolled in the primary school, my mom told me that I should follow the teacher's instruction and avoid speaking out of turn in class, and my teachers emphasized the same idea at the first session at school. I became used to it and did not want to draw too much attention to myself."

However, another group of interviewees disengaged from in-class participation and avoided class discussions altogether. M3 was one such example. He never brought a laptop to class and rarely took notes during lectures. During the classroom observations, M3 was often seen using his phone while passively listening to the lecture. In the interview, M3 explained that he had little interest in studying.

F2, F5, F6, M3 and M6 are less likely to take the initiative to speak in class. Although they are all capable of actively expressing their opinions, their family background discourages them from actively participating in classroom discussions. They tend to adopt the roles of "good boys" and "good students," preferring to remain quiet rather than speak up voluntarily. This behavior is deeply rooted in their previous school experiences, where students are encouraged to be attentive listeners rather than active speakers. In East Asian educational systems, the emphasis on teacher authority, the fear of making mistakes, and the value placed on collective harmony over individual expression contribute to this tendency (Yuan, 2025). Therefore, even when studying in a different academic environment, these students may find it difficult to adapt to a more discussion-oriented classroom environment.

DISCUSSION

Interviewees from different family backgrounds displayed distinct attitudes toward academic performance and engagement. For example, F3, who grew up in a wealthy family, expressed a strong desire for good grades, shaped by her parents' moral expectations that students should succeed through their own efforts. She repeatedly emphasized phrases such as "maintain good grades" and "more opportunities for further education." At the same time, she adopted a pragmatic approach to learning: instead of reading entire books, she focused on extracting key points, often relying on online communities and subscription services to access newly released research. As she put it, "The result is more important than the process. I do not work hard; I work smart." Six other

interviewees strongly agreed with this view, highlighting a broader pattern among students with abundant resources.

However, not all participants perceived such strategies positively. F11, for example, criticized peers from wealthy families as being motivated primarily by quick success and immediate returns from learning. She noted, "I know that they achieve better grades than I do, despite spending less time studying. I do not think they are good. They are just opportunistic. It feels unfair because I invest significant time in reading and studying, yet I end up with a B, while they gather information online, read summarized articles, and receive an A." In a follow-up interview, F11 added that she had limited familiarity with these digital tools and no interest in subscribing to such services, preferring instead to rely on self-study. This contrast illustrates how students' family resources not only shape their access to academic strategies but also influence how they evaluate and position themselves in relation to their peers.

More broadly, students from working-class families tend to rely on limited personal resources when facing academic difficulties, often adopting a self-reliant but resource-constrained approach. In contrast, middle-class students benefit from sufficient guidance and strategies derived from their families, enabling them to manage challenges more effectively. For example, F1, F3, F8, M2, and M4 all received stable financial support, which allowed them to participate in a wider range of academic activities. Working-class students, on the other hand, engaged in simpler extracurricular activities that lacked clear goals or connections to their academic development.

In classroom settings, middle-class students also displayed greater confidence in adopting foreign cultural norms, actively speaking in class and sharing their opinions. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were generally less confident and less inclined to participate, reflecting differences in the cultural capital their parents transmitted. Those from working-class families often experienced disorientation while studying in Japan, struggling to integrate into local communities and maintain high academic performance. Unlike students from wealthy backgrounds, who could mobilize financial resources to address problems, some working-class interviewees, such as F7, reported feeling directionless in adapting to their new academic environment.

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of cultural capital in shaping academic engagement. Differences in parental resources, values, and expectations lead students to adopt divergent strategies and levels of confidence in their studies abroad. Family background not only provides varying forms of material and symbolic support but also influences how students perceive the meaning and value of academic practices in cross-cultural contexts (see Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of the Findings

	Interviewees come from middle class	Interviewees come from working class
Academic engagement	- Grades: because of the format of grading is based on the thesis writing instead of written papers, interviewees prefer to work smart to maintain good grades; - Academic problems: treating their senpai a meal for the academic help; or spending money to access to different tools online to find the solution to academic problems - In-class performance: actively participated in class discussion	- Grades: work hard to maintain good grade; - Academic problems: prefer to solve the problems by themselves and seldom ask for help from their senpai or professors. - In-class performance: interviewees experience a degree of anxiety when participating in class discussion

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the diverse academic pathways of Chinese students in Japanese higher education by comparing how they select and apply cultural capital in their learning engagement. These pathways are shaped not only by structural conditions but also by the ways in which individuals mobilize and reorganize cultural resources through their own reasoning within specific institutional and social contexts. Coping strategies and academic adaptations thus emerge as context-sensitive practices that reflect both personal agency and family influence.

The findings highlight that the impact of family background is mediated by both material resources and parental involvement. Some students actively expanded and reorganized their strategies to meet institutional demands (e.g., F11), others relied on existing resources to achieve minimal goals (e.g., M3), and others developed a personalized logic connecting parental expectations with academic achievement (e.g., M9). These differences suggest that family origins and inherited cultural resources play crucial roles in shaping how students respond to engagement challenges abroad.

A particularly salient dimension is the influence of parental values and expectations, which continue to shape students' strategies even after they move overseas. Parents are not only providers of early resources but also ongoing emotional and conceptual guides in their children's academic lives. Within the broader Chinese context, success is often framed through intergenerational values

that emphasize stability and material security. Overseas education is therefore not merely an individual aspiration but a family-level investment, with parents remaining active participants in decision-making processes. This enduring influence reflects a cultural logic of intergenerational cooperation and moral responsibility, in which children are expected to align their life choices with family expectations, even in cross-cultural environments.

In summary, this study identifies two main pathways through which family background influences the academic achievement of international students. First, families draw on their socioeconomic resources to compete for and purchase high-quality educational services in the market, thereby shaping students' academic outcomes. Second, parents influence their children's learning through educational involvement and behavioral support, fostering interest in study and cultivating positive learning habits, thereby enhancing academic achievement. These findings complement existing research on the relationship between family background and educational attainment by highlighting mechanisms that have received less attention. At the family level, even parents with fewer socioeconomic resources can improve their children's academic performance by closely monitoring and encouraging their studies, thereby reducing the impact of social class on academic achievement and narrowing performance gaps among students studying abroad. At the school level, given existing resource constraints, universities can improve students' academic engagement through two measures. The first is to strengthen institutional support by ensuring that academic centers pay greater attention to the needs of international students and provide effective academic guidance, which can increase students' confidence in learning. The second is to foster peer-based initiatives, such as informal mentoring or student-led support groups, to create a positive educational environment in which senior students guide newcomers, stimulate interest in learning, and help cultivate productive study habits.

While this study sheds light on the differentiated academic strategies of Chinese students in Japan, it also has limitations. The findings are based on a small sample and a single national context, which may restrict broader generalization. Future research could expand the scope by examining larger, more diverse samples and comparing across different host countries to further explore how family background interacts with institutional contexts to shape students' academic engagement.

Acknowledgment

REFERENCES

Arksey, H., & Knight, P. (1999). *Interviewing for social scientists*. Sage.
Astin, A. W. (2014). College student development and academic life:
    Psychological, intellectual, social and moral issues. In K. Arnold, P. G.

Altbach, & I. C. King (Eds.), *College student development and academic life: Psychological, intellectual, social and moral issues* (1st ed., p. 33). Routledge.

Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1989). Social space and symbolic power. *Sociological Theory, 7*(1), 14–25. https://doi.org/10.2307/202060

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1990). *Reproduction In Education, Society and Culture* (2nd ed.; R. Nice, Trans.). Sage Publications.

Breen, R., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (1997). Explaining educational differentials: Toward a formal rational choice theory. *Rationality and Society, 9*(3), 275–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/104346397009003002

Bukodi, E., Goldthorpe, J. H., & Steinberg, I. (2023). Continuing complexity: The university careers of a scientific elite in relation to their class origins and schooling. *The British Journal of Sociology, 74*(4), 547–565. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13046

Cebolla-Boado, H., Hu, Y., & Soysal, Y. N. (2018). Why study abroad? Sorting of Chinese students across British universities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 39*(3), 365–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1349649

Center for China and Globalization. (2023). *Blue Book on the development of Chinese overseas study (2023–2024)* http://www.ccg.org.cn/archives/84288

Cheadle, J. E. (2008). Educational investment, family context, and children's math and reading growth from kindergarten through the third grade. *Sociology of Education, 81*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070808100101

Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E. Q., & Hobson, C. J. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity*. National Center for Educational Statistics (DHEW/OE).

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*(Supplement), S95–S120. https://doi.org/10.1086/228943

Collins, R. (2019). *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. Columbia University Press.

Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Clark Plano, V. L., & Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative research designs: Selection and implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist, 35*(2), 236–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006287390

Cui, Z. S., & Sun, W. R. (2024). The double-edged effect of online wandering on college students' academic performance in the digital era. *Heilongjiang Education (Higher Education Research and Evaluation), 11*, 29–32. http://www.qikan.com.cn/article/hljg20241108.html

DiMaggio, P. (1997). Culture and cognition. *Annual Review of Sociology, 23*, 263–287. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.23.1.263

Elliott, S. N., Kratochwill, T. R., Littlefield, C. J., & Travers, J. (2000). *Educational psychology: Effective teaching, effective learning* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Glaser, B. G., Strauss, A. L., & Strutzel, E. (1968). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine.

Gomm, R., Hammersley, M., & Foster, P. (2009). *Case study method*. Sage.

Greve, J. (2013). Talcott Parsons: Toward a general theory of action: The social system. In K. Senge & R. Schützeichel (Eds.), *Hauptwerke der Emotionssoziologie* (pp. 255–266). Springer.

Jiao, R. (2025). Exploring factors reflecting Chinese students' study abroad destination choice: A case study of Chinese students in Japan. *Journal of International Students*, *15*(2), 49-68. https://doi.org/10.32674/2dare810

Kuh, G. D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(6), 683–706. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0099

Li, C., & Guo, Y. (2021). Do family backgrounds still matter in campus competition? The role of family background in human capital formation of college students. *Sociological Studies, 2*, 138–159. https://shxyj.ajcass.com/Magazine/show/?id=76910

Lin, L. (2020). The visible hand behind study-abroad waves: Cram schools, organizational framing and the international mobility of Chinese students. *Higher Education, 79*(2), 259–274. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00408-1

Liu, Z. T., Tian, J. J., Ma, M. J., Dong, Q. C., & Liu, X. Y. (2022). The impact of online autonomous learning on academic performance among university students in southern Shaanxi. *Research and Practice of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Theory, 9*, 180–192. https://qikan.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=00002HCDK76O7JP0MLDO0JPX6HR&from=Qikan_Search_Index

Mare, R. D. (1980). Social background and school continuation decisions. *Journal of the American Statistical Association, 75*(370), 295–305. https://doi.org/10.2307/2287448

Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., Wolniak, G. C., Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2016). *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence That Higher Education Works* (Vol. 3). Jossey-Bass.

Mayo, P. (2008). Antonio Gramsci and his relevance for the education of adults. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 40*(3), 418–435. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00357.x

Nash, R. (1990). Bourdieu on education and social and cultural reproduction. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 11*(4), 431–447. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1392877

Parsons, T. (1991). *The social system* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Peaker, G. F. (1971). *The Plowden children four years later*. National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales.

Sirin, S. R. (2005). Socioeconomic status and academic achievement: A meta-analytic review of research. *Review of Educational Research, 75*(3), 417–453. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543075003417

Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge University Press.

White, K. R. (1980). Socioeconomic status and academic achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 2*(3), 21–40. https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-765X(80)90023-3

Williams, M., & Moser, T. (2019). The art of coding and thematic exploration in qualitative research. *International Management Review, 15*(1). https://www.imrjournal.org/uploads/1/4/2/8/14286482/imr-v15n1art4.pdf

Willis, P. (1978). *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Routledge.

Yuan, J. (2025). Research on family moral education in Chinese pedagogy textbooks. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2025.2466600

Zhao, B. H. (2011). Family factors and mechanisms influencing the academic achievement gap between urban and rural students. *Journal of Education of Renmin University of China, 4*, 134–147.

Zheng, Y. (2023). *After Winning the Title: The Puzzle Of College Students' Differentiated Outcomes*. Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore.

Zhou, Y. R., Knoke, D., & Sakamoto, I. (2005). Rethinking silence in the classroom: Chinese students' experiences of sharing indigenous knowledge. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 9*(3), 287–311. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500075180

Zhu, H., & O'Sullivan, H. (2022). Shhhh! Chinese students are studying quietly in the UK. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 59*(3), 275–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2020.1813603

Author bio

RAN JIAO is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of International Relations, Japan. Her primary research interests lie in international education, higher education, and cultural sociology. Email: jiaoran55@live.cn