

# ***Mental Health Problems of Chinese International College Students in the United States***

**Yanling Chen<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Institute of Education, University College London, London, United Kingdom  
a. Stnv523@ucl.ac.uk*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Mental health problems are prevalent among students in American universities and colleges, particularly among those from other countries or regions. Despite considerable research on the relatively high prevalence of mental health problems among international college students and potential reasons they under-utilize student support services, little is known about the mental health experiences of students from China to study in the United States. This paper provides insight into the challenges and interventions surrounding the mental health problems of college students from China to study in the United States. This paper provides a synthesis of available findings and addresses the factors triggering mental health issues experienced by Chinese international college students studying in the United States, the challenges they face when gaining access to mental health services, and potential interventions to boost their mental well-being. Additionally, this paper emphasizes the significance of providing a supportive environment that encourages and facilitates the help-seeking behavior of Chinese international college students, aiming to offer a valuable resource for mental health practitioners, policymakers, and higher education professionals.

**Keywords:** mental health, Chinese international students, barriers to help-seeking, intervention

## **1. Introduction**

While studying abroad can be an exciting opportunity, it can also present a significant number of challenges, such as mental health problems. Psychological research paid relatively little attention to international college students studying in the United States, regardless of their significant contributions to the educational system. Prior to 2010, studies on mental health issues among students from different countries were limited in quantity and scope [1]. Among them, research on mental health issues experienced by international students from non-English speaking countries, particularly China, was particularly lacking. However, driven by the sharp rise in the number of Chinese international students and the fact that they have become the mainstay of international students in the United States (nearly 317,000 enrolled in higher education institutions in 2020/21) [2], increasing studies conducted in the recent two decades examined the factors contributing to mental health problems among them [3].

By critically synthesizing and analyzing the existing body of literature concerning the psychological issues that confront Chinese international college students in the United States, this paper will explore the underlying factors contributing to mental health problems among this specific

population and the barriers they encounter when seeking mental health help. Additionally, this paper will examine different types of help-seeking interventions that have been proposed to support the mental health needs of this population. It is anticipated that this paper can provide some valuable insights into the customization of mental health services to effectively cater to the distinctive needs of Chinese international students in American universities and colleges, to encourage and promote their help-seeking behavior, thereby, improving their mental well-being.

## **2. Causes of Mental Health Issues among Chinese International College Students in the United States**

Chinese international college students suffer from unique difficulties in adjusting to their new academic, social, and cultural environments in the United States, which can lead to mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and so on. This section looks at some factors that contribute to mental health problems that appear frequently in the studies that are currently available on Chinese international students in American universities and colleges. Specifically, the psychological stress associated with academic life, the barriers in social life, and the cultural conflicts these students may experience are among the key factors affecting Chinese international students' mental health. Moreover, identifying and understanding these factors is crucial in developing effective interventions to support these students.

### **2.1. Psychological Stress in Academic Life**

Academic stress, or more accurately, excessive academic-related pressures that surpass students' capacity to cope, is widespread among students enrolled in higher education institutions; furthermore, students who experience academic stress are much more likely to have chronic and sporadic stress, depressive symptoms, and anxiety symptoms [4]. The most frequently mentioned academic strains are linked to academic communication and struggle to complete educational assessments with high quality [5]. In addition to the difficulties mentioned above that almost every undergraduate encounter, Chinese international students in American universities and colleges have extra obstacles that may cause intensified academic stress, such as language barrier, unfamiliar methods of teaching and learning, and the exceptionally high expectations placed on their educational achievement throughout their academic careers.

The educational achievement and academic performance of Chinese international college students are adversely affected by their English language difficulties. These challenges manifest in various ways, such as accurately comprehending lecture materials, and succeeding in oral presentations and written exams. In addition, language difficulties also limit their ability to reach out for academic assistance from their professors, tutors, and peers. As a result, many Chinese international college students encounter obstacles in their efforts to enhance their academic performance and achievements, and thus feel increased pressure. In addition, although there is insufficient evidence, it is reasonable to infer that Chinese international students affected by language barriers may experience more stress in the process of seeking academic assistance from others. For example, Chinese international students may write down the questions they want to ask in advance or practice pronunciation many times meeting with professors.

Another essential aspect of research that may shed light on the significant academic stress among Chinese international college students pertains to the influence of perfectionism [7], or more precisely, the extraordinarily high expectations of academic performance from their parents and students themselves. Again, this can be seen as a source of stress with Chinese characteristics. In China, education is viewed as the key to upward mobility and success, and parents often see their children's academic achievements as a reflection of their own success and social status. Although there is not

an overwhelming amount of literature to prove it, furthermore, the one-child policy has arguably further raised parents' expectations for their children. This pressure is compounded by the competitive nature of China's education system. In general, the combination of personal academic expectations and parental academic expectations adds to the burden experienced by Chinese international college students, leading to heightened stress levels and greater susceptibility to mental health issues.

Notably, some recent studies have emphasized the significance of investigating the mental health experiences of Chinese international college students in the years preceding their enrollment as undergraduates, as it is during this period that many mental health issues among this specific population arise [8]. That is to say, Chinese international college students may have developed mental health issues prior to studying in the United States as a result of the academic pressures they endured in China. Thus, this paper suggests that this situation may affect the results and data of studies on the mental health assessment of Chinese international students in American higher education institutions and calls for more longitudinal studies in the future on changes in Chinese international student's mental health since there has been no/few research comparing Chinese international students' mental health status before and after going abroad.

All in all, the academic pressure perceived by Chinese international students is caused by multiple factors, which increase their susceptibility to mental health problems. Moreover, most of these factors are associated with China's unique social norms and beliefs, so it is necessary to study them when seeking ways to alleviate academic pressure. In addition, in response to some of the gaps in current research, this article also puts forth some hypotheses.

## **2.2. Barriers in Social Life**

Many Chinese international college students experience social barriers, including difficulties making friends and differences in communication styles, and all of which may worsen their senses of isolation and loneliness that can result in mental health issues such as depression and anxiety [8-9].

The experience of loneliness can be attributed to difficulties in adjustment, but the primary reason why Chinese international college students feel isolated or alone is their physical separation from family and friends. To overcome loneliness, international students can opt to make new friends. However, this can be particularly challenging for those who struggle to make friends in China, and the obstacles to making friends will become even more pronounced when studying and living abroad due to factors such as language barriers [6]. Furthermore, cultural differences in communication styles and social values can contribute to social barriers among international college students from China. This paper argues that contrasting approaches to communication can further hinder Chinese international college students' ability to form relationships and engage with their surroundings, resulting in exacerbating their sense of isolation and loneliness and insufficient support to deal with the stressors they encounter.

Feeling unaccepted also causes social barriers and stress for international students [6]. In a study conducted by Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, and Joshi, the American-International Relations Scale was utilized to determine the degree to which international college students experience the feeling of being rejected by American individuals, revealing a strong correlation between perceived prejudice and stress [10]. Moreover, international students may be less equipped to effectively fight against prejudice or racism and more likely to struggle to navigate such experiences and stress caused by them, leading to a negative impact on well-being. Chinese students comprised the biggest group of international students in the United States and were probably to be represented in this finding, therefore, to support Chinese international college students in better coping with social barriers and mental health problems caused by non-acceptance, prejudice, or discrimination, this article suggests that schools can consider offering more courses (which can be provided during international freshman

orientation) to help students understand the challenges that a multicultural society in the United States can bring, as well as effective strategies to deal with prejudice and discrimination.

It is worth noting that previous studies were based on normal conditions, not public emergencies. During the pandemic, the discrimination in both China and the United States further reinforced their feeling of being rejected and prejudiced, elevating their susceptibility to mental health problems [11]. Furthermore, Chinese international college students also experienced a great number of specific stressors, such as university closures, transition to remote study, and travel limitations, resulting in loss of peer interaction and increased levels of loneliness. In the event of future public health emergencies, it is necessary to identify more vulnerable groups as soon as possible and provide them with more comprehensive assistance.

### **2.3. Chinese Cultural Factors**

Many existing studies [3, 11-12] have indicated that traditional Chinese cultural factors may constitute a barrier to both the correct understanding of mental health issues and help-seeking. In general, Chinese culture can contribute to inadequate mental health literacy [10], resulting in some Chinese international students avoiding admitting that they may have mental health problems and refusing to seek specialized care due to fear of discrimination and stigmatization. Consequently, it is of utmost importance to comprehend the social stigma prevalent in China and its potential impact on the perceptions of Chinese international college students regarding mental health problems during their studies in the United States. Available findings have suggested that the collectivist culture in China is considered a source of stigma on mental health problems [8]. Stigma impacts individuals suffering from mental health issues, as well as those with close relationships with them. That is to say, if individuals have a mental health problem, their family members and friends may experience stigma and become utterly isolated from their networks. As a result, many individuals in China refuse to accept a psychological issue rather than a medical one; moreover, they opt to or are requested to keep their mental health problems hidden, making obtaining mental health care impossible [13].

Chinese cultural factors are complex and cannot be simplified only to consider stigma. For example, some studies have proposed that Chinese individuals tend to keep mental health problems to themselves and refrain from sharing them with others because of Taoism values, particularly self-endurance and acceptance [8]. Additionally, while some Chinese people with mental health concerns would like to reach out for assistance and treatment, many are more inclined to gain help from family members, friends, traditional Chinese medicine practitioners, and even fortune tellers since they don't trust professional mental health services [14]. Conceivably, Chinese international college students may also prefer seeking mental health support from their parents and other Chinese international college students instead of professional mental health services. Since these help-seeking practices may not necessarily lead to positive outcomes, this paper suggests to conceptualize them as a cultural barrier and calls for future research on the effectiveness of these practices.

### **3. Barriers to Mental Health Help-Seeking for Chinese International College Students in the United States**

International students have a tendency to postpone finding assistance for their mental health concerns; furthermore, help-seeking is notably infrequent among Chinese international students due to several barriers to obtaining mental health services [12]. Arguably, the barriers to utilizing mental health services can also be considered as a significant factor contributing to mental health issues among college students from China in American universities and colleges.

### **3.1. Personal Help-Seeking Ability Barriers**

First of all, limited English language proficiency can constitute a significant barrier for Chinese international college students when looking for mental health support. In the long run, international students may be reluctant to seek professional psychological assistance. Furthermore, because Chinese international college students have limited access to resources related to mental health education in China, it may be more difficult than other international students to accurately express the problems and symptoms they encounter. Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the language barrier as a hindrance to mental health services among this population.

Secondly, as mentioned above, several cultural factors in Chinese society can contribute to Chinese international college students' inadequate mental health literacy. Chinese international college students may experience feelings of shame or embarrassment when it comes to seeking assistance for their mental health concerns, as they are often stigmatized and viewed as taboo. Mental health issues are generally seen as personal problem that should be resolved through personal effort rather than seeking outside help, making it more difficult for them to recognize and seek help for mental health issues. Furthermore, Chinese international students generally do not have enough knowledge of mental health problems due to limited mental health education in China. Because there is a lack of systematic mental health education in China, children can only gather information from friends and family members or other sources. Worse, some parents prioritize their children's academic performance over their mental health, and as a result, they may refuse to provide support for their children [15]. Therefore, it is difficult for Chinese international college students to actively seek help after arriving in the United States.

### **3.2. Cultural Barriers**

There are several cultural factors that may contribute to Western psychological counselors' difficulty in understanding the mental health concerns encountered by college students from China. Firstly, variances in cultural norms regarding emotional expression can create challenges in communication between Chinese international college students and psychological counselors, leading to potential difficulties and misunderstandings in their interactions. When Chinese international college students realize that it is challenging to get the help they need, they may gradually become resistant to seeking psychological assistance or develop a distrust of counseling. Secondly, western psychological counselors may not be familiar with Chinese cultural beliefs, values, and practices and may have difficulty understanding and addressing Chinese international college students' issues. Overall, these cultural disparities underscore the significance of cultural competence in counseling, emphasizing the requirement for counselors to take into account their clients' cultural backgrounds and experiences when addressing mental health issues.

### **3.3. Institutional Barriers**

Chinese international students, particularly those with language and cultural barriers, face the limited availability of mental health services on campuses. This does not mean that American universities and colleges do not provide mental health services for international students. However, some cannot provide mental health services available in those international students' preferred language. Some universities may have counselors who are fluent in Chinese and can offer translation services to ensure effective communication between the counselor and the student. However, appointment availability can be an issue. In addition to a high level of Chinese proficiency, psychological counselors should also have a certain understanding of Chinese culture to provide adequate help to Chinese international students. And this may require more specialized training - which will be limited by funding-related issues.



Moreover, the high costs of mental health services in the United States can be regarded as a barrier that affects Chinese international college students since insurance plans provided by the school generally do not provide comprehensive mental health coverage.

#### **4. Help-Seeking Interventions for Chinese International College Students in the United States**

Chinese international college students studying frequently experience significant barriers to seeking mental health services. There exist, however, various potential interventions that could assist Chinese international college students in overcoming these hurdles and improving their mental health outcomes.

##### **4.1. Broad Mental Health Education**

One of the potential strategies to aid Chinese international college students in overcoming obstacles to gaining effective mental health assistance is providing and refining mental health education in the United States and China. Research has suggested that mental health education can effectively enhance mental health outcomes among international students, including those from China [8]. Mental health education should provide students with information and skills that can bolster their mental health well-being. This could involve a variety of strategies, such as teaching coping strategies for stress and anxiety, providing information about common signs and symptoms of mental illness [16], and addressing cultural beliefs and stigma around mental health, to increase acceptance and increase help-seeking intentions.

Mental health education can be presented through various means, such as orientation sessions for new students, online courses, and more. The effectiveness of such approaches may differ depending on the cultural background and specific needs of the students. Consequently, it is critical to create culturally appropriate and sensitive mental health education programs for Chinese international college students. They should be delivered by professionals who comprehend the cultural nuances of mental health issues and have the expertise to offer practical support to Chinese international students. Furthermore, educating mental health practitioners and educators on the significance of multicultural training can enhance their understanding of the help-seeking behaviors of this specific population [12].

Furthermore, tackling Chinese international college students' mental health issues cannot depend solely on the efforts of American universities and colleges. As discussed above, Chinese students may already be at risk of mental health problems before studying in the United States, and due to cultural and other factors, they will not actively seek help in the United States. So, ideally, promoting mental health education in China will help solve current problems. Frankly, the Chinese government recognized the importance of mental health services in schools as early as the 1980s and started employing counselors with government funding to provide counseling services for students and share professional knowledge with staff [15]. However, due to the significant differences in government funding in different regions, not all schools in all regions of China can provide students with mental health services; additionally, the services' quality is different. To eliminate disparities between regions, mental health education should be included in China's national educational system.

##### **4.2. Proactive Professional Intervention**

Another possible approach to enhance the mental well-being of Chinese international college students is through professional intervention. Existing research suggests that professional intervention can effectively improve mental health outcomes. For instance, the study conducted by Hwang and colleagues showed the value of a culturally adapted cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) intervention

in reducing symptoms of depression among Chinese Americans [17]. Moreover, the benefits of CBT-related interventions can be maintained over time and improve higher education students' mental health and well-being [18]. Although these studies did not look at Chinese international students specifically, they do provide valuable evidence to support the utilization of professional intervention to solve mental health issues in this population.

Professional intervention can involve providing access to qualified professionals, including counselors or therapists, who can give specialized support and treatment for problems with mental health. Professional assistance can be provided through a variety of routes involving on-campus counseling, teletherapy, or referrals to off-campus mental health professionals [12]. Remarkably, providers of healthcare and mental healthcare in colleges should recognize the significance of identifying if international college students from China are experiencing mental health issues when they report physical health problems, and they should refer these students to mental health services in the community. Also, historically, Chinese people have typically interpreted mental health differently, with specific cultural aspects that may impact their understanding of mental health understanding and their willingness to seek professional help. Hence, it is vital for counselors or therapists to ascertain whether this also applies to Chinese international college students studying in American universities and colleges and adjust their approach to help them solve mental health issues.

#### **4.3. Making Good Use of Multimedia Intervention**

Multimedia interventions, such as social networking and mental health apps, are emerging as promising ways to improve mental health outcomes among international students. These interventions can be easily accessed through mobile devices and offer a range of tools and resources for managing mental health. Six distinct kinds of multimedia interventions, for example, have been designed to tackle some of the challenges adolescents may have, such as fear of confidentiality breaches, the stigma of mental health problems, and self-reliance [16], which are common problems encountered by Chinese international college students. Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that multimedia interventions can help this population overcome barriers to mental health help-seeking.

Despite the potential of these interventions, it is crucial to recognize that no single intervention can be effective for all students. Instead, a combination of mental health education, professional intervention, and multimedia interventions may be most effective in conquering the difficulties that Chinese international college students have in accessing mental health services. Furthermore, there are particular challenges to implementing multimedia interventions for mental health support among this population. For instance, language and cultural barriers may impede the effectiveness of these treatments. Therefore, culturally sensitive and appropriate multimedia interventions that cater to the specific needs of Chinese international college students need to be developed and implemented.

#### **4.4. Training Peer Intervention**

Peer counseling is often seen as a complement to psychiatry, where peers are trained to play a proactive role in promoting mental health innervations. Peer training interventions aim to train students to become "peer leaders" who can effectively bridge the gap between students and mental health literacy. These leaders can help foster social interactions that promote a better understanding and acceptability of looking for assistance for mental health concerns among the student population. Such training programs are typically integrated into the school environment and become a part of students' daily activities [16].

#### 4.5. Exploring Recreational Intervention

Recreational interventions for mental health related to a wide range of activities and programs designed to boost mental health and well-being via leisure and enjoyable activities. These treatments, including sports and arts, can be coordinated by mental health experts, recreational therapists, or other skilled personnel. Recreational therapies attempt to improve social relationships and general quality of life while reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. There is evidence that suggests recreational activities can improve mental health outcomes. Huang et al., for example, conducted a study demonstrating the effectiveness of recreational therapies, such as exercise, art, and peer support in treating depression and anxiety [17]. Therefore, the sports and art clubs of the school can actively cooperate with the psychological counseling center to carry out exciting activities to provide help to students.

#### 5. Conclusion

Chinese international college students have been identified as exceptionally vulnerable to mental health problems due to a variety of factors. This paper has provided insight into the challenges and interventions surrounding the mental well-being of Chinese international college students. Through a synthesis of available findings, this paper has explored the factors that contribute to mental health problems among this group, the barriers they encounter when seeking mental health support, and potential interventions to enhance their mental health outcomes.

Psychological stress in academic life, barriers in social life, and cultural conflicts are some of the main factors contributing to mental health issues among college students from China. Additionally, even when some individuals from this population recognize the need for help, they often face significant barriers to seeking mental health services. To address these challenges, there is an increasing demand in exploring help-seeking interventions that can support the mental health needs of Chinese international students. Several interventions have been proposed, and they can take different forms, including broad mental health education, proactive professional intervention, multimedia intervention, peer intervention, and recreational intervention.

Overall, this paper has emphasized the significance of understanding Chinese international students' unique mental health experiences and the cultural factors that may contribute to their mental health problems. Furthermore, it has highlighted the need for tailored interventions that address this population's specific needs and challenges. Despite the contributions and insights provided in this paper, several limitations must be acknowledged. First of all, much of the literature used in this article are studies on the mental health status or problems of international college students in American universities and colleges, and only a few research is only for Chinese international college students. Another limitation is the lack of input from Chinese international students themselves. Although this paper draws on existing literature, it would be valuable to gather insights and experiences directly from Chinese international students through interviews or surveys to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their mental health challenges and help-seeking behaviors.

Moving forward, there is a pressing need for mental health practitioners, policymakers, and higher education professionals to maintain their focus on the mental well-being of Chinese international college students and other international college student populations in the United States. This can be accomplished through increased research, funding, and programming specifically tailored to address the distinctive mental health issues faced by students from other countries.

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