
Exploring Experiences of Chinese Students Studying at U.S. Universities Since COVID-19

Lindai Xie
Virginia Commonwealth University
U.S.A.

Yaoying Xu
Virginia Commonwealth University
U.S.A.

ABSTRACT: This paper presents a phenomenological study exploring what Chinese international students (CIS) have experienced since COVID-19. Three themes emerged through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight participants. The first theme is the typical challenges that might be encountered by CIS such as cultural barriers. The concerns of safety and racism were illustrated in the second theme, which was amplified and intensified during the pandemic. The last theme involved support and services that need improvement. Implications of the findings are discussed to reflect on how to best support CIS after and beyond COVID-19, followed by limitations of this study.

KEYWORDS: Chinese international students, U.S. colleges, COVID-19, phenomenology

Literature review
Theoretical Framework
Methodology
Findings
Discussion
Limitations and Recommendations
References
Author Contact

In 2020, the world experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, with people facing both economic and social stress (Cao et al., 2020; Shanahan et al., 2020). Preliminary research indicates that the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and the relationship between home countries and host countries have had a certain degree of impact on international students (Anand & Hsu, 2020; Laws & Ammigan, 2020). The pandemic has particularly affected Chinese international students, impacting their enrollment, engagement levels, overall satisfaction, and mental health through challenging environments and uncertain policies (Korhonen, 2024; Xie & Xu, 2024; Xu et al., 2021).

Multicultural education, as defined by Banks and Banks (2004), is

an idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically. (p. 1)

Multicultural education helps promote intercultural sensitivity through formal and informal learning experiences. International students create an intercultural learning environment that promotes multicultural education, which in turn, helps improve intercultural competence and cultural humility. For example, the involvement of international students may bring diverse perspectives to university classes, encourage curriculum internationalizing, enrich the learning environment, as well as benefit the cultural awareness development of the entire class, including both students and lecturers (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Sawir, 2013). In addition to their contribution to multicultural education, international students also bolster the U.S. economy and strengthen global connections between the U.S. and their home country (Gartman, 2016). Chinese students continue to make up a large proportion of international students in U.S. higher education institutions (Institute for International Education, 2022; Shu, 2019), despite their reduced numbers since COVID-19. To ensure their study abroad development and to sustain their valuable contributions, it is important to understand their experiences, explore ways to support them effectively, and so improve their satisfaction.

The findings of this study will help college educators better understand and empathize with Chinese international students (CIS), which can assist with ongoing commitments to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within higher education institutions. In addition, the results of this qualitative study can offer professionals and faculty who work with international students information about students' lived experiences and the kinds of support they might need. Thus, faculty and helping professionals can enhance their intercultural competency to provide services that meet the needs of CIS. To summarize, the purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges and implications of what CIS have experienced and to explore ways to promote their development beyond COVID-19. More specifically, this study addresses two research questions:

1. What was the lived experience of students from China studying at U.S. universities in 2020?
2. How can educators and university personnel at U.S. higher education institutions better support Chinese international students?

Literature Review

This section reviews the existing literature from three perspectives. The first part summarizes the challenges faced by international students in general, including adjustment issues, emotional difficulties, and employment concerns. The second part addresses the increase in Asian hate and racism, particularly the discrimination faced by Asian international students during COVID-19.

International students experience various difficulties and require additional and specific support. However, they have limited access to a broad range of resources and services that may only be available to U.S. residents. Therefore, the final part outlines resources for CIS that have been documented in previous studies.

International Students' Challenges

Previous studies have listed a large number of challenges that international students might experience during their study abroad life. In the initial phase, the main barriers are adjustment issues such as acculturation stress and cultural differences (Choy & Alon, 2019; Yakunina, 2010). International students' emotional responses to cultural difficulties are described as the linear development of a "U" curve with four stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment (Lysgaard, 1955). Through these stages, international students gradually become more familiar with the host country's culture, leading to increased adaptation and integration over time. However, language barriers, financial issues, and discrimination are some of the additional challenges that international students encounter over a long period of time (Choudaha et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2017). Moreover, international students commonly face interpersonal relationship problems and emotional difficulties such as loneliness or isolation (Tsai et al., 2017; Williams & Johnson, 2011). In the later stage of studying abroad, most international students adeptly navigate campus life, develop coping strategies, and learn to address issues with composure. Their primary concerns often shift toward future employment, job applications, or pursuing another degree (Lee, 2013; Lian et al., 2020).

Chinese international students (CIS) may face some unique challenges, in addition to those shared by all international students (Liu, 2009). The onset of COVID-19 has impacted the lived experiences of CIS who are in different stages. Research has reported that both prospective and current CIS have certain levels of concerns about study in the U.S. due to detrimental policies, safety issues, discrimination, and restrictions or limited opportunities for CIS in the U.S. work market (Mok et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021; Yu, 2021). The pandemic has intensified research into CIS well-being, highlighting issues including "double-blind" confusion, which arises from incongruent messages and conflicting information received from family and friends in their home country and those in their immediate social context in the host country (Ma & Miller, 2021). Studies have also identified a "double stigmatization" caused by the "political othering" tactic of the two countries, which affected students' sense of belonging (Jin & Wang, 2022). To summarize, international students, particularly CIS, face various types and durations of challenges, the impact of which differs from person to person; however, the influence has been generally exacerbated by the outbreak of COVID-19.

Asian Hate and Racism

Researchers argue that “difference is not deficient” (Heng, 2018, p.11); however, xenophobia, people’s fear of difference embodied in persons or groups such as foreigners, still exists (Berezin, 2006). Compared with the mainstream group, international students are a heterogeneous group with many differences in culture, language, and lifestyle, sometimes making them the object of hatred (Zhang et al., 2020). It has been shown that Asian international students have perceived being discriminated against and felt they were neglected by their classmates, professors, or strangers through classroom discussions, assignment grading, and others’ attitudes toward them (Park et al., 2017).

CIS may experience additional challenges and difficulties due to historical and social-cultural issues. Sinophobia, one type of xenophobia, was defined as hatred or fear specifically towards China and Chinese people (Nam et al., 2021). Researchers have illustrated that Sinophobia threatens CIS’s safety, increases anxiety and other negative emotions, and can be traumatizing (Litam, 2020; Nam et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the pandemic increased the rates of Sinophobia. CIS have often become the target of COVID-related discrimination because the COVID-19 virus was first discovered in Wuhan, China (Litam, 2020; Xiong et al., 2022; Ye et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). According to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center (Silver, 2022), the majority of U.S. adults have expressed an unfavorable opinion of China since 2020 (79% in 2020, 76% in 2021, and 82% in 2022). Although these trends might not necessarily suggest hatred toward any individual Chinese people, they undoubtedly contribute to misunderstanding or misleading messages about CIS in the U.S.

Resources for International Students

As illustrated, international students, specifically CIS, need to deal with different kinds of challenges and overcome a number of adversities. The discrimination and prejudice caused by COVID-19 have exacerbated these issues and persist to this day. This phenomenon encourages researchers to study and advocate for enhancing the support offered to CIS who are often overlooked (Huang & Turner, 2018). In recent years, institutions have noticed international students’ challenges and are trying to support them. U.S. colleges normally have an office of international students’ affairs to assist students with transition, adjustment, and problems with visas or enrollment (Castiello-Gutiérrez et al., 2021). College counseling centers help students with their mental health needs, career counseling centers support them in preparing for an internship or job applications, and some centers offer training to their professionals on multicultural awareness and competence to better serve this student group (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Hwang et al., 2014). While on-campus services cover a wide range of students’ needs, those services may have limited availability and relevance. Faculty with international backgrounds, peers, student organizations, family

members, and friends are identified as other resources for international students, but this support is usually limited to one aspect of students' experience and they may not be trained in assisting international students (Lian et al., 2020; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Thus, this study also aims to explore areas of services that necessitate quality improvement and identify additional resources needed to better support international students.

Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of this research which explains the conceptual relationships among the study's objectives, constructs, and theories. The horizontal rectangle contains the lived experiences of CIS and the challenges they may encounter. Two ellipses represent two theories this study uses to guide the research direction. The vertical rectangle on the right represents the ultimate goal of professionals working with international students: to assist their development and promote their overall well-being.

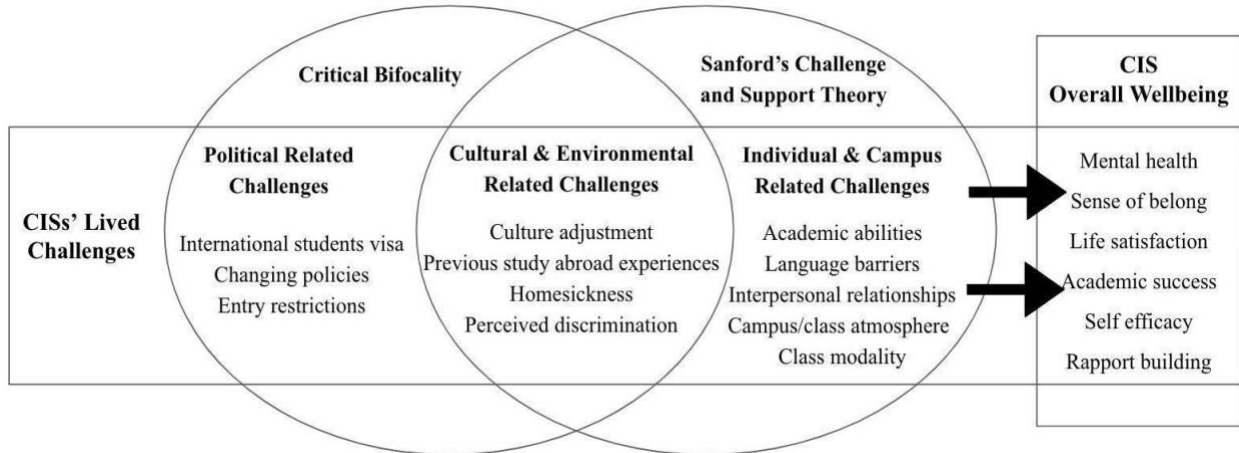


Figure 1
Theoretical Framework

Critical bifocality (CB) is a theory of method to explore the relationship between structures of power, social policies, history, and institutions, making these dynamics visible while drawing lessons from history to benefit society and minority groups (Weis & Fine, 2012). Even though the political challenges are unavoidable, critical bifocality enables this study to empathize with international students' feelings and learn about their challenges. Fine (2017) also uses critical bifocality to argue for research designs that interrogate how history, structures, and lives shape, reveal, and refract the studied conditions. The history of recruiting CIS to U.S. universities goes back to the last century. Adjustment issues, cultural adaptation, and prejudice regarding these students' skin color, the country they are from (i.e., Sinophobia), and their identity as CIS have been recorded (e.g., Nam et al., 2021; Xie & Xu, 2024). Critical bifocality highlights the importance of participants' backgrounds and guides this study to better understand CIS' cultural-

and environmental-related challenges, such as adjustment issues and perceived discrimination. To summarize, critical bifocality enables the researcher to dig deeper, specifically in investigating the root causes of CIS challenges in the post-2020 context and theorizing with CIS about their lived experiences.

Sanford's (1967) challenge and support theory (CST) is included in the framework, as it argues for the importance of a proper balance between the challenges students encounter and the support they receive to promote their development. Helping CIS adapt to the new culture and encouraging their social and academic development are goals of higher education institutions and these goals need to be accomplished by understanding their experiences (Gurin et al., 2002). Sanford's theory inspired a perspective for this research: to first explore and understand both internal and external difficulties CIS may confront, including challenges related to culture, environment, individual, and campus. The theory then guides the study to investigate the corresponding services CIS have, as well as additional support or resources they need since the onset of COVID-19.

The overlap of the two ellipses shows the need to apply both theories to comprehend CIS's cultural difficulties and so provide appropriate support. Additionally, COVID-19 brought CIS new and increasingly difficult challenges. Like Sanford's (1967) challenge and support theory illustrated, as the level of challenge goes up so should the support given. The selected theoretical framework not only fits the purpose of this study but also guides its conduct in terms of interview question design, data analysis, and findings report. To ensure a thorough exploration of CIS experiences, each interview question is directed by CB and/or CST and addresses at least one challenge and one well-being goal for professionals (see Appendix 1). By using CB, researchers can recognize participants' backgrounds and specific needs during data analysis. Additionally, the CST framework helps identify potential solutions and services that need improvement.

Methodology

Phenomenology can be defined as the study of individuals' experiences that aims to describe, understand, and interpret human life (Bloor & Wood, 2006; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Van Manen (2017) indicated that phenomenology focuses on solving phenomenological research questions such as: what it is like to experience a particular situation (e.g., study at a U.S. university as an international student from China). The outcome of phenomenology is "a collection of descriptions of meanings for individuals of their lived experiences" (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 4). The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of students from China studying at universities in the U.S.; therefore, phenomenology was selected as the methodology.

Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges the importance of understanding a phenomenon as part of a holistic experience while also recognizing the researchers' role in the research process (Dowling, 2007). In this study, the meaning and reflection of CIS's lived experiences are examined through

phenomenological language, a communication approach applied in phenomenological research to capture and express the essence of lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016). In addition, it fits the researcher's philosophy that knowledge is co-constructed, reflection is valuable, and reflexivity is necessary. Grounded in Van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology, this study utilized the following six steps to collect and analyze data: (a) examining a phenomenon that the researchers are interested in and also find meaningful to study, (b) keeping that interest throughout the research process, (c) theorizing about participants' lived experiences with them, (d) analyzing data and summarizing them into themes, (e) reading and rereading the themes then writing and rewriting the description to best explain experiences of the phenomenon, and (f) getting to know the various dimensions of individual experiences and reflecting on how they contribute to the total experiences. The codebook presented in Appendix 2, which includes five main codes, 22 sub-codes, and the definition of each code, was used for data analysis and thematic development.

Bracketing

The first author who conducted the interviews is Chinese and a full-time international student studying at a U.S. university. Her background enabled the recruitment method to be more effective; she is also aware of the impact of her background, prior knowledge, and experience as a research subject of data analysis (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Before conducting the interviews, she wrote down her experiences as a CIS and reflected on potential biases and their influence on data analysis and interpretation. During the research process, she used research memos to document the process and discussed her assumptions with a supervisor before and after interviews to ensure the research remained focused on the participants. The second author helped develop and refine the conceptual framework that guides the research process. The second author was also engaged in the data analysis and interpretation process. Both authors collaborated to discuss their understanding of the conceptual connections of themes that emerged, patterns identified, and implications for future research and practice. Both authors were aware that their personal and professional identities could influence their interpretations of the findings. They were aware of their natural connection with the target population of this study: the first author is a CIS; the second author is a faculty member with a CIS background who works closely with CIS. Thus, they frequently reflected on how their international backgrounds and experiences might influence the process of meaning-making regarding study findings. In these ways, the authors ensured a consistent approach to data processing with the guidance of the theoretical framework and maintained an awareness of their own identities while concentrating on the participants' experiences during data analysis and the reporting of findings.

Participants

This study aimed to learn more about Chinese international students' lived experiences in the U.S. since 2020. After receiving approval from the researchers' university Institutional Review Board (IRB), the first author posted a recruitment flyer with announcements on WeChat, a Chinese social media app that researchers frequently use to recruit Chinese participants (e.g., Guo et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2020). Individuals who might know someone interested were encouraged to forward the recruitment flyer and announcement. Students who were interested in participating could contact the researcher by sending WeChat messages or emails. Students who are qualified to participate were: (1) from China and studied at a U.S. higher education institution for at least one academic semester in 2020; (2) at least 18 years old; (3) enrolled full-time and took any type of class (i.e., online, in-person, and hybrid). Using social media networks along with purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Balkin & Kleist, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016), nine potential participants were recruited, eight of whom qualified for interviews.

Participants were between the ages of 20 and 29. Four participants identified as male and four identified as female. They were studying in different universities to pursue their bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. In 2020, two of them were located in China and took online classes, while the rest of the participants were studying in the U.S. On average, participants had stayed in the U.S. for 3.81 years, with a range from 0 to 11 years. Their majors were related to Psychology, Marketing, Engineering, Business, and Art. For the sake of confidentiality, pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1 or P1) were assigned by the researcher.

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval, in-depth semi-structured interviews were completed to ensure participants a fairly open framework and provide participants' data with richness and depth. In the written informed consent and verbal interview protocol, participants were informed that they might feel uncomfortable answering some questions about their lived experiences during the pandemic. They were assured that they could skip any topics they preferred not to discuss and could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they were otherwise entitled. The interviews include ten open-ended questions followed by several demographic questions (see Appendix 1). These questions were designed and revised based on previous studies, an expert's suggestions, and a pilot study with a Chinese international student. Questions focused on participant thoughts and experiences since 2020. The average interview duration was 75 minutes with a total of 603 minutes of recorded interviews across all participants.

English is not the first language of the interviewer and potential participants. Language barriers can be a factor hindering participants from expressing

themselves clearly; it might cause some potential participants to hesitate to join the interviews and may influence the effectiveness of the interview. Considering this, the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese. The transcriptions were sent to each participant for their review. One participant added additional information, and another answered the interviewer's follow-up questions with WeChat messaging for clarification. After analyzing data and summarizing them into themes, the experiences of participants were selected as quotations to explain the themes this study summarized. Those quotations were translated into English and sent to the participants again to confirm.

Data Analysis

Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology and his four lifeworld existentials (i.e., lived body, lived time, lived space, and lived human relation) were applied to guide our reflection on the data analysis process (Van Manen, 1997, 2016). Eight documents of each participant's interview transcriptions were systematically organized and prepared for analysis. During the analysis, new documents containing "hermeneutic reductions" emerged (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Then, the researcher identified and extracted essential themes from participants' shared experiences and conducted the approach of "selective" and "highlighting" statements or phrases throughout the transcript (Van Manen, 1997). To best explain participants' experiences of the phenomenon, the art of rereading and rewriting was utilized while analyzing. Selected and highlighted experiences were translated and quoted to share the voices of CIS, support the corresponding summarized themes with examples, and enrich the findings. Two Chinese scholars who are proficient in English were invited to be peer reviewers of the data analysis and transcript translation to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. Once the quotations were transcribed and translated, both authors of this study conducted the data analysis and interpretation. During the process, authors frequently met to discuss the conceptual connections of themes identified and reflect on possible influences of their international backgrounds on the process of meaning-making of the data collected.

Findings

After reviewing the codes, the various challenges CIS experienced were summarized into eleven themes, including four challenges and seven services (See Appendix 2, first column). After reading, rereading, and verifying these themes, the preliminary findings were categorized into three main themes listed in the fourth column of Appendix 2: students' typical challenges and barriers; COVID-19-related challenges and experiences; and demand for service improvement. The results verify the theoretical framework of this study regarding the types of challenges CIS are encountering and their needs for various services. It adds financial concerns and worries about the future to the individual-related challenges and updates the framework by emphasizing the need for increased availability of service and improved quality of service.

Students' Typical Challenges and Barriers

Participants expressed three sub-themes of challenges and barriers they faced in 2020 but that might also be encountered by CIS during any other time. These typical challenges are barriers and concerns related to culture, policies, communication, building friendships, and their futures. The challenges specific to 2020 were illustrated in the second main theme.

Barriers in Communication and Culture

During the interviews, six participants in particular mentioned inconvenience due to communication and cultural barriers. They expressed frustration in class discussions and group assignments and a lack of confidence in their understanding of the conversation content since most of the time they could only partially comprehend others. After a higher level of adjustment to all English-speaking environments, participants still believed they had some communication issues with natives. A perceived discouraging environment replaced language barriers and was considered to be the leading cause of communication issues, which was illustrated by P8:

It might be the kind of atmosphere that makes me unable to speak. I can feel exactly whether the other person is interested in [the conversation]. If I feel that people don't want to talk with me, I won't push them. To be honest, I feel that my communication barrier is not a barrier contributed by low English proficiency but a psychological barrier that is brought on by the environment.

For this CIS, the communication barriers that CIS experience include both internal and external challenges. While language barriers can be addressed by dedicating more effort to improving English proficiency, overcoming the perceived discouraging environment requires deeper exploration and additional efforts from different stakeholders.

Two participants mentioned cultural barriers. P3 shared discomfort with the requirement to share personal growth or feelings about a course at the semester's end. While American classmates are familiar and comfortable with reflection and sharing those reflections, P3 was not: "If I were asked to talk about the growth of my knowledge and specialty, I could have done a 40-minute presentation. But if I have to share my personal growth, I really don't know what to say..." In addition, P4 held a more personal perspective; she believed that there were not simple differences but rather large barriers to overcome where her Chinese culture and Western culture clashed:

My limited experience and my own cultural identity make me unable to integrate into the Western culture here... The parenting style I have received since childhood and my own hobbies are all related to traditional Chinese culture. I feel that I am an exception. Many other [Chinese] students may choose to stay here because they like the Western living

[style] and working environment. I am here to get to know different cultures or lifestyles. It's a pity that I haven't been able to integrate Western culture. CIS can adapt to cultural differences and overcome certain barriers. However, as highlighted above, some challenges may be more individualized which reminds us that CIS are a heterogeneous group in addition to the shared culture among them.

Difficulties in Developing Close Friendships

Six out of eight participants specifically reported different degrees of difficulty with building deeper friendships with domestic students. They thought that most Americans they met were friendly and kind. However, because of the barriers discussed above, the interactions were typically “kept at a surface level.” Participants did not think their relationships with natives were close or deep. P6 reported similar feelings and shared his thoughts on possible reasons for CIS challenges in making American friends: “I think the cultural and ideological gap prevents us from building deep friendships with Americans. They understand each other's jokes and slang. I'm not able to understand and react as they expected. Therefore, it is difficult to communicate further.”

Some participants proposed the possibility that the difficulty level of building friendships was related to the length they stayed in the U.S. This idea was supported by P7, who came to the U.S. at a younger age and stayed in the country for 11 years, longer than other participants. After hearing other participants' difficulties, he responded differently: “Well, maybe I came here at a younger age... I have some close [American] friends, and my social connection with them is similar to what I had in high school in China.”

Career and Future Concerns

Four participants reported their concerns and thoughts about their careers and futures. Participants did not view CIS as being competitive in the U.S. work market. P5 shared his experience in failing to secure an internship: “I have applied to seven or eight companies. I didn't hear back... It's very difficult for me to get an internship [as an international student]. I feel my future is very slim.” Participants' concerns about the future were related to their current academic performance and peer pressure. This led them to doubt their abilities and feel guilty about receiving financial support from family while not meeting the expectations of their parents, all of which resulted in low confidence. P1 shared:

Because my family supports my education financially, I question if it is enough to just make my grades look better. Can I do anything if I throw myself into the workplace right now? [...] Everyone has a skill or unique quality that they are proud of that can be put into their resume. However, when I look at myself, I struggle to describe something outstanding about me.

The worries about their future/career even contributed to P1's insomnia, who claimed he used to be "able to fall asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow." A discussion with his friends made him reach the conclusion that "People tend to reminisce about the past only when they are unsatisfied [with the present]. The more they dwell on it, the more their dissatisfaction persists." The repeated intrusive thoughts prevented him from falling asleep.

COVID-19-related Challenges and Experiences

COVID-19-related challenges and experiences for Chinese international students in this study could be broadly classified into two categories: new challenges added by COVID-19 and pre-existing challenges that were intensified due to the pandemic. The former included significant changes such as the transition to online classes, as well as evolving visa policies and on-campus study restrictions. The latter were previously documented challenges that, while not unique to 2020, were further intensified during this time.

Challenges Added Since COVID-19

Beginning during the 2020 Spring semester, schools across the U.S. converted most of their in-person courses to online. Participants seemed to be significantly impacted by this transition. They expressed awareness that their attitude and motivation determined the effectiveness of online classes. P6 disclosed that "I check my phone or iPad during classes. I think it's a common thing with online classes. Online learning is certainly not as effective as in-person learning." Participants also stated that an online format not only hindered learning but also teaching. P4 said, "The instructions of the classes became easier, and the class design became less rich after transitioning to online." Online lectures forced professors to modify their curriculum design and teaching plan to fit the nature of online teaching platforms, which impacted students' learning experiences.

Compared with in-person teaching, professors' transition to online teaching and students' disengagement with their studies magnified the limitations of online classes and posed new challenges for CIS. These challenges differed based on the locations where participants took the online courses (e.g., U.S. or China). P2 expressed her difficulty in finding a balance between online classes "in" the U.S. and offline life in China: "Taking online classes and the isolated environment creates a sense of 'split self'... I feel that my daily life [in China] is part of my life, and the world I face via Zoom is the other part." The participant was unable to integrate the two parts of her life well, which resulted in a sense of fragmentation that impacted her emotions: "I am a mess every day. It's very... very chaotic. I feel like my life is meaningless, and I even feel that I may be in a relatively depressed state."

As illustrated above, since Spring 2020, students have navigated the transition from in-person to online learning. At the same time, the U.S. government tightened the entry requirements and specified course credits as well as lecture types (e.g., hybrid) for international students studying in U.S. universities (U.S.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2020). Those who could not meet the requirements were not permitted to enter the U.S., which posed a significant impact on the academic planning of some international students. Uncertainty about the status of the pandemic and fluctuation in policies also led to an additional challenge for students since 2020: “It seems that things are about to reach the stage that I can control, but I still can't grasp it completely. That's a very strange state” [P3]. In addition, P3 shared her feelings of uncertainty stemming from the inconsistency between the U.S. universities' COVID-19 vaccine requirements and accessible vaccines in China: “The amount of vaccines in Beijing is very sufficient. I can get fully vaccinated. However, I am not sure whether I can get the Sinopharm vaccine, and Sinovac is not approved by the WHO [at that time]”. U.S. universities required international students to receive a vaccine that was certified by the World Health Organization (WHO). Initially, the Sinopharm vaccine was the only Chinese vaccine approved by the WHO, but Chinese people usually get vaccinated with whatever vaccine is available in their community. The inconsistency between vaccination requirements and available vaccine distribution caused feelings of uncertainty.

Challenges Intensified Since COVID-19

Factors including COVID-19, changing policy, and Asian hate intensified CIS difficulties in building new relationships, safety concerns, and worries about racism. Almost all participants mentioned the challenges in building romantic relationships and friendships. Building new connections was more difficult for certain types of students. Because of entry restrictions, international students, such as P2, who was about to start her first semester in the U.S., were required to take their classes remotely in China. P2 used the Chinese term “JieYuan” [结缘] to identify the action/behavior of meeting someone and starting a relationship. She described a low motivation to “JieYuan,” because she preferred a long-term and stable relationship but feared that any new relationship would become long-distance if the school reverted to in-person classes. Thus, she felt social hesitation and avoided the risk of getting acquainted with others and having to cut the stable relationship off in the future: “This kind of situation [uncertainty] made me afraid to and not want to start a new relationship.”

Moreover, participants were concerned about their safety and physical health. P8 expressed fear of contracting coronavirus: “The coronavirus is quite serious. What if I get it? The treatment in the U.S. is quite expensive.” The reported number of individuals infected with COVID-19 and the death toll in the U.S. were higher than in China. The significant difference in the reported number and the responses to the pandemic between the two countries increased the concerns of CIS and their families about students' physical health. Four participants specifically reported their parents' concerns regarding the high risk of infection.

COVID-19 also aggravated CIS worries about racism: “[Because of] the pandemic, there were some hateful statements and behaviors against Asians. This is a big worry for me... I felt like I was going to be subjected to hate speech just

because I am Asian” (P2). Six participants reported that they had personally experienced or heard that people around them had experienced discrimination or being mistreated during the pandemic. P1 disclosed the experience of being victimized by hate speech: “I went to Walmart with three friends [CIS]... We all wore masks for our own safety. Two other customers pointed at us and said: ‘Chinese virus fuck off’, and then they left.” P5 shared the experience of his classmate receiving unfair treatment from a Chinese American who is considered “one of us” by CIS:

My classmate [a Chinese international student] had the experience of being discriminated against by another fellow Chinese person who had a green card. He sent me a video recording that [a Chinese-American manager of] a restaurant kicked him out in front of all the diners. It seems like the manager wanted other people to see what he did, like showing his attitude [that this restaurant will not let in CIS]. Even though some American customers didn't support this behavior, the manager insisted on kicking the student out... His logic was, like: “If you just came here from China, you must have the virus, and everyone hates you, so let me show others that I will not let people like you get into this restaurant”. The discrimination from “one of our own” was actually more harmful than those from the Americans.

It was not uncommon for CIS to experience discrimination from various groups during COVID-19. What made it worse was the discrimination from those who shared a similar racial/ethnic background, which was often perceived as more harmful because it was from “your own group.”

Demand for Service Availability and Quality

Participants evaluated the services they utilized and expressed a need for an improvement in both quantity and quality. They illustrated the need for more available resources and services. Moreover, they recommended that services be provided by professionals with knowledge of CIS traits, restrictions, and experiences.

Demand for Increased Services

Participants noted the necessity for increased appointment availability in international student affairs during peak times to better serve the needs of CIS:

There is a department XXX [name of a center that handles services for international students] in our school.... It is difficult to make an appointment with them because a lot of students book their services at the same time. During the graduation season, many students apply for OPT [Optional Practical Training] or CPT [Curricular Practical Training]... That's what I want to complain about. I have to make an appointment scheduled two weeks in advance. (P3)

International students faced additional challenges scheduling appointments because they had to meet some requirements in order to receive certain on-campus services. For example, P4 was unable to receive counseling services from her U.S. university when she was in China, which hindered her from receiving the support she needed. “At that time, their services were only available to clients who were physically in the state, so there was no way to deal with my situation...”

Demand for Improved Quality of Services

Participants also stated their demand for better quality services that could meet their needs, especially in career services. P3 highlighted that the job-hunting culture in China is different from that in the U.S.; instead of maintaining good grades to prepare for future job-seeking, U.S. culture encourages students to “build their resume on the first day on campus by going out and networking with alumni and people.” She added: “I hope the career services can be more suitable for CIS, more approachable, or at least the school can explain the differences of job hunting between the U.S. and China to us better.”

P7 contended that university career services needed to consider the unique needs of international students and provide specific services. He shared his experience of not knowing how to respond when asked whether he needed a visa during one interview because the career services at his university did not prepare him for that question during mock interviews. He did not know the company would equally evaluate a local American applicant and a Chinese international applicant who needed extra support regarding a work visa. That experience led him to believe more mock interviews or workshops that specifically provided training for international students would be necessary: “There are workshops and mock interviews in universities, but they mainly serve the needs of domestic students. However, the interview process can be different for international students, and universities should understand their needs and prepare them for it...” P7 added, “Otherwise, international students may be asked questions in an actual interview that they never prepared or practiced for during the mock interview with career services.”

Discussion

This study explored the lived experience of Chinese international students studying in U.S. universities since 2020. Three themes with seven sub-themes were identified by using Van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology to analyze recorded interviews with eight participants. These themes supported the existing research on CIS lived experiences, especially the challenges and barriers examined in the first two main themes. The first theme summarizes typical challenges that can be grounded by the normal psychological reaction of an individual visiting a new environment, which is related to their own adaptability, English proficiency, and cultural integration. However, a large portion of barriers

and prejudices were associated with the history of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. While the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which specifically restricted Chinese immigration, has been repealed, the stereotype of Chinese immigrants threatening the jobs and resources of U.S. citizens persists (Kil, 2012). This has created a historical legacy of anti-Chinese sentiment and ethnic discrimination that continues to exist today (Hooper & Batalova, 2015) and explains the lack of job opportunities and negative attitudes toward CIS by some Americans. The second theme illustrates challenges added or intensified since 2020. COVID-19 as a universal crisis has impacted individuals differently; for CIS in the U.S., the impact is multifaceted and can be long-term. Many hidden or invisible challenges have emerged since 2020. Hesitation to start an intimate relationship or build a new social network can sometimes be categorized as a type of cultural adjustment issue and may be interpreted as related to an introverted personality (e.g., Aydin, 2020). However, as our findings illustrate, in addition to personality, there may be other factors and concerns that cause international students' hesitation to socialize with others from culturally and ethnically different backgrounds. To reduce concerns that negatively affect CIS lives, institutions can support students by providing workshops on U.S. social norms or organizing support groups focused on specific topics, such as long-distance or mixed-nationality relationships. The challenge of safety concerns and worries about racism identified through the current study suggest the need for additional support to CIS to ensure their success throughout the program of study.

The third theme helps explain the causes of some challenges or different behaviors of CIS that previous studies identified. More specifically, the literature suggests that international students may underutilize services related to their needs, even though they know social support is available (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhou et al., 2021). However, few studies have delved deeply to search for root causes. This study intended to understand why CIS act or react in ways that may not be considered "common sense" from the mainstream's perspective. Considering participants' experiences, this study offers an alternative interpretation. The behavior of not utilizing resources does not mean that CIS do not need them, nor does it mean resources for international students are unnecessary, or that universities can reassuringly ignore this group. On the contrary, the hesitation to seek services may indicate that CIS feel or believe those resources are not able to help, suggesting the need for more meaningful resources. Institutions need to learn more about the international student population, their cultures, and the reasons for their lack of help-seeking behaviors. It is unfair to use their culture, parenting style, or the non-Western education system they studied before as excuses for their "failure" to utilize resources. Successful approaches to campus diversity recognize not only population diversity but also the need for people with diverse backgrounds and from diverse cultures to feel engaged, respected, and included. Thus, in addition to the traditional Chinese culture of obedience and endurance, a reason for the low help-seeking behaviors of CIS might be their negative experiences of utilizing support, such as limited availability of relevant support or poor support quality.

Findings show that the challenges experienced by international students can be better understood if professionals are better prepared with culturally relevant knowledge and proactive strategies for providing effective services to international students that consider social policies, history, and current trends. In addition, CIS may need advocacy to get to know what services are available and how the services can be helpful. Services should be culturally specific and support must be reinforced constantly (Redfern, 2016). The services mentioned here should not be merely focused on international students themselves because challenges such as racism cannot be addressed by a one-sided focus on international students. The surrounding environments of CIS need consideration and improvement to become more culturally sensitive; multicultural education in educational settings should emphasize the importance of social justice advocacy (Lawyer, 2018). The findings of this study align with those of Halpern et al. (2022), suggesting that to further internationalization and promote diversity across campuses, universities should facilitate cross-cultural integration among international and domestic students, faculty, and staff. In addition, training for faculty members' multicultural competencies enhancement and events for international students and local community connections are also elements institutions need to consider.

Limitations and Recommendations

The uniqueness of the problems that CIS face (Liu, 2009) is consistent with the challenges and barriers this study identified. This suggests the need to address difficulties independently from other international student communities, such as Indian students and other Chinese groups (e.g., students in China and Chinese Americans). Researchers tend to think of CIS as similar to East Asian or other Asian international students (Li et al., 2014). The current study uses hermeneutical phenomenology (Van Manen, 2016) for an in-depth analysis of CIS lived experiences, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to international students from countries other than China. Hermeneutical phenomenology relies on language to understand the essence of participants' experiences, which presents limitations when participants have language barriers. To overcome this challenge, interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, both the original and translated transcripts were sent to participants for confirmation, and professionals proficient in both languages were invited to verify accuracy. These approaches enabled participants to accurately and clearly explain their experiences while minimizing translation errors and their impact on the outcomes. In addition, the phenomenological approach may introduce potential bias in data interpretation due to researchers' personal perspectives and presumptions. Ongoing self-reflection, discussion of possible preconceptions, and bracketing can help researchers identify unintended biases and maintain objectivity. Hermeneutical phenomenology is a widely used and important methodology for studying individuals' lived experiences. When using hermeneutical phenomenology with participants who have language barriers, the above approaches are recommended to minimize relevant limitations.

Findings of the current study not only give a voice to CIS, but also provide some insights for future studies, as well as higher education professionals on what CIS encounter, what they need, and how to best help them. Findings of this research suggest that counselors or other helping professionals be familiar with typical and unique barriers that CIS face and corresponding resources that are helpful. Considering those barriers, counselors may also adjust sessions, styles, or approaches. For example, it might be helpful for the counselor to slow their speaking speed and be flexible with using translation apps when a CIS client expresses language barriers. Findings also encourage counselors to be aware of additional barriers faced by CIS clients due to certain environmental or political changes. Professionals should intentionally evaluate the difficulty levels and provide appropriate support in sufficient quantity and quality. Additionally, future studies can compare CIS with other international students in the U.S. to ensure that all international students have a successful experience in the U.S. In this way, student affairs professionals will be prepared to assist international students, especially if they face the aforementioned difficulties in the future. The findings of the current study further recommend more studies to learn about the experiences of international students after the pandemic, which can be called the "post-COVID era," and how the educational system recovered from the destruction caused by the pandemic.

References

- Anand, D., & Hsu, L. (2020). COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter: Examining anti-Asian racism and anti-Blackness in US education. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education*, 5(1), 190-199. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jimphe.v5i1.2656>
- Aydın, O. T. (2020). Social interaction between students: Local and international students' experiences at a Turkish university. *Journal of International Students*, 10(2), 383-400. <https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis/article/view/1067>
- Balkin, R. S., & Kleist, D. M. (2017). *Counseling research: A practitioner scholar approach*. American Counseling Association.
- Banks, J. A., & Banks, M. (2004). *Handbook for multicultural education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Berezin, M. (2006). Xenophobia and the new nationalisms. In G. Delanty & K. Kumar (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* (pp. 273-284). SAGE Publications Ltd. <http://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608061.n24>
- Bloor, M., & Wood, F. (2006). Phenomenological methods. In M. Bloor & F. Wood (Eds.), *Keywords in qualitative methods: A vocabulary of research concepts* (pp. 129-131). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209403.n40>

- Cao, W., Fang, Z., Hou, G., Han, M., Xu, X., Dong, J., & Zheng, J. (2020). The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psychiatry Research*, 287, 112934. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112934>
- Castiello-Gutiérrez, S., Hoye, K. A., García, H. A., & McNaughtan, J. (2021). Educators, not bureaucrats: How managerial professionals at international student services centers engage in job crafting and create meaning in their work. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(11), 2167-2182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1716317>
- Choudaha, R., Orosz, K., & Chang, L. (2012). Not all international students are the same: Understanding segments, mapping behavior. *World Education News & Reviews*, 25(7). Retrieved from <https://knowledge.wes.org/rs/worldeducationservice/images/RAS-Paper-02-Not-All-International-Students-Are-the-Same-Understanding-Segments-Mapping-Behavior.pdf>
- Choy, Y., & Alon, Z. (2019). The comprehensive mental health treatment of Chinese international students: A case report. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 33(1), 47-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2018.1427513>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Dowling, M. (2007). From Husserl to van Manen: A review of different phenomenological approaches. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 44(1), 131-142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2005.11.026>
- Fine, M. (2017). *Just research in contentious times: Widening the methodological imagination*. Teachers College Press.
- Gartman, K. (2016). Challenges of international students in a university setting. *Journal of Adult Education*, 45(1), 1-7.
- Guo, Y., Cheng, C., Zeng, Y. U., Li, Y., Zhu, M., Yang, W., ... & Wu, S. (2020). Mental health disorders and associated risk factors in quarantined adults during the COVID-19 outbreak in China: Cross-sectional study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(8), e20328, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.2196/20328>
- Gurin, P., Dey, E., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(3), 330-367. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.72.3.01151786u134n051>
- Halpern, C., Halpern, B., & Aydin, H. (2022). International students' lived experiences with intercultural competence in a southwest Florida university. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 24(1), 47-67. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v24i1.3013>

- Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 22-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1152466>
- Holcomb-McCoy, C. C., & Myers, J. E. (1999). Multicultural competence and counselor training: A national survey. *Journal of counseling & development*, 77(3), 294-302. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1999.tb02452.x>
- Hooper, K., & Batalova, J. (2015). Chinese immigrants in the United States. *Migration Policy Institute*, 28, 1-13.
- Hou, F., Bi, F., Jiao, R., Luo, D., & Song, K. (2020). Gender differences of depression and anxiety among social media users during the COVID-19 outbreak in China: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, 20, 1-11.
- Huang, R., & Turner, R. (2018). International experience, universities support and graduate employability—perceptions of Chinese international students studying in UK universities. *Journal of Education and Work*, 31(2), 175-189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2018.1436751>
- Hwang, B., Bennett, R., & Beauchemin, J. (2014). International students' utilization of counseling services. *College Student Journal*, 48(3), 347-354.
- Institute for International Education. (2022). Top 25 places of origin of international students, 2000/01-2023/24. *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. Retrieved from <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/leading-places-of-origin/>.
- Jin, R., & Wang, X. (2022). "Somewhere I belong?" A study on transnational identity shifts caused by "double stigmatization" among Chinese international student returnees during COVID-19 through the lens of mindsponge mechanism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1018843, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1018843>
- Kil, S. H. (2012). Fearing yellow, imagining white: Media analysis of the Chinese exclusion act of 1882. *Social Identities*, 18(6), 663-677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2012.708995>
- Korhonen, V. (2024, July 5). Number of international students in the United States from 2003/04 to 2021/23. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/237681/international-students-in-the-us/>
- Laws, K., & Ammigan, R. (2020). International students in the Trump era. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), 18-22. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2001>
- Lawyer, G. (2018). The dangers of separating social justice from multicultural education: Applications in higher education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 20(1), 86-101. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v20i1.1538>

- Lee, K. C. G. (2013). Training and educating international students in professional psychology: What graduate programs should know. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 7*(1), 61-69. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031186>
- Li, J., Wang, Y., & Xiao, F. (2014). East Asian international students and psychological well-being: A systematic review. *Journal of International Students, 4*(4), 301-313.
- Lian, Z., Wallace, B. C., & Fullilove, R. E. (2020). Mental health help-seeking intentions among Chinese international students in the US higher education system: The role of coping self-efficacy, social support, and stigma for seeking psychological help. *Asian American Journal of Psychology, 11*(3), 147-157. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000183>
- Litam, S. D. A. (2020). "Take your Kung-Flu back to Wuhan": Counseling Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders with race-based trauma related to COVID-19. *Professional Counselor, 10*(2), 144-156. <https://doi.org/10.15241/sdal.10.2.144>
- Liu, M. (2009). Addressing the mental health problems of Chinese international college students in the United States. *Advances in Social Work, 10*(1), 69-86. <https://doi.org/10.18060/164>
- Luo, J., & Jamieson-Drake, D. (2013). Examining the educational benefits of interacting with international students. *Journal of International Students, 3*, 85-101. <https://doi.org/10.6084/M9.FIGSHARE.773054.V1>.
- Lysgaard, S. (1955). Adjustment in foreign society: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States. *International Social Science Bulletin, 7*, 45-51.
- Ma, H., & Miller, C. (2021). Trapped in a double bind: Chinese overseas student anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Communication, 36*(13), 1598-1605. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1775439>
- Mok, K. H., Xiong, W., Ke, G., & Cheung, J. O. W. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility: Student perspectives from mainland China and Hong Kong. *International Journal of Educational Research, 105*, 101718, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101718>
- Nam, B. H., Marshall, R. C., Tian, X., & Jiang, X. (2021). "Why universities need to actively combat Sinophobia": Racially-traumatic experiences of Chinese international students in the United States during COVID-19. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 51*(5), 690-704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1965957>
- Park, H., Lee, M. J., Choi, G. Y., & Zepernick, J. S. (2017). Challenges and coping strategies of East Asian graduate students in the United States. *International Social Work, 60*(3), 733-749. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002087281665586>

- Perry, C. J., Lausch, D. W., Weatherford, J., Goeken, R., & Almendares, M. (2017). International students' perceptions of university life. *College Student Journal, 51*(2), 279-290.
- Redfern, K. (2016). An empirical investigation of the incidence of negative psychological symptoms among Chinese international students at an Australian university. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 68*(4), 281-289. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajpy.12106>
- Sanford, N. (1967). *Where colleges fail: A study of the student as a person*. Jossey-Bass.
- Sawir, E. (2013). International students and internationalisation of higher education. *Journal of International Students, 3* (1), iii-iv.
- Shanahan, L., Steinhoff, A., Bechtiger, L., Murray, A. L., Nivette, A., Hepp, U., Ribeaud, D., & Eisner, M. (2020). Emotional distress in young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence of risk and resilience from a longitudinal cohort study. *Psychological Medicine, 52*(5), 824–833. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003329172000241X>
- Shu, H. (2019, Nov 28). Number of Chinese students in the U.S. 2008/09-2018/19. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/372900/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-in-the-us/>
- Silver, L. (2022). Some Americans' views of China turned more negative after 2020, but others became more positive. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/09/28/some-americans-views-of-china-turned-more-negative-after-2020-but-others-became-more-positive/>
- Sloan, A., & Bowe, B. (2014). Phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology: The philosophy, the methodologies, and using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate lecturers' experiences of curriculum design. *Quality & Quantity, 48*(3), 1291-1303. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-013-9835-3>
- Tsai, W., Wang, K. T., & Wei, M. (2017). Reciprocal relations between social self-efficacy and loneliness among Chinese international students. *Asian American Journal of Psychology, 8*(2), 94-102. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000065>
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (2020, July 6). SEVP modifies temporary exemptions for nonimmigrant students taking online courses during fall 2020 semester. <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/sevp-modifies-temporary-exemptions-nonimmigrant-students-taking-online-courses-during>
- Van Manen, M. (1997). From meaning to method. *Qualitative Health Research, 7*(3), 345-369.
- Van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Routledge.

- Van Manen, M. (2017). But is it phenomenology? *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(6), 775-779.
- Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2012). Critical bifocality and circuits of privilege: Expanding critical ethnographic theory and design. *Harvard Educational Review*, 82(2), 173-201. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.82.2.v1jx34n441532242>
- Williams, C. T., & Johnson, L. R. (2011). Why can't we be friends? Multicultural attitudes and friendships with international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(1), 41-48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.11.001>
- Xie, L., & Xu, Y. (2024). A systematic review on the factors affecting Chinese international students' mental health. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 46 (2), 43–368. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-024-09542-7>
- Xiong, Y., Rose Parasath, P., Zhang, Q., & Jeon, L. (2022). International students' perceived discrimination and psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of American College Health*, 72(3), 869–880. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2059376>
- Xu, Y., Gibson, D., Pandey, T., Jiang, Y., & Olsoe, B. (2021). The lived experiences of Chinese international college students and scholars during the initial COVID-19 quarantine period in the United States. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 43(4), 534-552. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-021-09446-w>
- Yakunina, E. S., Weigold, I. K., & McCarthy, A. S. (2010). Group counseling with international students: Practical, ethical, and cultural considerations. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 25(1), 67-78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2011.532672>
- Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C. (2011). Chinese international students in the United States: Demographic trends, motivations, acculturation features and adjustment challenges. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 12(2), 173–184. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-010-9117-x>
- Ye, M., Fu, D., Ren, Y., Wang, F., Wang, D., Zhang, F., ... & Lv, T. (2020). Treatment with convalescent plasma for COVID-19 patients in Wuhan, China. *Journal of Medical Virology*, 92(10), 1890-1901. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmv.25882>
- Yu, J. (2021). Caught in the middle? Chinese international students' self-formation amid politics and pandemic. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 10(3), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/22125868211058911>
- Zhang, B., Bow, C. O., & Bow, J. M. (2020). The Intersection of racism and xenophobia on the rise amid COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study investigating experiences of Asian Chinese international students in America. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica*, 29(5), 1145-1156.

Zhou, S., Banawa, R., & Oh, H. (2021). Stop Asian hate: The mental health impact of racial discrimination among Asian Pacific Islander young and emerging adults during COVID-19. *Health Services Research, 56* (S2), 8-9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.13723>

Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview Questions and Corresponding Components of Theoretical Framework

Theory	Components	Interview Questions
CB & CST	Overall challenges; Overall wellbeings	What is your experience of living and studying in the U.S. (e.g., academic, social, emotional)?
CB & CST	Cultural & environmental related challenges; Life satisfaction & rapport building	Are these experiences different from your experiences prior to coming to the United States? If so, how (e.g., academic environment, education style, interpersonal relationships, lifestyle)
CB & CST	Environmental-related challenges; Life satisfaction & mental health	What is your experience of being an international student during the pandemic? Is this different than before the pandemic? If so, how (e.g., economically, psychologically)?
CB & CST	Political and cultural related challenges; Life satisfaction & mental health	What is your experience of being an international student during the Black Lives Matter movement (e.g., psychologically, concerns about racial discrimination)?
CB	Political-related challenges; Sense of belonging & life satisfaction	What is your experience of being an international student during the Trump Administration and the 2020 election (e.g., emotionally, concerns about international student status/work visa)?
CB & CST	Cultural related challenges; Sense of belonging & life	Have you ever experienced or heard that other Chinese international students have experienced discrimination, prejudice, or unfair treatment? If you have, please tell me what happened. How

	satisfaction	did you or your friends respond and/or deal with this discrimination? How do you feel about that response?
CB & CST	Overall challenges; Self-efficacy	If you encountered challenges/barriers related to being an international student, please describe those challenges and/or barriers (e.g. language barriers, adjustment issues, culture shock). How did you cope with them? (e.g., handled by yourself, talked with a friend, visited the counseling center)
CB & CST	Campus-related challenges; Life satisfaction & academic success	In your university, are there any services or activities you think are helpful to international students? (e.g., Global Education Office, Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, activities, programs) Is there any service that doesn't help or needs improvement?
CB & CST	Campus-related challenges; Overall wellbeing	What can higher education institutions do to support international students better?
CB & CST	Individual challenges; Self-efficacy	What are your future plans? (e.g. academic plan, career plan, returning or continuing to live abroad, emigration)
CB & CST	Individual challenges	Is there any other experience you would like to share?
CB	Demographic information	Demographic questions including age, major, length of stay in the U.S., etc

Notes. CB: Critical Bifocality; CST: Sanford's Challenges and Support Theory.

Appendix 2

Codebook

Main code	Sub-code	Definition	Themes
Academic challenge	AC_class	Participants experienced challenges related to classes e.g., online classes	COVID
	AC_time management	Participants reported challenges in time management e.g., procrastination	COVID

	AC_language	Participants indicated language barriers	Typical
	AC_performance	Participants expressed concerns about their academic performance e.g., GPA	Typical & COVID
Cultural challenge	CC_adjustment	Participants experienced cultural adjustment issues and cultural shock.	Typical
	CC_homesick	Participants expressed homesickness during COVID	Typical & COVID
	CC_racism	Participants reported experiencing or observing discrimination towards CISs	Typical & COVID
Social challenge	SC_relationship	Participants share barriers or challenges in building or maintaining relationships e.g., faculty-student relationship	Typical & COVID
	SC_communicate	Participants find difficulties in communication with others e.g., classmates or professors	COVID
	SC_travel restrict	Participants mentioned restriction that limited their opportunities to social e.g., less direct contact with others	COVID
Other challenges	OC_resources	Participants indicated concerns about lack of resources e.g., financial concerns or materials	COVID
	OC_policy	Participants indicated concerns regarding policies e.g., CIS entry restrictions	COVID
	OC_future	Participants mentioned concerns about their future e.g., job searching or delayed graduation	Typical & COVID
	OC_other	Participants experienced other challenges that CISs students may encounter e.g., health concerns	Typical & COVID
Services and Support	S_academic	Participants' experiences with services and support regarding academics e.g., tutorial	Services
	S_social	Participants mentioned services and support regarding social relationships for	Services

CISs		
S_fiancial	Participants mentioned financial support for CISs	Services
S_job/career	Participants mentioned services and support regarding job searching such as career fairs for CISs	Services
S_mental health	Participants talked about mental health services e.g., counseling	Services
S_physical health	Participants talked about physical health services e.g., COVID tests	Services
S_other	Participants talked about other resources or support they received	Services

Notes. Typical = typical challenges that CIS usually encounter; COVID = challenges specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic; Support = demand for service improvement.

Author Contact

Lindai Xie, xiel3@vcu.edu

Yaoying Xu, yxu2@vcu.edu