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# Asian International Students' Acculturation Over a Decade: An Integrative Literature Review

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**ABSTRACT:** Increasing global mobility of students has intensified scholarly interest in the adaptation experiences of Asian international students. This integrative literature review synthesizes studies published between 2015 and 2025 to examine the academic, social, and psychological challenges encountered by Asian international students, proposing a five-part conceptual framework based on these themes. The review also uncovers significant research gaps, including a paucity of region-specific studies or a lack of culturally tailored mental health literacy interventions. Findings provide evidence for future research and institutional strategies to enhance cross-cultural adaptation and ensure equitable support for this diverse student population in global higher education.

**KEYWORDS:** Asian international students, acculturation, bibliometric retrospective, systematic synthesis, integrative literature review.

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Global student mobility has experienced exponential growth in recent decades, but it has now entered a new and contested era (Pawar, 2025). The disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with rising geopolitical tensions and shifting economic currents, have fractured traditional mobility corridors and fundamentally reshaped the strategic landscape of international education. Previous research has demonstrated that international student flows are closely linked to global trade patterns, highlighting the strategic importance of education in international relations, economic diplomacy, and global talent development (Adam, 2024; Shields, 2013). Today, this linkage has become a flashpoint. International students, particularly those from Asia, are increasingly at the center of a complex political economy. These students are often considered critical financial contributors to universities, particularly in developed countries, while simultaneously being subjects of national security and diplomatic scrutiny (Bevis, 2002; Mathews-Aydinli, 2017). However, beyond their economic contributions, international students play a crucial role in enriching host societies through the

cultural diversity they bring (Berry, 2005). Their unique heritages, perspectives, and experiences contribute to greater cultural awareness, cross-cultural understanding, and global competency within academic institutions and the broader community (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Asia has emerged as both a major sender and, increasingly, a host of international students. With careful design and governance, international mobility programs are well-positioned to foster cross-border communication, enhance cultural understanding, and contribute to institutional collaborations in higher education (Kang et al., 2024).

Simultaneously, the substantial rise in international student enrollment has drawn significant academic attention, particularly in understanding the patterns and motivations behind global student mobility (Zhou & Yin, 2024). One prominent area of research focuses on how international students, especially those from Asia, navigate various challenges related to cross-cultural adaptation, acculturative stress, and academic and social integration (Ng et al., 2017).

Despite a growing body of literature exploring the experiences of international students, a notable gap remains in comprehensive, synthesized research specifically addressing the acculturation processes of Asian international students. However, in addressing this gap, it is crucial to critically acknowledge that the term “Asian international students” encompasses a vastly heterogeneous population. This category includes individuals from diverse subregions (e.g., East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia) who possess distinct cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, and historical backgrounds. A significant limitation within the existing literature, which this review aims to address, is the tendency to adopt a “one-size-fits-all” framework, often generalizing findings from one dominant subgroup (such as Chinese students) to the entire Asian diaspora. This oversimplification risks essentialism and obscures the unique acculturation challenges and support needs of diverse nationalities. Therefore, a primary objective of this review is not only to synthesize common themes but also to critically examine the extent to which the literature accounts for this diversity, thereby laying a foundation for more nuanced and culturally specific future inquiry. To comprehend the underlying dynamics and inform educational practices and policymaking (Zhou & Yin, 2024), this study aims to critically examine the multifaceted challenges supporting the acculturation and well-being of Asian students in international higher education environments. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What are the key publication trends, geographical distributions, and influential journals in the field of Asian international students’ acculturation from 2015 to 2025?
- RQ2: What are the significant themes and conceptual constructs addressed in the existing literature on Asian international students’ acculturation?
- RQ3: What are the gaps, limitations, and future research directions indicated by the literature on the acculturation of Asian international students?

The findings of this review are intended to provide actionable, evidence-based insights for both researchers and higher education practitioners. By identifying the persistent gaps in the literature — such as the oversimplification of

the “Asian” cohort and the lack of culturally grounded mental health frameworks — this study provides a clear directive for future research. More critically, it guides institutional policymaking by demonstrating the urgent need to move beyond “one-size-fits-all” support models. This research articulates how these findings can inform the design of disaggregated, culturally-responsive support systems and help institutions strategically prepare for shifting mobility patterns in a new geopolitical landscape, thereby fostering a truly supportive and culturally competent educational environment.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a systematic literature review to comprehensively examine the acculturation experiences of Asian international students over the past decade. To ensure methodological rigor and transparency, the review integrates a bibliometric retrospective with a systematic synthesis of empirical findings. The following sections detail the research protocols, including the search strategy guided by the PRISMA and SPIDER frameworks, the screening criteria for study selection, and the analytical procedures utilized to interpret the data.

### **Data Collection**

This study conducted a systematic literature review to address the core research questions concerning the acculturation experiences of Asian international students. The review process adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021), ensuring procedural transparency and conceptual precision. The PRISMA framework was implemented across three main phases, illustrated later in Figure 1.

In addition to PRISMA, this study adopted the SPIDER framework (Cooke et al., 2012) to define and refine the search parameters clearly (detailed in Table 1). The SPIDER framework comprises five components: Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research Type.

**Table 1***The Application of the SPIDER Framework*

<b>SPIDER Component</b>	<b>Definition in This Study</b>
S – Sample	Asian international students studying in higher education institutions across both Western and Asian host countries.
PI – Phenomenon of Interest	Acculturation, cross-cultural adaptation experiences, including sociocultural, academic, psychological, and emotional adjustment, etc.
D – Design	Empirical studies (both quantitative and qualitative).
E – Evaluation	Outcomes related to acculturation, adaptation, cross-cultural, and adjustment.
R – Research Type	Empirical peer-reviewed journal articles written in English, primarily focusing on final-stage publications indexed in Scopus.

Based on the dual-framework approach, combining PRISMA for procedural transparency and SPIDER for conceptual precision, this study developed a targeted search strategy using the Scopus database. Each element of the query was designed with clear inclusion criteria to identify relevant literature (detailed in Table 2).

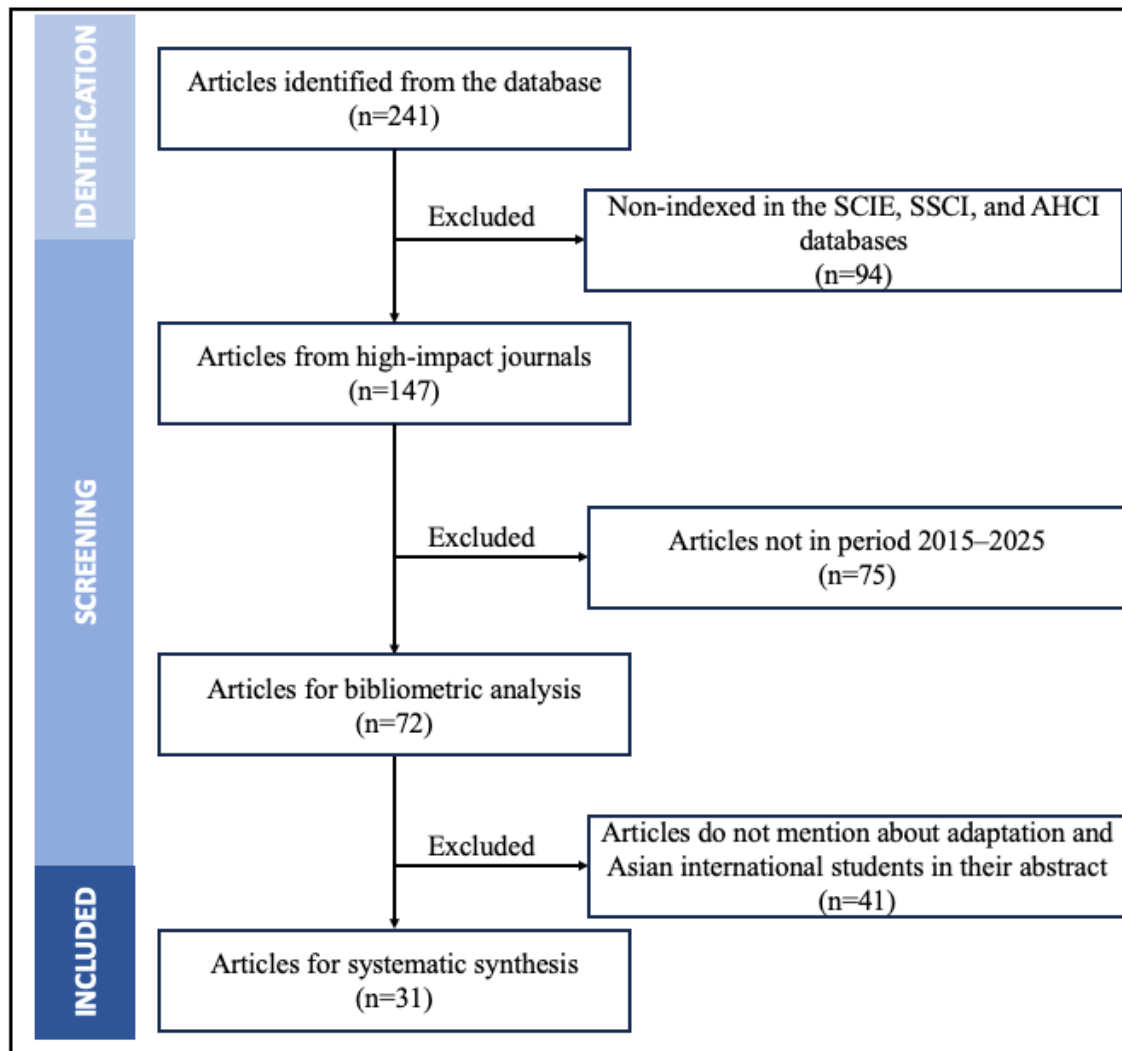
**Table 2***Search String and Its Definition*

<b>Search String</b>	<b>Definition in This Study</b>
("Asia" OR "Asian") AND "international student*"	Capturing publications specifically focused on international students from or associated with Asia.
("acculturation" OR "adapt" OR "cross-cultural" OR "adjustment")	Representing the core concepts of the phenomenon of interest—namely, the psychological, sociocultural, and academic dimensions of acculturation and adjustment.
LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar")	Restricting the search to peer-reviewed articles, excluding other document types such as reviews, conference papers, or book chapters, to ensure academic rigor.
LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, "final")	Filtering out articles in press, ensuring that only fully published and finalized manuscripts are included in the analysis.
LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, "j")	Limiting results to journal sources only, excluding non-journal content to maintain quality and peer-reviewed standards.
LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")	Ensuring language consistency for data extraction and analysis by selecting only articles published in English.

Following the implementation of the search strategy, a total of 241 articles were found. This study further applied a screening filter based on journal indexing to enhance the academic rigor of the subsequent systematic synthesis, retaining only articles published in scholarly journals indexed in the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (AHCI). These indices are reviewed and maintained yearly, reflecting journals that meet stringent editorial standards and exhibit high scholarly impact (Zhou & Yin, 2024). This review acknowledges that this stringent “double gatekeeping” (filtering via Scopus and then again via these indices) is a significant methodological choice. While this approach achieves a high degree of established academic rigor, it systematically overlooks a crucial body of evidence, likely excluding valuable regional, practice-oriented, and institutional scholarship (e.g., in databases such as KCI from Korea, CNKI from China, or Airiti from Taiwan), where acculturation is discussed clearly. This trade-off is a known limitation of this review. Then, based on the published year, I narrowed the publication window to a ten-year period (2015–2025), capturing the most recent decade of scholarly work and ensuring each review reflects current issues in Asian international students’ acculturation. Ultimately, 72 articles were identified as eligible for inclusion in the bibliometric retrospective analysis.

Next, a manual screening of the titles and abstracts was conducted to ensure that selected articles explicitly addressed issues related to acculturation and/or the experiences of Asian international students. Articles not directly discussing these focal points were excluded from the synthesis phase. As a result of this rigorous filtering and review process, a final set of 31 articles was selected for systematic synthesis.

**Figure 1**  
The PRISMA Flow Diagram



## Data Analysis

To address RQ1, this study employs a bibliometric retrospective to trace the intellectual evolution of scholarly work on the acculturation of Asian international students, based on a curated corpus of 72 peer-reviewed journal articles. Following this, the leading journals contributing to the field were identified. Beyond descriptive analytics, the conceptual structure of the domain was explored through a keyword co-occurrence network. All bibliometric analyses were conducted using the Bibliometrix R-package. This ensures a systematic and replicable approach to understanding the literature's structural and conceptual landscape. While the bibliometric analysis utilized the broader set of 72 articles, a secondary manual screening was conducted to retain only studies explicitly focused on acculturation experiences. To address RQ2, the 31 selected articles were systematically

synthesized using thematic coding and content analysis. By iteratively reviewing the texts, this review identified key themes and recurring patterns related to student psychosocial, academic, and sociocultural adaptation, applying dominant theoretical models (e.g., Berry's Acculturation Framework) to structure the intellectual landscape. For RQ3, the selected literature was critically examined to identify existing research gaps, methodological limitations, and future research directions.

### Bibliometric Retrospective

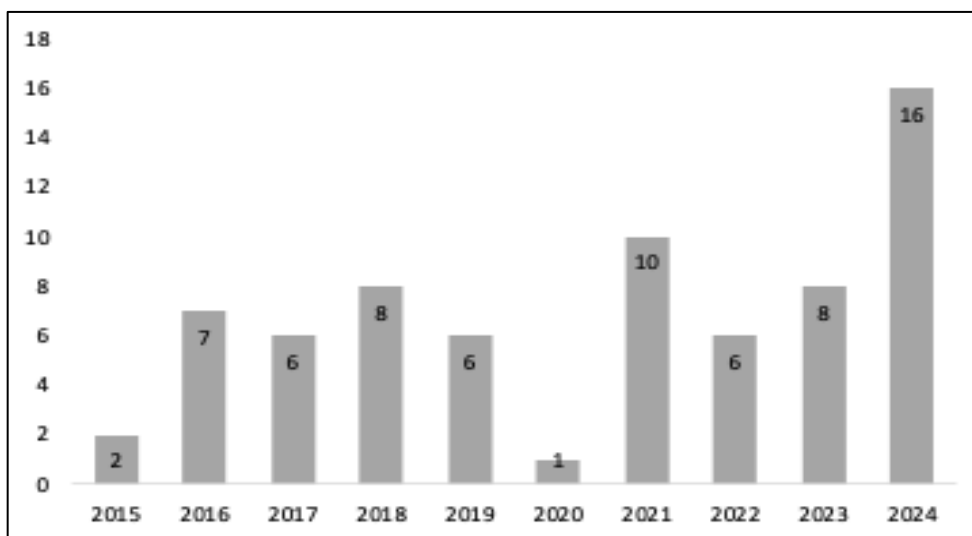
This section presents the quantitative findings derived from the 72 identified articles. It begins by mapping the temporal distribution of publications and identifying the leading journals in the field. Subsequently, the intellectual structure of the domain is explored through a keyword co-occurrence analysis, highlighting the dominant themes and conceptual clusters within the literature.

#### Overview

As illustrated in Figure 2, below, the number of relevant articles fluctuated moderately in the early years, with a notable dip in 2020, likely reflecting disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. A marked increase occurred in 2021, peaking in 2024 with 16 publications, signaling a growing academic focus on the topic in recent years. This trend suggests a heightened recognition of the significance of acculturation issues among Asian international students in the post-pandemic context.

#### Figure 2

*Volume of Publications over a Decade (until May 2025)*



## Popular Journals

Table 3 orders the identified journals based on publication frequency, providing insight into the scholarly platforms that prioritize this research. *The International Journal of Intercultural Relations* is the leading journal in the field of intercultural relations and acculturation, contributing eight publications to the examined sample. This prominence reflects the journal's focus on cross-cultural adjustment and intercultural dynamics, aligning closely with the core themes of acculturation.

**Table 3**

*Ranking of Journals Based on the Number of Publications*

Order	Journal	Frequency
1	<i>International Journal of Intercultural Relations</i>	8
2	<i>Current Psychology</i>	4
3	<i>Counseling Psychologist</i>	2
4	<i>Higher Education</i>	2
5	<i>Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology</i>	2
6	<i>Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development</i>	2
7	<i>Journal of Studies in International Education</i>	2
8	<i>Leisure Sciences</i>	2
9	<i>Annals of Global Health</i>	1
10	<i>Professional Psychology: Research and Practice</i>	1

## The Co-occurrence Network of Keywords: Intellectual Structure

The co-occurrence network, which examines the potential relationship between two bibliometric items appearing within the same publication record (Zhou et al., 2022), as illustrated in Figure 3, facilitates the identification of underlying thematic structures within the literature on Asian international students' acculturation.

**Figure 3**  
The Co-occurrence Network of Keywords



To visualize the underlying intellectual structure, Figure 4, below, presents a three-fields plot, which maps sources to authors and keywords, reinforces the observation that research on Asian international students’ acculturation has primarily concentrated on themes such as acculturative stress, social support, academic adaptation, and overall adjustment outcomes. In this visualization, the column headers correspond to standard bibliographic fields: SO represents the source (journal name), AU denotes the authors, and DE indicates the author keywords. This visualization highlights the recurring conceptual focus and the scholarly networks driving the field.

**Figure 3**  
Three-fields Plot: Source-author keywords Plot





for approximately one-sixth of the global international student population (Zhou & Yin, 2024). This dominance in the literature reflects the numerical significance of Chinese outbound mobility and highlights the country's pivotal role in shaping global academic exchange. In terms of host countries, the United States remains the most extensively examined destination for international students, likely due to its historically high intake, institutional prestige, and influence in shaping international education policies and practices (Chen et al., 2022; Jara Pazmino & Pack, 2022). These trends underscore the evolving geography of international student mobility and the need for more nuanced and diversified perspectives in acculturation research.

## Key Themes and Constructs

Drawing upon this systematic synthesis of 31 peer-reviewed articles, well-established theoretical models, and empirical literature in international student acculturation and cross-cultural psychology, this study identifies five distinct but interconnected themes. These constructs form a conceptual framework for understanding the holistic student experience: (1) acculturation process (Berry, 1992; Kim, 2001; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), (2) psychological adjustment (Berry, 2006; Folkman, 2013; Yeh & Inose, 2003), (3) social integration (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sawir et al., 2007), (4) academic adaptation (Andrade, 2006), and (5) institutional context (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1988). The following subsections critically examine each theme, discussing their specific roles and interrelations within the acculturation journey of Asian international students.

Elements such as orientation programs, language support, counseling services, and inclusive policies can facilitate or hinder students' cultural learning and engagement with the host society (Li et al., 2023). A supportive institutional context encourages smoother cross-cultural adjustment and is a buffer against psychological stress (Han et al., 2017). Acculturation strategies (e.g., assimilation, integration, separation, marginalization) significantly impact psychological well-being. Among these, integration, characterized by the simultaneous maintenance of heritage culture and adoption of host culture practices, is most consistently associated with favorable mental health outcomes and lower levels of acculturative stress (Berry, 1997; Hasnain et al., 2024).

In addition, social integration factors, including the development of peer relationships, a sense of belonging, and access to community support, further influence psychological adjustment. Positive social engagement reduces feelings of isolation and stress, whereas experiences of exclusion or discrimination can exacerbate mental health challenges (Zhou et al., 2008). Psychological adjustment, in turn, plays a mediating role in academic adaptation. Elevated stress or anxiety may impair concentration, reduce motivation, and ultimately hinder academic performance (He & Banham, 2011). In contrast, emotionally resilient students achieve better educational outcomes (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

Finally, social integration and institutional academic support are key to academic success. These supports address linguistic and pedagogical challenges and create an inclusive educational environment conducive to international student achievement (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Furthermore, establishing such comprehensive support mechanisms helps mitigate acculturative stress, thereby empowering students to focus more effectively on their educational goals and personal growth.

## Acculturation Process

The acculturation process describes the dynamic and ongoing interaction when individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds come into continuous first-hand contact. The “dual process of cultural and psychological change occurs due to contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Asif et al., 2024). This interaction often changes the original cultural patterns, beliefs, or behaviors of one or both groups involved. Rather than one-sided adaptation, acculturation is a bidirectional process that may result in varying degrees of cultural exchange, transformation, or integration, depending on contextual factors such as social support, power dynamics, and institutional structures (Rothe et al., 2010).

Acculturation is a complex and multifaceted experience critical in determining how well Asian international students adapt to their new academic and sociocultural environments (Lin & Dmitrieva, 2018). The initial months of an international sojourner’s experience are particularly pivotal, as they often shape long-term adaptation outcomes, especially within the context of demanding graduate programs (Asif et al., 2024). During this early phase, students navigate multiple transitions involving language barriers, academic expectations, and cultural norms. This challenge was further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted a rapid shift to virtual learning environments (Lemay et al., 2021). Many international students developed personal strategies to cope with these transitions. When using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the previous publication identified four thematic responses: “Functioning in Ambiguity,” “The Importance of Language and Culture,” “Reshaping Community,” and “Alternative Experiences in Intercultural Connectivity” (Ellis et al., 2024). These findings underscore the nuanced and adaptive ways students strive to maintain academic continuity and social belonging amidst uncertainty and disruption.

The acculturation process comprises two interrelated forms of adaptation: psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation (Yu et al., 2019). Psychological adaptation pertains to personal well-being and mental health stability, reflecting how individuals emotionally respond to intercultural transitions (Berry, 2005; Berry et al., 2006). In contrast, sociocultural adaptation involves the development of social competence and practical skills required to navigate daily life in a new cultural environment (Pacheco, 2020). For Asian international students, successful sociocultural adaptation is particularly demanding, as it

requires managing both the psychological strain of adjusting to new norms and the logistical challenges associated with cultural distance, language barriers, and unfamiliar institutional systems (Asif et al., 2024). This dual-pronged process underscores the complexity of cross-cultural adaptation and highlights the need for holistic support strategies that address emotional resilience and practical acculturation skills.

For Asian international students, acculturation often entails navigating a range of cultural, lifestyle, and social differences, which can present significant psychological and practical challenges. In the Scottish context, students commonly report initial experiences of uncertainty and unfamiliarity as they adjust to the host environment (Cogan et al., 2024). Similarly, research on Asian international non-Chinese students in China highlights a strong correlation between difficulties in cultural adaptation and elevated levels of psychological distress (Li et al., 2021). Notably, orientation toward the host culture has been found to negatively correlate with psychological distress and sociocultural adaptation difficulties, suggesting that greater openness to cultural learning and integration can be a protective factor in acculturation (Luo et al., 2024).

While specific acculturative stressors, such as academic pressures or adaptation to climatic conditions, may diminish as students become more acclimated to their new environment, other challenges persist (Ying, 2005). For example, homesickness and difficulties arising from deep-seated cultural differences often remain constant stressors throughout the Asian international student experience, affecting psychological well-being and social integration (Xiong et al., 2025).

## Psychological Adjustment

As one of the key outcomes of the acculturation process, psychological adjustment captures the emotional and mental shifts experienced by international students as they adjust to life in a new cultural context (Jackson et al., 2013). It is regarded as a central result of acculturation, encompassing individuals' overall well-being and life satisfaction as they integrate into the host culture. A critical factor influencing this psychological adjustment is the availability and perception of social support, which serves as a buffer against acculturative stress (Nailevna, 2017). Psychological acculturation primarily engages the affective dimension of cross-cultural adaptation, encompassing outcomes such as depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and overall life satisfaction (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). These emotional responses not only shape Asian international students' well-being but also influence their broader academic and social experiences in the host environment.

A central concept within psychological adjustment is acculturative stress, which refers to the psychological strain experienced when individuals encounter life events that disrupt or challenge their culturally embedded norms, values, and ways of life (Kim & Yoo, 2016; Xiong et al., 2025). For international students,

particularly those from Asia, acculturative stress emerges as a significant source of distress during their transition into the host culture (Huang & Mussap, 2016; Sheng et al., 2022). This stress stems from navigating unfamiliar academic systems, communication barriers, lifestyle changes, and experiences of marginalization or discrimination (Ra & Trusty, 2017; Yu, et al., 2019). As such, acculturative stress is recognized as a principal contributor to the overall psychological burden faced by international students (Cogan et al., 2024), and its effective management is critical for promoting mental well-being and successful adaptation in the host society (Sheng et al., 2022). This is especially important because acculturative stress can be chronic if not properly relieved and may lead to various health problems (Cogan et al., 2024).

Psychological distress has been widely reported among international students pursuing higher education, with Asian students frequently encountering pronounced challenges during their adaptation process (Naylor, 2020). Key acculturative stressors include language difficulties, academic pressure, social isolation, experiences of discrimination, perceived inferiority, and homesickness, all of which can hinder emotional adjustment and well-being (Cho et al., 2021). A recent meta-analysis confirmed moderate to strong associations between poor acculturative adjustment and the prevalence of depressive symptoms among international university students (Çimşir & Ünlü Kaynakçı, 2024). Moreover, such stress is often exacerbated by financial hardships, including high tuition fees and living expenses, further aggravating students' psychological strain (Cao et al., 2021; Leong, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2021). These cumulative burdens negatively affect the mental health of Asian international students and can lead to long-term implications if left unaddressed (Cogan et al., 2024). Nonetheless, research indicates that higher levels of acculturation are positively associated with more favorable psychological help-seeking attitudes. Length of stay in the host country correlates with greater acculturation (Sun et al., 2016), suggesting that time and support mechanisms can improve mental health outcomes through enhanced adaptation (Lee et al., 2022).

## **Social Integration**

Social integration is critical to individual well-being and adjustment, particularly for international students navigating new cultural environments (Slaten et al., 2016). Social integration refers to the degree to which an individual is connected to and engaged with their surrounding social environment across multiple levels, including community participation, personal networks, and intimate relationships. In contrast, a lack of social integration—manifested as isolation—is characterized by minimal contact with friends, neighbors, co-workers, family members, or social groups (Bai, 2015). Such isolation can significantly impede psychological adaptation and increase vulnerability to stress, loneliness, and mental health challenges among international student populations.

Recent research has emphasized the role of lifelong learning in facilitating the acculturation and social integration of international individuals through immersive and meaningful everyday experiences. For example, individuals with a strong orientation toward lifelong learning often engage more deeply in local cultural activities, such as dining out. These immersive culinary experiences can facilitate psychological adaptation and foster a stronger sense of attachment to the host country (Kim & Kim, 2018). Notably, place attachment mediates the relationship between immersive experiences (characterized by deep engagement and focus) psychological outcomes, and social engagement, suggesting that embodied and culturally rich interactions in host environments can promote smoother adaptation (Yu et al., 2023). Conversely, acculturation is not always seamless, especially in contexts involving conflicting cultural norms. Bhat et al. (2021) observed that international students in Australia reported increased alcohol consumption as part of adapting to local social norms around drinking. Yet, many also struggled to reconcile these practices with the values of their ethnic heritage. These tensions highlight the complex negotiation of identity and cultural values accompanying adaptation, particularly in areas involving social behavior and lifestyle norms. Together, these findings underscore that, while active engagement with the host society may support psychological well-being and social integration, it can also create inner conflicts when cultural values clash.

Asian international students' challenges in social integration are frequently reported, particularly in forming and maintaining new social networks (Cogan et al., 2024). Cultural and language barriers and limited opportunities for meaningful interaction with local peers often compound these difficulties. However, engaging in leisure activities has been shown to play a significant role in facilitating social bonding, providing a context where international students can establish strong interpersonal ties and cultivate a sense of belonging (Lee et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2017). Moreover, students who adopt a more mindful approach to their sojourn tend to develop enhanced sociocultural competencies and deeper insights into the local culture, further aiding their integration (Kashima et al., 2017). Another major obstacle is the perceived social distance between domestic students and peers from other international backgrounds (Asif et al., 2024). Despite their initial optimism and positive expectations for acculturation, many students report experiences of marginalization and separation (Nam & English, 2025).

The importance of social connection in alleviating acculturative stress and fostering a sense of belonging has been widely acknowledged as critical to the successful adaptation of Asian international students (Ma et al., 2020; Razgulin et al., 2023). However, significant barriers to social integration remain. Both verbal and non-verbal communication difficulties and cultural misunderstandings often hinder meaningful peer interactions, resulting in social disconnection and loneliness (Cogan et al., 2024). Difficulties in forming friendships may lead to psychological repercussions, including feelings of inadequacy, withdrawal, and reduced self-esteem (Xiong et al., 2025). Consequently, fostering community and building social ties are essential in easing the transition process and promoting positive adaptation outcomes. Notably, near-peer mentoring programs—in which

senior or more experienced students guide newer peers—have effectively enhanced sociocultural adaptation and mitigated acculturative stress among international students (Thomson & Esses, 2016). Recommendations to support social integration include the implementation of peer mentoring schemes, facilitating opportunities for cross-cultural interaction, and encouraging students' involvement in campus organizations and community groups (Asif et al., 2024; Xiong et al., 2025).

## Academic Adaptation

Academic adaptation is successfully meeting academic requirements and engaging effectively with a new educational environment (van Rooij et al., 2018). It is critical in predicting students' academic success and perseverance throughout their studies (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). For international students, adapting academically is essential for achieving academic goals, maintaining motivation, and reducing the risk of attrition in unfamiliar educational systems (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016).

International students must adapt across multiple domains to succeed in a foreign higher education environment (Mao, 2024). For Asian international students, transitioning into a new educational and cultural setting involves not only meeting academic demands—such as attending lectures, completing assignments, sitting for exams, and writing theses—but also managing the challenge of balancing academic responsibilities with social life (Bui et al., 2020; Mao et al., 2023). Intensified academic stress is a significant source of acculturative stress for international students. Previous research has shown that linguistic barriers, limited social support, and cultural differences often compound feelings of social isolation and adversely affect students' overall well-being (Cogan et al., 2024). Additionally, many students have reported experiencing racism and communication difficulties, particularly during internships (Graham et al., 2007). Academic adaptation and navigating unfamiliar education systems represent significant challenges and sources of acculturative stress for many students. These stressors can adversely impact both academic performance and psychological well-being. Therefore, higher education institutions must recognize these challenges and implement targeted support systems that promote the mental health and overall adjustment of Asian international students (Lim & Chen, 2021).

Adapting to the education system and academic expectations has frequently been a significant challenge for Chinese students. Notably, research indicates that for Asian international students in Australia, academic stressors often surpass other cultural difficulties in intensity (Xiong et al., 2025). Sociocultural adaptation difficulties commonly include learning-related challenges such as coping with academic tasks, interacting with foreign academic staff, and effectively expressing ideas in classroom settings (Luo et al., 2024). Prior exposure to research has been noted as a positive factor in facilitating smoother academic

transitions, while academic self-efficacy is closely linked to improved academic outcomes (Asif et al., 2024; Xiong et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the disparity in pedagogical approaches between home and host countries significantly impacts adaptation. Asian international students, often accustomed to teacher-centered educational cultures that value knowledge transmission and respect for authority, may find Western expectations for critical thinking, debate, and active class participation disorienting. This educational culture shock can manifest as silence in the classroom, which faculty may misinterpret as a lack of engagement rather than a culturally-rooted behavioral norm. Consequently, academic adaptation is not merely about language proficiency but involves a profound cognitive shift in understanding what constitutes learning in a new academic system.

### **Institutional Context**

The institutional context is a set of rules and practices that shape and frame social processes (Ariztía et al., 2014), functioning as a shared system of ideas that maintains a particular social order or condition. It refers to the established and commonly accepted rules, norms, and conditions under which organizations operate (Silva, 2008), setting the boundaries and parameters for interactions between organizations and their surrounding environments. The institutional context plays a critical role in influencing the well-being and adaptation of international students (Asif et al., 2024; Cogan et al., 2024). Higher education institutions can ease this transition through intentional program design and targeted support services (Asif et al., 2024). Institutions are encouraged to proactively address mental health challenges by raising awareness, ensuring access to culturally-competent therapists, and offering creative and inclusive interventions. Key recommendations include supporting language development to mitigate communication barriers and implementing culturally sensitive training workshops on well-being services, mental health literacy, coping strategies, and reducing stigma (Asif et al., 2024; Cogan et al., 2024).

Moreover, institutions must actively prevent discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, which have been shown to affect student mental health adversely (Cogan et al., 2024). Creating a supportive campus climate that fosters early help-seeking behaviors and promotes social connection is essential (Xiong et al., 2025). However, systemic issues such as limited awareness of available services and long waiting times often impede access to institutional support (Graham et al., 2007; Szabó et al., 2017). Thus, staff members, including counselors and faculty, must have adequate cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills to support international students effectively (Li et al., 2023; Xiong et al., 2025).

Crucially, the institutional context extends beyond classroom dynamics to include the broader administrative and political climate of the university. Literature suggests that, while institutions aggressively recruit Asian students for their

economic contributions, the corresponding support infrastructures are often under-resourced or generic in nature. This creates a structural gap where students face bureaucratic hurdles—such as complex visa regulations, limited access to financial aid, and opaque grievance procedures—without adequate institutional guidance. When the institutional environment is perceived as transactional rather than supportive, it reinforces feelings of marginalization and hinders the students' sense of belonging.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The bibliometric and synthesis findings are not neutral; they are a direct reflection of the geopolitical and political-economic realities of the past decade. This, combined with the finding that the United States remains the most extensively examined destination for international students, must be critically understood as a product of the U.S.-China political economy in higher education. Furthermore, the temporal distribution of publications, which shows a notable dip in 2020 followed by a marked increase in 2021 and a peak in 2024, cannot be attributed solely to the COVID-19 pandemic. This period also corresponds with heightened U.S.-China political rhetoric and trade tensions, which created profound uncertainty and, in some cases, a hostile reception environment. The subsequent spike in research likely reflects a scholarly scramble to understand the dual impact of the pandemic and this political fracturing on student well-being. Therefore, the persistent challenges of “acculturative stress” and experiences of “discrimination” observed within the reviewed literature must be re-interpreted as being exacerbated by these macro-level political forces, not just individual-level cultural adjustment.

This review's findings challenge the sufficiency of traditional acculturation models, such as Berry's framework (Berry, 1997), in the current geopolitical era. However, this model is largely built on the individual's psychological orientation and the social dynamics of the immediate host community. This review proposes that these established frameworks must be complicated by a “structural” or “political” dimension. For example, a student may desire “integration” but find this path blocked by systemic discrimination or political suspicion from the host society. In such a context, a “separation” strategy (e.g., relying on support networks of peers from the same home country) may not be a simple preference but a protective, adaptive necessity—a buffer against a hostile political climate.

This political-structural lens helps explain the “mixed findings regarding the role of co-national social support in psychosocial adaptation” noted in this review. This political-structural perspective provides a robust explanation for the contradiction often observed in the literature, where support networks of peers from the same home country are sometimes viewed as a buffer and at other times as a barrier to adaptation. Traditional models might view strong peers from the same home country as a form of resistance to integration. However, when situated within the current geopolitical contestation of higher education (Adam, 2024; Shields, 2013), this reliance takes on a new meaning. In a climate where

international students serve as proxies for state-level tensions (Kang et al., 2024), retreating to the comfort of peers from the same home country networks may not be a failure of individual acculturation, but a rational, protective response to systemic exclusion. Thus, the mixed impact of social support is likely modulated by the external political environment—protective in hostile contexts yet potentially isolating in welcoming ones. It also re-frames “acculturative stress” as not just a failure of individual adaptation but as a rational response to systemic exclusion. Future acculturation theory cannot remain apolitical; it must account for how the political economy of higher education and state-level relations directly constrain the psychological and social “choices” available to international students.

The literature on international student acculturation, particularly concerning Asian students, reveals several notable gaps. First, research has frequently treated Asian students as a homogenous group, overlooking the significant cultural, historical, and regional differences among them. This oversimplification may lead to generalized, “one-size-fits-all” support approaches that fail to meet the specific needs of diverse subgroups (Asif et al., 2024). Second, most studies on Asian international students’ adaptation have concentrated on English-speaking Western countries such as the United States and Australia (Cogan et al., 2024), with limited attention given to their experiences in non-English-speaking host countries like China (Luo et al., 2024). Third, there is a scarcity of research on culturally sensitive mental health literacy interventions tailored for Asian international students (Bai, 2015; Kim & Yoo, 2016; Zhou et al., 2017). Moreover, existing tools to measure mental health literacy are predominantly developed in Western contexts and may not accurately reflect the perspectives of Asian students (Cogan et al., 2024). Lastly, the literature presents mixed findings regarding the role of social support from fellow nationals (peers from the same home country) in psychosocial adaptation, and research on the influence of international peer support remains underdeveloped (Luo et al., 2024).

Before discussing the limitations within the reviewed literature, it is essential to critically acknowledge two primary methodological limitations of this review. First, as noted in the methodology, the decision to filter by SCIE/SSCI/AHCI indices, while ensuring high academic impact, systematically excluded important regional and institutional journals. Second, and more significantly, the “LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”)” filter is a profound methodological constraint, not merely a practical one. The finding that research in non-English-speaking host countries is sparse is, in part, a consequence of this design choice. This “English-only” filter inherently risks reproducing the very Western-centric knowledge hierarchy that this paper critiques, as it excludes scholarship published in languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese. This creates a significant blind spot regarding the acculturation of non-Chinese Asians in China or Asian students in non-Anglophone European contexts. Third, the search string, which required the term “Asia” or “Asian,” would not have captured articles that only used a specific nationality (e.g., “Chinese international students”) unless the authors also included the broader geographic term. This represents another potential blind spot in our search results. Acknowledging this paradox is essential for methodological integrity.

The reviewed sources also highlight limitations, including a predominance of small-scale qualitative studies (Bhat et al., 2021; Cogan et al., 2024; Ellis et al., 2024), a reliance on short-term, cross-sectional designs that cannot capture longitudinal change (Asif et al., 2024; Lim & Chen, 2021; Xiong et al., 2025), and findings influenced by unique contexts like the COVID-19 pandemic (Ellis et al., 2024). Furthermore, the interpretative nature of these qualitative inquiries means that findings may be influenced by researcher positionality and subjective data analysis.

The literature proposes several avenues for future research in light of the identified gaps and methodological limitations. First, scholars are encouraged to conduct larger-scale and more diverse studies, particularly survey-based research, to enhance the generalizability of findings and to assess the prevalence of acculturative challenges among international students (Asif et al., 2024; Kim & Yoo, 2016; Luo et al., 2024). Longitudinal research designs with multiple data collection points over extended periods are also recommended to capture the dynamic nature of adaptation processes better. Such studies should ideally begin before students arrive in the host country and continue to map the trajectory of acculturative stress and identify critical periods of vulnerability (Luo et al., 2024; Xiong et al., 2025). Furthermore, future research should avoid treating Asian students as a homogeneous group and instead explore the nuanced experiences of individuals from specific national or ethnic backgrounds (Asif et al., 2024; Cogan et al., 2024). Comparative studies involving students from different cultural contexts can also provide a broader understanding of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim & Yoo, 2016). Additionally, there is a need to expand research into non-Western host countries, such as China, where current literature remains sparse (Luo et al., 2024). Crucially, to overcome the limitations of this review, future systematic syntheses should prioritize the inclusion of non-Anglophone literature. Conducting targeted searches in regional databases (e.g., KCI, CNKI, or Airiti) and utilizing translated keywords is crucial for building a more equitable and globally representative understanding of Asian international student acculturation. Finally, researchers should prioritize developing and validating culturally sensitive mental health interventions and assessment tools that reflect international students' conceptualizations of well-being and distress (Cogan et al., 2024).

Beyond guiding future research, this review's findings provide actionable insights for administrators, policymakers, and educators, as the persistent research gaps reflect real-world deficits in institutional support. First, the finding that literature treats Asian students as a "homogenous group" confirms that a "one-size-fits-all" approach is inadequate; institutions must move beyond generalized support to develop targeted strategies for the diverse Asian cohort, recognizing the distinct needs of, for example, South Asian versus East Asian students. Institutions should use student data and participatory approaches to design subgroup-specific orientations and resources. Second, the gap in "culturally sensitive mental health literacy interventions" has profound implications. Simply hiring a counselor who speaks a relevant language is insufficient; institutions must co-design mental health frameworks with international students to create proactive, culturally-grounded interventions that align with their conceptualizations of well-being.

Ultimately, these findings must be considered in the context of current geopolitical tensions. As geopolitical dynamics (e.g., U.S.-China relations) alter mobility flows, the research gap on “non-Western host countries” becomes a critical blind spot for institutional strategy. Institutions must prepare for new mobility corridors and train staff to address unique stressors arising from geopolitical anxieties, such as discrimination or “othering.”

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