# Coping Strategies of Chinese International Students in the UK at the Postgraduate Level

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*Abstract:* This paper examines coping strategies among Chinese international students (CISs) in UK postgraduate programmes, and how they overcome distress and adapt to the educational system. Key strategies include social support, engaging in leisure activities, utilizing green spaces for stress relief, and leveraging digital resources for academic success. The research also explores the role of the Western mental health model in addressing the mental health needs of CISs, suggesting the need for universities to provide culturally attuned support services to enhance the mental health and academic experience of international students.

## 1. Introduction

Chinese international students (CISs) are facing numerous problems, demanding the advancement of various coping strategies to curb the adverse effects of psychological distress. Dai (2023) qualitatively evaluated the CISs' well-being and experiences in higher education. They used a combination of literature review and interview responses. Dai's (2023) finding showed that the students were confused and surprised regarding the various formats of assessment and autonomous learning [1]. In this regard, they adopted various mechanisms and strategies to cope with the experience of being in UK universities and the education system.

## 2. Coping Strategies

### 2.1 Social Support and Academic Challenges

Many students considered social support a primary strategy to overcome the puzzling assessment and research undertaking. The findings were similar to those of Cantwell et al. (2008), which demonstrated that most students were likely to form an "international student culture" to help them adapt to the demands of the UK education system and acclimatise to the new environment [2]. These outcomes pointed out that postgraduates (international students) found co-nationals and other students to be the primary support system to overcome challenges relating to assessment and other undertakings related to studies. Zhao and Patuano (2022), on the other hand, conducted an online survey with 186 CISs studying in Edinburgh, Scotland [3]. They found that CISs identified social

support as a relevant strategy to address the complications they faced in the school setting. In these groups, they talked with their friends or families concerning the pressures they encountered in a classroom context.

## 2.2 Leisure Activities and Utilization of Green Spaces

Other coping strategies included leisure and entertainment, which entailed watching movies, listening to music, and playing videos. Zhao and Patuano (2022) also found that they engaged in physical activities such as jogging, visiting the gym, and ball games[3]. These undertakings helped them relieve the tension and stress linked to studying and learning away from home. However, nearly 51% of CISs visited green spaces at least once a week and spent nearly an hour. The result shows that the UK has amenities that serve as a system to help students relieve tension from the events of the day (studying), which supports them in coping with various challenges. These findings have provided insight into the factors driving psychological distress and how prevailing systems can be used to manage these issues in the UK background. It can be concluded that coping strategies are increasingly offering CISs an avenue to overcome their learning challenges and perceived stress relating to learning courses, which has, in turn, reduced the incidence of mental illness among CISs and other international students in the UK.

Visiting natural environments such as forests or urban parks has proven relevant resources, helping CISs cope with the demands of higher education in the UK. Roe, Aspinall, and Thompson (2017) revealed that natural environments presented restorative qualities that support emotional regulation from fatigue, stress, and low mood. The finding suggests that nature parks trigger the sense of being away, which advances physical and mental well-being. The outcomes echoed those of Zhao and Patuano (2022), revealing that green spaces were important resources for CISs in coping with the growing pressures linked to the UK education system and communication difficulties[3]. However, Xu, O'Brien, and Chen (2019) revealed that acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) helped students manage the stress generated by studying abroad. ACT is an intervention where participants discuss challenges they are facing and how to overcome them. These findings have provided insight into the different mechanisms that CISs can use to cope with issues around education and adapting to a new environment and way of life. It can be concluded that green spaces and ACT provide an avenue for these students to regulate their emotions, which positively influences their mental health.

## 2.3 Digital Resources for Academic Success

CISs are increasingly using digital resources for their learning and overcoming the challenge of being taught in a different language. Simmons, Edirisingha, and Jiang (2021) qualitatively explored how CISs used digital resources during their postgraduate education in the UK. Simmons et al. (2021) collected data using focus group discussions conducted with postgraduate learners at Leicester University[4]. They found that students used Google and online dictionaries to help them in their studies. The findings were consistent with those of Jiang (2018), revealing that post-graduate students in the UK used the Google Scholar search engine to obtain information for learning and research undertaking[5]. These findings highlighted CISs' literacy skill development and the role of technology in helping students cope with the challenges of communication and information search in UK higher learning institutions. It can be concluded that digital resources have helped CISs to navigate the complex learning environment in the UK, reducing perceived stress and anxiety relating to their academics and research.

## 2.4 University Support Services and Mental Well-being

The UK education sector has built a mechanism that supports international students pursuing their postgraduate education to overcome the learning and culture shock-related challenges. Zile et al. (2023) conducted a study to examine the resources available for postgraduate students to overcome poor mental health related to culture shock and changing environments. Students acknowledged that university-provided interventions emphasised stress and well-being rather than mental well-being as a whole. The support provisions in these institutions included counselling or well-being services. However, these services were understaffed, under-resourced, and underfunded, particularly in terms of meeting the diverse student population's needs. These findings replicated those of Metcalfe, Wilson, and Levecque (2018), which demonstrated that the university counselling services offered various services to postgraduate students, staff, and students, including group and individual counselling sessions[6]. In some higher education institutions, group workshops were formed to tackle various stressors and promote self-management/self-help techniques, such as resilience, overcoming anxiety, and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Xu, O'Brien, and Chen (2019) also demonstrated that the universities provided ACT programmes to enable CISs to discuss issues and challenges affecting their education and study progress. However, scholars such as Zile et al. (2023) and Metcalfe et al. (2018) argued that the services (both NHS- and university-funded) are overwhelming, under-resourced, and possibly ineffective in supporting all international students' mental well-being needs[6]. These investigations imply that although counselling services are available in the universities to help CISs, the problem of resource scarcity and inadequate funds affects its development and achieving its intended objective in the target populace. These findings have begun to offer insight into various initiatives advanced by the UK education sector to improve the well-being of international postgraduate students. It can be concluded that counselling services and self-management techniques are significantly advancing the mental health of CISs, though some challenges exist that relevant stakeholders need to tackle to improve student welfare.

## 2.5 Western Mental Health Models: Appropriateness and Reliability

The Western Mental Health Models (WMHMs) are appropriate and reliable for CISs in managing and overcoming psychological distress and disquiet related to postgraduate education and study. Magnusdottir and Thornicroft (2022) conducted a narrative review of CISs' experience in the UK and found that these learners rarely seek formal psychological health support compared to native students but depend on informal support from friends[7]. This trend could be attributed to the fact that most of these students do not understand how the UK mental healthcare system works, and structural and cultural barriers. Although Western mental health models are favourable to CISs, some cultural beliefs around the cause and prevention of mental illness might exist. The findings were consistent with those of Yin (2016), demonstrating that cultural beliefs concerning mental health played a role in CISs' seeking counselling services in the UK. The research has offered insight into models that can be utilised by counsellors or therapists to guide them when working with Chinese clients and offer them a culturally suitable and quality service. Magnusdottir and Thornicroft's (2022) findings echoed those of Dai (2023) by illustrating that students formed support groups with friends to discuss the challenges they were facing and how to navigate the multicultural UK education system[7]. These studies have discussed factors augmenting the challenge of dealing with and managing anxiety and stress among international students in the UK despite mental health models being friendly and competent in managing stress and anxiety related to postgraduate education. It can be concluded that mental health models and the UK mental health system are gradually modifying and transforming international students' mental well-being.

## 2.6 Cultural Sensitivity in Mental Health Care

The UK mental health system provides culturally sensitive care to non-UK students to meet their diverse psychological needs. Jenny (2003) qualitatively investigated cultural values and how they affected therapy among Chinese students studying in the UK. Jenny (2003) used semi-structured interviews distributed to eight clients and four therapists. Jenny (2003) found that some participants felt that managing their mental well-being was linked to visiting a Chinese psychologist, while others agreed that having a non-Chinese psychologist improved their well-being. Jenny (2003) also revealed that therapists needed to incorporate Chinese cultural ethics in their therapeutic work to provide quality mental health services. The findings replicated those of Jenny and Pistrang (2007), which illustrated that the Chinese underutilised mental health services because they felt the therapy did not meet their psychological needs. The result suggests that from a cultural standpoint, culture emerges into the therapeutic connection in a multifaceted and diverse manner to affect the mental well-being and management of psychological distress and anxiety. Tang, Reilly, and Dickson (2012) surveyed 323 CISs at a university in the UK. They found that culture was a determinant of seeking mental health among the Chinese student community. Most CISs had less interpersonal sincerity compared to the British learners. Tang, Reilly, and Dickson (2012) concluded that comprehending students' cultural inclination toward mental health concerns and cultural attitudes might deter or facilitate access and engagement of students in psychological services in higher learning institutions. The results reverberated those of Jenny (2003), demonstrating that culture influenced the perception of how psychologists satisfied their psychological needs when seeking mental health services. As a result, these findings have provided insight into the influence of culture in seeking mental health services among CISs in the UK. It can be concluded that offering culturally sensitive treatments or services could be a reason why the CISs seek formal mental health services in the UK [8,9].

## 3. Perception of Mental Health Symptoms and Western Models

CISs are using the UK mental health system because it understands psychological health symptoms, causes, and deterrence strategies relevant to coping with the growing demand for postgraduate education and learning. Ngai et al. (2014) examined the attitude of three groups of learners, CISs in the UK, British students and Chinese students in the UK and China, respectively, concerning mental disorders. Ngai et al. (2014) revealed that the three clusters favoured the more Westernised model of comprehending psychological well-being symptoms. This is because the model can appropriately diagnose and treat the symptoms of psychological distress and other mental well-being problems. Moreover, students from Chinese backgrounds do not understand the symptoms of depression or psychological distress. The finding suggests that the UK mental healthcare system can provide these students with a better-coping mechanism than the Chinese mental healthcare system, which could explain why they value the UK healthcare system. These outcomes replicated those of Magnusdottir and Thornicroft (2022), revealing that sophisticated psychological health models in the UK provide a framework for students to build social support groups and interventions where they can discuss challenges facing their education in the UK. These findings have begun to illustrate how the Westernised models of mental health are changing how CISs perceive mental health symptoms and how they can overcome these issues and complications. Although Ngai et al. (2014) and Magnusdottir and Thornicroft's (2022) studies have demonstrated how UK mental health models have changed the attitude of CISs seeking mental care, other scholars such as Jenny and Pistrang (2007) believe that these models ought to be culturally sensitive to meet the needs of the diverse student population, especially from Chinese background[10]. It can be concluded that models that understand the causes, symptoms, and prevention mechanisms of mental health could increase the desire of CISs to seek mental health services to cope with the demands of postgraduate education and research.

## 4. Reliance on Co-international Chinese Students for Support and TCM

CISs in the UK rely mainly on co-international Chinese students if they need support to cope with stress related to their education. A report by Nottingham (2011) found that CISs relied majorly on support from other co-international Chinese students[11]. The outcomes were in direct opposition to Bishop et al. (2009) results, which revealed that a higher number of CISs sought conventional services for their mental health than using traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) . Wang's (2017) findings, on the other hand, reported that some students were seeking TCM in the UK when they were let down by the practitioner. These findings suggest that CISs rely on conventional treatment for their mental healthcare needs in the UK because it is effective and competent in helping students manage their psychiatric conditions. Although Wang (2017) and Bishop et al. (2009) studies have highlighted the importance of TCM in coping with psychological distress in the UK during postgraduate education[12], Nottingham (2011) affirms the effectiveness of conventional techniques such as having support groups.. It can be concluded that conventional mental health services and therapy offer the required help, assistance, and support for postgraduate students to manage psychological distress.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the growth of Chinese international students in postgraduate studies within the UK, there is a prominent gap in the available literature regarding their mental health and coping strategies. They rely on social support, digital resources, leisure activities, and the therapeutic benefits of green spaces to ease off anxiety and academic challenges. The critical role of culturally sensitive mental health care and the effectiveness of Western mental health models in addressing the unique challenges faced by CISs are explored. These findings stress the vital of a supportive, inclusive educational environment that addresses the diverse needs of international students, promoting their well-being and academic success.

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