

Bridging the Gap: Enhancing the Psychological Well-Being of Chinese International Students in Korea

Xinyi Tang^{1,a,*}

¹*Liberal Arts, Yonsei University, Seoul, 03722, South Korea*

a. tangxinyi613@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: With the current economic development and general improvement of education, more and more people are choosing to go abroad for higher education. Although there have been studies focusing on the psychological conditions of international student groups, the discussion of the psychological conditions of specific Chinese international students in Korea is still insufficient. This study aims to discuss the psychological conditions and psychological stress generated by Chinese international students in Korea. In this study, a mixed research method was used to conduct a questionnaire survey of about 80 Chinese international students, five of them were selected for in-depth interviews to collect information about the psychological conditions they faced during their actual study in Korea, and the data were analyzed using a mixed-method analysis, including quantitative and qualitative analyses. The results of the study show that most international students experienced great psychological pressure due to language, academic and other problems, suggesting that parents and schools need to pay more attention to international students and give them some help.

Keywords: Chinese international students, Korea, psychological condition

1. Introduction

In recent years, more and more students are choosing to study abroad in order to get a higher level of education with the improvement of cultural level, but at the same time, international students are facing various psychological pressures such as academic pressures, language barriers, and cultural adaptation[1][2][3]. This study examines issues related to the psychological problems of Chinese international students in Korea and addresses the psychological problems of Chinese international students only in Korea. By 2024, more than 8 million international students have chosen to study abroad, a significant increase from 5 million in 2014. In the past, scholars have conducted a wide range of studies on the psychological problems of international students, but studies on the psychological problems of international students only in Korea are still limited[1][2][3].

Widely accepted theoretical frameworks, such as Berry's acculturation theory and Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory, have been extensively applied in the context of international students' psychological adjustment[1][3][4]. Acculturation theory focuses on how individuals adapt and integrate in a new cultural environment[1][3][4]. It was proposed by John Berry and emphasizes that the process of cross-cultural adaptation is divided into four modes, namely assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. These theories provide a valuable lens for understanding the multifaceted challenges that international students encounter, such as linguistic barriers and

cultural dissonance, which directly impact their psychological well-being. The theory suggests that an individual's mental health is closely related to the mode of adaptation. Integrated adaptation is usually associated with a better state of mental health, while marginalization may lead to more psychological stress and adaptation difficulties[1][3][4]. Stress and Coping Theory was developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman and explores how individuals cope with stress[1][3][5]. The theory suggests that psychological stress is a result of the interaction between the individual and the environment, and that the way an individual copes determines his or her psychological well-being. Coping styles are categorized into two types, problem-oriented coping and emotion-oriented coping.

The paper "Stress Management Strategies of Chinese International Students in South Korea: A Qualitative Analysis" explores the coping strategies of Chinese international students in South Korea[3][6][7]. Through interviews with 24 Chinese international students, the study found that students' stress management was mainly divided into individual and organizational levels. The study suggests that schools should provide more culturally appropriate support programs to help Chinese international students better cope with stress and adapt to new environments. These programs should focus on a combination of emotional support and practical assistance to promote students' physical and mental health.

"Assessing Knowledge, Preventive Practices, and Depression Among Chinese International Students and Local Korean Students in South Korea" The study "Assessing Knowledge, Preventive Practices, and Depression Among Chinese International Students and Local Korean Students in South Korea During the COVID-19 Pandemic" investigated depressive symptoms among Chinese international students and local Korean students during the COVID-19 epidemic[8][9]. The results of the study showed that the prevalence of depressive symptoms among Chinese students was 49%, while the prevalence of anxiety was 39.6%. The mental health problems of international students were exacerbated especially in the context of self-isolation from the epidemic.

"Factors Associated with Mental Health Among International Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Korea" The study investigated the prevalence of mental health problems among international students during the "Factors Associated with Mental Health Among International Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Korea," which investigated the mental health of 488 international students in South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that 47.1% of international students had sleep problems, 39.6% had anxiety, and 49% had depressive symptoms[9][10][11][12][13]. Depression problems were associated with factors such as language proficiency, social isolation, and media usage time during the epidemic.

From the above literature, it can be seen that there are almost no articles that focus only on the psychological problems of international students in Korea, and most of them are about the psychological stress of international students during the epidemic.[14] It is undeniable that international students do face serious psychological pressure during the epidemic, but they also face great psychological pressure at other times. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to study the psychological stress faced by international students in Korea during weekdays and how various parties can provide help.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed research method, first collecting a large amount of data with a questionnaire for statistical analysis, and then supplementing it with more specific background by conducting in-depth interviews with a few. To ensure ethical compliance of the study, pre-questionnaire informed consent will be given before the questionnaire is filled. This study ensures that the privacy of the participants is adequately protected and all data are stored and processed anonymously.

The limitations of this study mainly include the small sample size and the short duration of the study. These limitations may affect the broadness and generalizability of the study results. The research population of this study was Chinese international students in Korea, with a sample size of 80 for the questionnaire and 5 for the in-depth interviews. The sample size of 80 students was selected to provide a sufficient base for quantitative analysis, ensuring that the results are robust and can offer generalizable insights into the population of Chinese international students in South Korea. According to standard practices in survey research, a sample of 80 is adequate for detecting meaningful patterns and relationships while still being manageable in terms of data collection and analysis.

The selection of 5 participants for in-depth interviews follows the principle of using qualitative methods to complement the quantitative findings. Qualitative interviews allow for deeper insights into the nuanced psychological challenges faced by international students, which might not be captured in a survey. The smaller sample size for interviews is justified because qualitative studies often focus on in-depth exploration rather than large-scale representation, and 5 participants can provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences.

Together, the combination of 80 students in the survey and 5 interviewees allows for both breadth (through quantitative data) and depth (through qualitative insights), providing a well-rounded representation of the larger population of Chinese international students in South Korea.

This study adheres to rigorous ethical standards to ensure the integrity of the research and the protection of participants. The following safeguards were implemented:

Voluntary Participation: Participation in both the survey and interviews was entirely voluntary. All participants were informed in advance about the nature and purpose of the study, and they were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

Informed Consent: Before participating, all students received detailed information about the study's objectives, procedures, and potential risks. Written consent was obtained from each participant, confirming their understanding and agreement to participate in the research.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: To protect participants' privacy, all responses were kept anonymous. Identifiable information, such as names or personal contact details, was not recorded. Data were stored securely, and access was restricted to the research team only. In the case of interviews, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants.

Minimizing Harm: Given the sensitive nature of the psychological topics being explored, care was taken to avoid causing distress. Participants were provided with the option to seek counseling or support if they felt uncomfortable discussing certain issues during the interviews.

Ethical Approval: The study was approved by an institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines in research involving human participants

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the questionnaire showed that participants were evenly distributed across three categories of study duration in Korea: one year, two to three years, and four years. Additionally, the participants represented a diverse range of academic disciplines, ensuring that the findings reflect varied educational experiences and contexts. The results of this study highlight several key factors contributing to the psychological stress experienced by Chinese international students in South Korea. The primary sources of stress identified are language communication difficulties and academic pressure, both of which are consistent with previous research on the challenges faced by international students in new cultural and educational environments. Language proficiency is frequently identified as a major barrier to both academic success and social integration for international students. In this study, 79.41% of participants reported language communication as their greatest difficulty, which is significant given the large proportion (76.47%) of respondents who rated their Korean language proficiency at levels 5-6. Despite having a relatively high level of proficiency, students still encounter

difficulties in understanding specialized academic content, as mentioned by interviewees. This aligns with the findings of Wen & Kim[3] who reported that even students with advanced language skills struggle with complex academic vocabulary and specialized coursework. The cognitive load required to comprehend lectures, particularly in a second language, often leads to increased anxiety and stress. Academic pressure is the most significant source of stress in the study, with 85.29% of students reporting it as a major contributor to their psychological distress. This finding mirrors the research by Park et al.[2], which noted that academic challenges are among the top stressors for international students. This pressure is compounded by the unfamiliarity of educational systems in South Korea, where students may be required to adapt to different teaching styles, expectations, and evaluation methods compared to those in China. Many students, despite having high language proficiency, find it difficult to perform well in specialized courses, contributing to their stress about grades and future career prospects. Moreover, the sense of uncertainty about future prospects, as noted by 52.94% of the respondents, further exacerbates academic-related stress. This uncertainty could stem from concerns about post-graduation employment in South Korea or back in China, as well as anxiety about the challenges of transitioning from an academic environment to the workforce. Cultural adaptation also plays a significant role in stress, as 67.65% of participants mentioned difficulties with eating habits, and 52.94% noted social loneliness as another stressor. While these challenges may seem secondary to academic and language difficulties, they should not be underestimated. Social loneliness, particularly among those with limited local friends (52.94%) and fewer interactions with local students, can amplify feelings of isolation, which is a well-documented contributor to mental health issues in international student populations.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we explore the psychological situation of Chinese students in Korea, focusing on analyzing the main sources of stress and its impact on mental health during their adaptation. The study found that language communication difficulties are a major challenge for international students, especially in academic settings. This disorder not only affects the learning effect, but also increases the anxiety and psychological burden of students, further affecting their overall adaptability. Even with a certain level of linguistic competence, the complexity of academic terminology and classroom communication remains an important difficulty.

Academic stress and cultural adaptation challenges are also significant stressors. Students may feel the pressure of different curriculum requirements and evaluation standards as they adapt to the Korean education system. At the same time, cultural differences and feelings of social isolation exacerbate the difficulty of adaptation, which can lead to increased mental health problems.

Although many students have adapted to the new environment to some extent, some still experience a higher level of psychological stress, highlighting the need to strengthen support services. Based on these findings, it is recommended that schools further strengthen their support for international students, such as providing more professional Korean language courses, especially in terminology and academic writing.

Despite the limitations of this study with a small sample size and limited research time, the results provide valuable insights for improving the support system for international students. Future studies should explore students' long-term adaptation processes through longitudinal studies, expanding sample coverage, or conducting cross-cultural comparisons to further validate and deepen current findings.[15] These efforts will help provide more comprehensive and effective mental health support for international students.

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