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Sino-US Cultural Differences, Academic Integration, and Learning Outcomes among Chinese International Students

Jiarui Tian

School of Education, Syracuse University, New York, USA
reidtianus@gmail.com

Abstract. The number of Chinese international students in the United States has stayed high. They face various challenges in personal and academic life, one of which is cultural adaptation to the stark differences between Chinese and American cultures. This study explores how Sino-US cultural differences influence students' social willingness and subsequent academic performance with a literature review based on findings in existing studies. Based on multiple studies from credible sources, this study is deliberately designed to cast light on not only key dimensions of cultural differences but also students' adaptation strategies with a focus on how their social willingness mediates their academic integration. The findings suggest that Chinese international students are susceptible to collectivism, high-context communication and face culture in Chinese culture, which suppress their cross-cultural social willingness because American individualism and low-context communication encourage active social interactions. Consequently, Chinese international students in the United States often remain silent in class and avoid seeking academic help, which form a vicious cycle; however, peer social support can buffer this negative effect. This study concludes that enhancing cross-cultural social willingness can make a significant difference to Chinese students' academic success in the United States.

Keywords: Sino-US Cultural Differences, Chinese International Students, Social Willingness, Academic Integration, Cultural Adaptation

1. Introduction

According to the Statista Research Department in 2024/2025 school year, there were 265,919 Chinese students studying in the United States [1]. This makes China a major source of international students in the United States. Despite the hope for academic success and a better career path, Yuan suggests that many Chinese international students in the United States struggle with educational system adjustment and classroom transition [2]. In addition, according to Zhou and Wei, they are also challenged by personal interactions with others [3]. Ching et al. argue that a key reason for these struggles is cultural adaptation challenges upon arrival, caused by the stark cultural difference between China and the U.S., which can significantly hinder their social interaction and academic development [4]. Many previous studies have highlighted that cultural differences are closely linked to Chinese international students' adaptation in the United States, including Li et al., Wang et al., and Xu and Chai [5-7]. However, these studies usually focus on cultural differences, social willingness,

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or academic outcomes independently, without systematically examining the chain relationship between cultural differences, social willingness and academic outcomes among Chinese international students in the United States.

Therefore, using a literature review method, this study aims to answer the following three questions: (1) How do Sino-US cultural differences shape Chinese students' social willingness? (2) How does social willingness affect their learning behaviors and academic integration? (3) What strategies can break the vicious cycle of cultural discomfort, social avoidance and academic difficulties? This study clarifies the mediating mechanism of social willingness and provides practical implications for Chinese international students to facilitate cross-cultural adaptation and academic success.

2. Core dimensions of Sino-US cultural differences

2.1. Values: collectivism vs. individualism

One key difference affecting Chinese international students' social behaviors in the United States is collectivism versus individualism. Ma et al. explain that Chinese international students embrace Confucian cultural norms and value group harmony [8]. In contrast, Hu and Li point out that American classrooms generally encourage students to express independent opinions and actively participate in discussions [9]. As a result of these two opposing values, American students are more likely to think creatively and express themselves without worrying about interrupting class activities [2]. Meanwhile, many Chinese students often find it challenging to engage in open cross-cultural interactions [10, 11]. For Chinese international students, they are also highly likely to suffer from academic frustration and elevated levels of stress because their collective communication styles are misaligned with the participatory norms of the classroom in the United States [7].

2.2. Communication styles: high-context vs. low-context

Communication styles are another important dimension of Sino-US cultural differences. Chinese communication is generally high-context: Chinese people prefer to embed meaning in non-verbal cues and shared assumptions for implicit understanding, in order to protect each other's feelings [2, 5, 11]. This is different from the low-context American culture, which prioritizes direct and explicit verbal communication [3, 5, 11]. This means that when Chinese international students enter the United States, they need to adapt to an American classroom where direct expression is expected although they are used to indirect and harmony-preserving communication [4, 6, 11, 12]. Different communication styles may therefore reduce Chinese international students' social willingness, because concerns about making linguistic or cultural mistakes in public can lead to humiliation or loss of face [11]. Maggs notes that U.S. teachers encourage questions and interactions far more than their Asian counterparts, which leaves many Chinese international students unaccustomed to seminar-style discussions [12]. Therefore, many Chinese international students' social willingness to initiate or sustain conversations with Americans is usually low.

2.3. Social norms: deep-bond vs. broad-range socialization

Chinese international students also have different socialization patterns from their American peers, owing to different social norms about personal bonds. In China, people usually prefer deep-bond socialization, as they build close long-term relationships within small circles and remain cautious

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about interacting with people that they are not familiar with [7]. Consequently, they are less likely to participate in campus social activities with many peers whom they are not familiar with. However, the education system in the United States encourages broad-range socialization for bonds with diverse groups [4, 11, 13]. This explains why Chinese international students' cross-cultural friendships with American peers often remain limited and less developed, while they rely heavily on fellow Chinese students for support because of shared language, cultural background, and emotional bonds, forming a close-knit co-national community [3, 11, 14]. This preference for deep-bond in-group ties is another important reason for the low willingness of Chinese international students to initiate cross-cultural interactions in the United States.

3. Cultural adaptation strategies and social willingness of Chinese international students

3.1. Dominant adaptation strategy: separation strategy

Although Chinese international students share certain cultural features, they do not form a single group. As individuals, they adopt different cultural adaptation strategies to adjust to education in the United States, one of which is the separation strategy. They usually stay close with other Chinese international students while limiting in-depth interactions with local students and the broader campus community [3, 5, 6, 11, 13]. Besides the differences already mentioned, practical challenges such as language barriers and academic pressure from parental expectations also contribute to the adoption of this strategy [2, 7, 14]. This strategy can temporarily reduce Chinese international students' cultural anxiety and interpersonal struggles in the US, but in the long term, they are often faced with greater isolation from local peers and staff on campus, thereby weakening their social willingness to integrate into the host society and its education system [5, 6].

3.2. Optimal adaptation strategy: integration strategy

In contrast, some Chinese international students adopt the integration strategy. While maintaining their own cultural identities, they build meaningful connections with the host institution's social and academic communities [7]. They actively learn and accept local cultural norms while participating in campus activities, which encourages continued cross-cultural engagement and friendship development with local peers [13]. Through this strategy, they are able to obtain broader peer support from a larger interpersonal network, which helps alleviate the negative impacts of academic pressure, language proficiency, and communication styles [3, 7, 11]. It also provides opportunities to improve English proficiency and receive broader social support, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness and alienation [5-7, 14]. Greater engagement with the host culture generally expands students' social resources and facilitates their long-term cultural and academic adaptation.

3.3. Social willingness as a mediating mechanism

Social willingness plays an important role in explaining how different adaptation strategies influence Chinese International students' cultural adjustment. Students who adopt the separation strategy generally show lower cross-cultural social willingness, often because they are less interested in interacting with others from different cultural backgrounds [10, 14]. By contrast, students adopting the integration strategy usually exhibit higher levels of social willingness through active participation in peer communication and group activities, which further accelerates their cultural and academic adaptation [2, 3, 6]. Higher social willingness also promotes help-seeking behaviors and

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classroom participation, which enhances students' adaptation to the U.S. educational environment [6]. In other words, low social willingness may hinder the cultural adaptation of Chinese international students, whereas higher social willingness can facilitate the transformation of external adaptation challenges into internal adaptive motivation. This mediating mechanism helps explain why different adaptation strategies are associated with different social and academic performance among Chinese international students in the United States.

4. Social willingness's impact on Chinese international students' learning behaviors

4.1. Classroom participation: silence vs. active engagement

Different levels of social willingness among Chinese international students in the United States are linked to different patterns of classroom participation, notably silence and active engagement. Many studies confirm that, because of low willingness to communicate, some Chinese international students tend to remain quiet in American classes [2, 6, 8, 9]. Compared with their American peers, these Chinese international students are generally less likely to participate actively in classroom discussion because their low social willingness often makes them anxious about expressing personal ideas publicly and fearful of making mistakes in front of others [3, 6, 9, 11]. Yet, in the United States, the education system features a student-centered teaching model, in which spontaneous questioning and critical debate are encouraged as a core part of learning [7, 12]. This does not mean that Chinese international students lack intellectual engagement in the United States. For them, quiet listening is an important sign of respect for instructors [6]. Unlike them, Chinese international students with high social willingness are able to adapt to participatory classroom norms more effectively and efficiently. They engage in active group discussions by asking questions and sharing viewpoints like their American peers, which strengthens their understanding of course content and interpersonal relationships, and leads to better knowledge mastery and academic performance than those with low social willingness [7, 9, 11, 13]. It is therefore fair to say that active participation is a core feature of effective learning for Chinese international students in the United States.

4.2. Academic help-seeking: avoidance vs. active utilization

Social willingness also affects Chinese international students' academic help-seeking behavior in the United States, which is another key component of academic integration. Due to a lack of social willingness to face concerns such as being considered ignorant or unintelligent, some Chinese international students decide to hold back from seeking help from professors or peers [4, 5, 8, 10]. They are afraid that asking questions that they are supposed to know can make them lose face in front of professors or peers [8, 10]. This also explains why most Chinese students resort to forbearance coping when facing academic difficulties, which makes turning to professors or American peers for assistance a source of embarrassment [5, 11]. In other words, for many Chinese international students, they refuse potential valuable academic support resources that can benefit them simply because of such social and psychological concerns. However, Chinese students with higher social willingness overcome these mental barriers more easily. Instead of holding back or feeling stigmatized about asking questions, they are more likely to consult professors and discuss problems with peers, believing they are making the best use of their opportunities to study in the United States [8, 10, 14]. With greater willingness to communicate like this, Chinese international students are able to acquire timely academic support and effectively resolve learning obstacles, which contributes to their overall learning efficiency to a large extent [5, 8, 10]. Existing studies

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conclude that positive help-seeking behaviors among Chinese international students are important for them to expand learning networks while preventing minor academic problems from accumulating into severe setbacks in the future [5, 6, 8,10].

5. Social willingness and academic integration of Chinese international students

5.1. Components and outcomes of academic integration

For Chinese international students in the United States, academic integration is not just about high grades. In fact, academic integration is usually closely pertinent to not only their regular in-class participation and rapport with instructors but also a sense of academic belonging [3, 11, 14]. This suggests that for Chinese international students, academic integration is a mixture of individual motivation, social interaction, and environmental support, with their social willingness being a bridge between their personal motivations for academic success and campus resources. Hence, students with strong cross-cultural social willingness tend to build robust connections with peers and faculty [5-7].

5.2. The vicious cycle of cultural discomfort and academic difficulties

When Chinese international students experience lower social willingness, they are less likely to achieve successful academic integration. Limited academic integration may, in turn, further reduce their confidence in cross-cultural interactions, reinforcing their existing low social willingness. As a result, a self-perpetuating negative cycle may develop: When they decide to step back from social and academic interactions because of cultural discomfort, they give up their access to essential peer and faculty support to integrate, which makes them susceptible to challenging coursework and persistent academic stress, with learning burnout further isolating them from social exchanges to evade pressure [7].

5.3. Peer social support as a buffer

Despite the negative impacts of the above-mentioned cycle, peer social support can serve as an effective way for Chinese international students in the United States. According to Xu and Chai, peer interaction can give rise to strong protective effects for Chinese international students because peer social support can effectively buffer the negative effects brought by cultural adaptation pressure [7]. Besides emotional comfort, peer social support also offers useful information and practical assistance, which can boost their confidence in both social communication and academic pursuits [3, 6-8]. This indicates that with peer social support like encouragement and help, Chinese international students are more likely to gradually ease cultural anxiety and rebuild the courage for cross-cultural communication. This can in return enhance their social willingness significantly as well [7, 11]. However, while peer support from other Chinese international students can be beneficial initially, it may also have side effects in the long term. When Chinese international students rely heftily on co-national peers, they are also confining themselves to a narrow social circle, which can perpetuate the separation strategy by limiting their exposure to local academic norms and communication styles [6-8]. They need connections with American peers to boost their cross-cultural social willingness while shaking off social apprehension effectively.

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6. Conclusion

It is evident that fundamental disparities between Chinese and American cultures like collectivism versus individualism, high-context versus low-context communication, and deep-bond versus broad-range social norms are the root causes of Chinese international students' low cross-cultural social willingness in the U.S., which forces many of them to adopt the separation strategy and isolate themselves from local social networks. However, doing so increases their likelihood of negative emotions such as loneliness and anxiety, which in return further undermines their motivation to interact with peers and professors. Social willingness can directly affect Chinese international students' learning behaviors and academic outcomes, because low social willingness usually leads to classroom silence, limited help-seeking, and teamwork difficulties.. This can lead to insufficient knowledge absorption and accumulated learning difficulties, which are the main reasons for their poor academic integration in the U.S. However, when Chinese students show high social willingness to actively participate in class discussions and utilize academic resources effectively, they are more likely to build supportive learning networks and ensure significantly higher academic performance. The findings also suggest that peer support can buffer cultural adaptation pressure for them by helping them break the cycle of social avoidance and academic decline.

This study has its own limitations. Firstly, the findings are based on secondary information from existing literature. It does not offer firsthand experiences of Chinese international students. Also, the research focuses only on the negative impact of cultural differences without showing successful cases of Chinese international students. Future research can conduct large-scale empirical surveys and in-depth interviews to collect first-hand data. Future research can also include more discussions on successful practical intervention programs.

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