

# A New Theoretical Framework for Researching Female Chinese International Students' Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

This article critiques the prevailing damaged-based framework used in research on Chinese international students, advocating for a shift towards a desire-based framework inspired by Tuck's critique. While gender differences are often overlooked, recent studies highlight distinct challenges faced by female Chinese international graduate students. Centering on their experiences, this study introduces the "Women Strength" framework to amplify their voices, remove stereotypes, and foster empowerment within academia and society. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and advocates for their recognition and empowerment.

## KEYWORDS

Women Strength; Desire-based Framework; Female Chinese International Students.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the data from the Institution of International Education (IIE, 2022), China is the top country of origin for international students in the United States through the 2021/2022 academic year. Chinese international students are usually researched under the damaged-based framework. For example, one study in 2018 shows that Chinese international students have very urgent mental health issues (Lian & Wallace, 2020). Very limited research focuses on the strength-based aspects of the values of Chinese international students' special lived experiences and this group's agency. Also, gender differences in Chinese international students have not been pointed out in most research. However, some research data have shown large gender differences when comparing female and male Chinese international students. Female students usually have more difficulties and mental health problems than male students (Lian & Wallace, 2020; Qin et al., 2023).

Tuck (2009) critiques the prevalent approach of damage-centered research, which documents individuals' or groups' pain with the hope of suggesting changes, often leaving them with unresolved damage. Tuck proposes an alternative framework called desire-based, which situates analyses in both the past and future, acknowledging pain as part of collective wisdom and emphasizing survivance and resistance. Qin et al. (2023) contribute to this discourse by highlighting the independence and resilience of female Chinese international students, addressing a gap in existing research.

This study will develop a new theoretical framework called Women Strength—a desire-based framework to research female Chinese international graduate students' lived experiences and remove labels given by the dominant patriarchal culture, and amplify their voices for this marginalized group.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Female International Graduate Students' Experiences in the U.S.**

This section focuses specifically on female international graduate students' experience. Female international graduate students' experiences will be talked about to identify gender differences, especially female students' experiences. Some articles mentioned female graduate students tended to have more struggles than male students (Dao et al., 2007; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992 ), while only a few scholars talked about international female graduate students' positive aspects (Le et al., 2016 ). Mainstream studies tended to connect female international graduate students with different kinds of mental health problems. Mallinckrodt and Leong conducted a quantitative study with 440 graduate students at a large eastern university. The study documented the level of stressors and stress symptoms in male and female international graduate students. The authors found that female international graduate students reported more stress and symptoms of stress than male students. This research believed that because of the traditional imbalance in gender roles females have, female international students may have greater marital stress, role conflict, and depression. This study echoed the research of Dao et al., which figured out female students' larger possibilities of getting depressive feelings than male students.

Dao et al. (2007) did a quantitative study with 121 Taiwanese international students from a Division I university in the southern U.S. These international graduate students were invited in order to examine the relationship between acculturation, perceived English fluency, social support, and depression. One of the results indicated that female students in the study were more likely to have depressive feelings than male students. This result validates earlier research conducted by Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992). Different from what most studies focus on proving the damaged part of the female international graduate student experience, Le et al. (2016) conducted the study believing that the female group of students was not well researched. The authors adopted the qualitative approach, specifically the phenomenological approach, to explore deeper insights from female graduate students' experiences. Seven international students at a Midwestern university participated in this study. The study found that all participants experienced a mostly positive transformation in their social and personal development, including positive personal growth and development, support network, sense of belonging, and appreciation (Le et al., 2016, p.135). Therefore, it filled the gap and found more positive experiences female international graduate students had. The study also recommended that more future research should pay attention to making positive meanings for international students group.

### **2.2. Female Chinese International Students' Experiences in the U.S.**

The previous theme discussed two different focuses on female international graduate students. The mainstream studies pay more attention to the difficulties of this group (Heng, 2018; Lian & Wallace, 2020; Zhang, 2021) based on a damage-based framework, while some authors offer more information on the community's positive experiences (Qin et al., 2023). The last theme focuses more on female Chinese international students' experiences. Complicating Hsieh's (2006) argument that female Chinese international students are more vulnerable in the identity negotiation process, Qin et al.'s (2023) article will be a major reference in this part since their article first narrowed the research area to not only consider the gender differences of international students but also concentrate on the group of Chinese women's positive perspectives. This section can clearly and directly show the experiences of female Chinese international students.

Hsieh (2006) did a narrative study to investigate how female Chinese international students negotiate their identities. Seven female Chinese international students from a Midwest public institution of higher education were invited to take the individual interviews. The research found that most of the participants tried to avoid assertive communication with others because their collectivistic values

reflected a tendency to be obligative or to avoid conflicts. Also, most participants had difficulty negotiating a social identity because of their ethnic cultural background construction, such as the pursuit of harmony. The author filled the gap by documenting the voice of female Chinese international students' identity negotiation. The author also gave suggestions to female international students, such as the realization of the constraints of their cultures on their identity development, correcting their passive attitudes in identity negotiation, and raising critical thinking to avoid complete assimilation. Hsieh analyzes female Chinese international students' cultural background through a deficit-based model and, therefore, offers some suggestions with the assumption of their lack of critical thinking and cultural awareness. Qin et al. (2023) did a study giving the opposite findings.

Qin et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study of 27 first-year female international undergraduate Chinese students at a large public Midwestern university. The study pointed out a major problem: very little research focused on positive aspects of female Chinese international students' lives in the U.S. Most of the research focused on female Chinese international students' challenges of their adaptation experiences, such as Hsieh's (2006) research result. Qin et al.'s research filled the gap by stressing this group's positive aspects of their adaptation experiences in the U.S. Participants showed tremendous resilience and their clear identity as strong and independent women. The findings also showed "notable independence and strength by making efforts to overcome" (p. 9). the initial challenges they had in their study abroad journey. These findings contradict Hsieh's (2006) study result that most participants can not negotiate a positive identity. The authors also pointed out the limitations of this research that this study was not able to include all college levels, whereas it only included participants of first-year college students. This will be an invitation for my research to broaden research participants into graduate students. The core resilience framework is one of the vital parts of my theoretical framework. One of the limitations of this article is that it poses issues in a positive/negative framework, but the stories women have to tell are much more complex.

### **3. WOMEN STRENGTH AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In order to show the complex storytelling of female Chinese international students and eliminate the stereotype given by the Chinese and Western environment, I developed the concept of Women Strength, which was adapted from Tara Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model as well as Bajaj's (2018) conceptualization of transformative agency, resilience theory (Qin et al., 2023; Wang, 2009) and Test et al.'s (2005) self-advocacy conceptual framework to understand the lived experiences of female Chinese international students from a complex storytelling perspective. The Women Strength model was also influenced by Chinese feminist theory (Liu et al., 2013), decolonial feminist theory (Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 1988; Segato, 2016), and transnational feminist theory (hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988), which were included under critical feminist theory in my research. In this section, I firstly discussed Community Cultural Wealth and then Critical Feminist Theory before outlining the three main characteristics of Women Strength: agency, resilience, and self-advocacy.

#### **3.1. Community Cultural Wealth**

Yosso (2005) has argued individuals can be empowered by all forms of capital. She designed a community cultural wealth model to capture experiences students of color bring with them to their college environment from a strength-based perspective. The Women Strength model is adapted from the community cultural wealth model. Yosso named six forms of cultural capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance to frame and empower students of color. Aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future (p.77). Linguistic capital refers to intellectual and social skills that are drawn from communication experiences in more than one language and/or style (p.78). Familial capital includes cultural knowledge that comes from kin. It carries community history, memory, and cultural intuition. Social capital refers to the networks of

people and community resources. Navigational capital contains the skills of navigating through social institutions. It acknowledges individual agency with institutional oppression. Resistant capital refers to knowledge and skills that come from oppositional behavior that challenges inequality.

Therefore, the Women Strength model, which contains three characteristics—agency, resilience, and self-advocacy—will learn and adapt from the community cultural wealth model to speak up for female Chinese international students. This model specifically draws from Yosso's (2005) descriptions of aspirational capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Agency, as one characteristic of Women Strength, is acknowledged in navigational capital, and it will also be stressed in the Women Strength model. Resilience theory parallels aspirational capital, especially some characteristics like the positivity of the future. Self-advocacy can be used as one form of oppositional behavior, which aligns with the content in resistant capital. The Women Strength model captures the experiences female Chinese students bring with them to a transnational study environment from a strength-based perspective. The group of female Chinese international students' lived experiences should not be defined as a problem, whereas their strength as women and individuals should be seen. Agency, resilience, and self-advocacy are several vital characteristics that can not be ignored.

### **3.2. Critical Feminist Theory**

Feminism theory is the bedrock of the Women Strength model. I will apply three distinct but interconnected feminist frameworks to the Women Strength model, which I define here under the broad category of critical feminist theory. The first is Chinese feminism, which provides valuable cultural and historical background of gender dynamics in China. The second is decolonial feminism, which shares common grounds with Chinese feminism and also offers valuable knowledge and experiences for other global areas' feminism evolution process. The last is transnational feminism, which is critical to understanding the complexities of gender across national borders.

#### **3.2.1. Chinese Feminism**

In 1903, the first Chinese feminist manifesto was published in Shanghai, entitled *The Women's Bell*. This manifesto was created by a young man, Jin Tianhe, one of the contemporary male feminists who dreamed of being a white European man (Liu et al., 2013). He wrote in the preface of *The Women's Bell* that "I want to let in the fresh air of European civilization, drew it in to restore my body. I dream of a young, white European man" (Liu et al., 2013, p.1). This young man's unusual admission of racial sadness is an odd beginning for what is presented as the first Chinese feminist manifesto. A preeminent female feminist, He-Yin Zhen, critiqued Jin's perspective by pointing out that male feminists only pursued men's self-interests in the name of women's liberation. He-Yin Zhen also pointed out that the foundation of Western feminism was based on the "patriarchal foundation of capitalist modernity and the capitalist extensions of patriarchy" (p. 8). She believed the feminist struggle was not parallel with the capitalist modernization agenda and that a total revaluation and abolishment was needed to end all social hierarchies (Liu et al., 2013).

#### **3.2.2. Decolonial Feminism**

He-Yin Zhen's critique of Western feminism parallels decolonial feminist theory. Decolonial feminism criticizes Western feminist theory as the primary reference for other countries' feminist process (Mohanty, 1988). Western feminism produces the category Third World Woman to create the Other as a form of colonization. Women in the Third World become victims of particular cultural and socio-economic systems (Mohanty, 1988). According to this Western view, the only way women in the Third World can survive is to wait for the West to save them. Under Western feminism discourses, women from the world of the Other do not have any agency. Therefore, decolonial feminism denies the labels of powerless, exploited, and helpless given to the women in the world of the Other and stresses the agency all women have (Mohanty, 1988; Segato, 2016).

Lugones (2010) further expanded on the concept of decolonial feminism in her work *Toward a Decolonial Feminism*, in which she shed light on the modern capitalist colonial modernity itself. Lugones applied the term coloniality in the article to name not just a classification of people in terms of the coloniality of power and gender, but also the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for the classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human beings. (Lugones, 2010, p. 745)

She then defined *The Coloniality of Gender* as the analysis of racialized, capitalist, gender oppression, and further defined decolonial feminism as the possibility of overcoming the coloniality of gender. Lugones also talked about the alternative ways to resist the coloniality of gender. For example, she argued to value the voices of marginalized groups, such as colonized and indigenous women. She also believed that a decolonial feminist approach calls for feminists from different cultural backgrounds and borders to build solidarity and coalition.

### 3.2.3. Transnational Feminism and Women of Color Feminisms

Transnational feminism and women of color feminisms, including decolonial feminism, emphasize the interconnectedness of oppression and advocate for global solidarity among feminists. Mohanty (1988) and hooks (1984) have been instrumental in highlighting the intersectionality of transnational feminism and critiquing mainstream white feminism, urging attention to marginalized groups' experiences.

Women of color feminism, including Asian American feminism, challenges dominant narratives by resisting Western stereotypes and advocating for inclusive, intersectional perspectives (Tong & Botts, 2018; Chen, 2007). These feminist frameworks, along with Chinese feminism, disrupt victim labels and center the voices of marginalized groups, including female Chinese international students. Integrating these perspectives into the Women Strength framework enriches its foundation and fosters a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics and cultural identity.

### 3.3. Agency

Agency is the first and main characteristic in the Women Strength model. Agency is a widely used term across different scholarships to refer to a variety of behaviors and actions (Bajaj, 2018). The agency in the Women Strength model adopts Bajaj's conceptualization of transformative agency, which is constituted of four components—sustained agency, relational agency, coalitional agency, and strategic agency. Sustained agency refers to the agency that is sustained across contexts and time; Relational agency refers to the agency that is relational and enacted with others; Coalitional agency refers to the agency that attends to the bounded-ness of people, histories, cultures, and contexts; Strategic agency refers to the agency that is strategic with regards to analyses of power, long-term consequences, and appropriate forms of action. Each of these components is valued to build the structure of agency in the Women Strength model, especially coalitional agency, which was a term borrowed from feminist scholarship. Chavez and Griffin (2009) suggest that our capacity to influence societal transformation to empower both ourselves and others requires recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals, history, and culture. Coalitional agency echoes some shared perspectives from decolonial feminism and transnational feminism, such as highlighting the importance of global solidarity among marginalized groups.

### 3.4. Resilience

Qin et al. (2023) first introduced the resilience framework to understand the experiences of female Chinese international students. The resilience framework was first proposed by Conner (1993), and Qin et al.'s framework was based on Wang's (2009) introduction of resilience theory into the international student research area. Conner defined resilience as "the capacity to absorb high levels of change while displaying minimal dysfunctional behavior" (p.6). There are seven characteristics

resilient people tend to display: positivity about life and themselves; flexibility; focus; organization; proactive; looking at situations from multiple perspectives, and drawing on the resources of others in social relations (Qin et al., 2023). All of these characteristics are able to be applied to all change situations. Therefore, Wang applied them to examine the adjustment of international graduate students in the United States . It was a more focused research to apply a resilience framework to pursue an in-depth understanding of female international students in Qin's group's study. Resilience will also be an important characteristic in the Women Strength model. It can help to understand how female Chinese international students adapted to the new environment and how specific characteristics of resilience are displayed in their lived experiences.

### **3.5. Self-Advocacy**

Test et al. (2005) pointed out that there were several different definitions of self-advocacy. It can be defined as a goal for education, a civil rights movement, and a component of self-determination. Test et al. examined all of the definitions and then developed the four components of self-advocacy: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. Knowledge of self is the first step of self-advocacy because individuals have to know themselves first and then can tell others about their needs. The authors note that knowledge of rights is another step towards self-advocacy, which includes knowing personal rights, community rights, and human service rights.. Knowledge of self and knowledge of rights are the foundations of self-advocacy. Once these are understood, individuals need to communicate effectively with others through skills such as assertiveness, negotiation, and listening. Leadership is the last component in the self-advocacy conceptual framework.

According to the authors enables an individual to not only advocate for themselves but also advocate for the group, which needs skills such as knowledge of the group's rights and resources, and to advocate for others or for causes. Test et al. developed this model with reference to students with disabilities but also mentioned that this conceptual framework did not have to be limited to students with disabilities and that it could also be used for all students. This model of advocacy offers an opportunity for my research to contribute to this theoretical framework of Women Strength. At the same time, self-advocacy can be taken as a critical characteristic of Women Strength. Female Chinese international students are a marginalized group in the United States, and their voices should be heard. Each individual needs to know their own self and their rights first and speak their needs out loudly through communication, which can further enable the community to be seen and valued.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

In summary, the rise of Chinese international graduate students in the United States has reshaped higher education demographics. While previous research often framed their experiences negatively, recent studies, notably by Qin et al. (2023), highlight the resilience and agency of female Chinese international students, challenging stereotypes.

To address this, the Women Strength framework has been developed, drawing on various theoretical perspectives including resilience theory and feminist frameworks. This framework aims to empower female Chinese international students by amplifying their voices and recognizing their agency within broader socio-political contexts.

Moving forward, it's crucial to continue exploring the multifaceted identities of Chinese international students, particularly regarding gender dynamics. Adopting frameworks like Women Strength can lead to a more nuanced understanding and inclusive educational environment, ultimately fostering equity and empowerment for all.

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