

A Study on the Sense of Belonging of Chinese Students in the United States in the Post-epidemic Era

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Abstract The global pandemic has affected the entire world from all kinds of aspects. People were forced to stay up home to avoid the virus, which led to the great depression both economically and culturally. A great number of small and medium-sized enterprises closed down on the economic side. For the cultural field, one of the most affected fields tends to be education. Because of the worldwide pandemic, most schools were shut down and students can only have classes through online access. Under this circumstance, various education-related issues arose. Almost all the Chinese international students were forced to go back to China or quarantined in the foreign culture due to the restrictions of travelling. Many Chinese international students happened to be stuck in negative emotions, which can be concluded as a lack of sense of belonging during these turbulent times. The lack of sense of belonging can mainly originate from three factors: socialization, academic performance, and internship application. This article will first look into the troubles caused by these three main factors and then develop targeted solutions to remit the condition and improve Chinese international students' sense of belonging in the United States.

Keywords: international students; sense of belonging; Chinese student.

1. Introduction

The global pandemic began in 2021 and has upended people's lives in plentiful ways, casting a profound shadow on various fields, especially the realm of education. While the usage of remote learning became the prevalent norm among colleges, international students faced multiple kinds of academic difficulties, such as time zone differences, network instability, and limited studying resources. Aside from these academic dilemmas, the pandemic also leads to students' inefficiency in finding employment and daily socializing. These three major problems caused by the pandemic all point to the same negative emotion: feeling isolated, or in other words, loss of sense of belonging. This kind of emotion is considered to be aroused when people think they are excluded from an extensive group due to forced external or internal influences. Under this circumstance, international students tend to feel isolated since they have been restricted entirely from in-person activities by the pandemic. Once people feel isolated, their enthusiasm toward things related to such groups will primarily decline. According to Lewthwaite, he found that belonging is positively correlated with lower rates of depression and a higher level of instinctive motivation [1]. As a result, this paper will focus on international Chinese students in the US.

2. Sense of Belonging Issues

2.1. Socialization Problem

To begin with, the lack of sense of belonging is most widespread in Chinese international students' daily life, especially socialization. Although the basic necessities of everyday life, including eating and transporting, have also been seriously affected by the pandemic, they merely lead to a lower physical living quality for international students. Instead, the socialization barriers have been regarded as causing psychological issues. According to the Journal of Migration and Health, in a US University, 45% of Chinese international students reported depression symptoms, and 29% of them



showed anxiety symptoms [2]. Given the premise of complete conversion to online courses, students have already lost the chance to make friends during class breaks. In this case, the deprivation of extracurricular activities tends to make things get worse. It should be noted that most Chinese international students used to have class collectives in China. Conforming to the social value of collectivism, Chinese students usually have close connections with their assigned group by school and few contacts with students who are outside their group compared to Western students who care about individualism the most [3]. This different mode of learning originated from cultural differences that directly led to the higher difficulties for Chinese international students to make friends in US colleges due to its changing members for each class and each semester. Consequently, it will be impossible for Chinese international students to form a stable group for college life, and they are propelled to make friends in entirely unfamiliar and new ways. On the other hand, it's inevitable to take a look at the sharply reduced socialization opportunities during the pandemic. In order to guarantee students' health and safety, most colleges and universities suspend offline club activities and even daily casual meetings in communal spaces such as canteens and libraries. In other words, the last external chances for Chinese international students to socialize are eliminated. According to a study conducted by Tan and other scientists, the lower frequency of socializing during the pandemic decreases the approaches for releasing stress and thus increases the possibility of all kinds of negative moods [4]. Under this circumstance, Chinese international students tend to suffer from psychological issues, and their daily lives will be severely affected. However, this group's mental health is not paid attention by the country. A recently conducted analysis revealed from 1983 to 2014, there is merely 1.75% of the counseling articles focused on the psychological health of Chinese international students [5].

2.2. Academic-Related Issues

On top of that, the lack of sense of belonging is apparent in Chinese international students' academic life. The most central issue related to their academic career under the effect of the pandemic is the time zone problem. Most Chinese international students chose to go back to their homes after the pandemic outbreak in the US, which resulted in an entirely different time zone between their class time and home time. All Chinese international students follow the Chinese standard time (CST), which is 12 hours ahead of US time. Suppose that a 1.5-hour synchronous class begins at 12 p.m. EST. Chinese international students should stay up late until 1:30 a.m., to finish listening to this class, which is definitely in a state of low efficiency. Maybe due to this time zone concern, some professors change their courses into asynchronous classes, which means that students mainly study independently by watching Zoom recordings and reading class resources. On the one hand, this learning mode increases the difficulty of Chinese students to ask questions timely since they need to email their professor and wait for responses. Even though they may have classmates to discuss the problems with, the different time zones make communication become hard. Chinese international students will feel that it's tough for them to find a study group and be left behind by others. According to a study centering on the impact of the pandemic, the researchers pointed out that most international students lack the opportunities to interact with their classmates, and only 60% of the students reported that they adapt well to online learning [6]. The lack of communication is supposed to lead to different extents of negative impacts on different kinds of majors. The troubles mentioned above are from a general aspect, mostly happening among students who major in science. To be more specific, the most affected groups of international Chinese students are those who study liberal arts and arts. The learning mode of liberal arts majors is entirely different from that of science majors. Aside from after-class assignments, which are similar to science majors, the liberal arts classes contain a considerable percentage of class discussion, group presentations, and personal sharing. In *Liberal Arts Education and Online Learning*, the author emphasizes that liberal arts study highly requires in-person communication and connection, including live interaction and after-class activities [7]. Although the professor can open a break-out room for group discussions, there are still a lot of limitations. The first one is that the system may accidentally assign students who are more silent in class into one break-out room and those who often share their thoughts in one group. This inappropriate grouping will directly result in silence in the entire group of students who seldom talk since no one would like to

start the discussion, which is detrimental to students' participation. The silent Chinese international students will gradually become more and more not willing to talk, and thus, it will become more and more difficult for them to integrate into the class. Secondly, many liberal arts in-class activities are restricted by online courses. For example, in education policy class, the professor may want the students to work in groups to design strategies to solve specific policy deficiencies mentioned in class reading. Before, it was an excellent chance for Chinese international students to get familiar with classmates and communicate with each other about the class content, even if they were afraid of talking in classes. However, this class event is replaced by common thought-sharing, which means the deprivation of comfortable channels for shy Chinese international students. On the other hand, not all students are well-organized and self-disciplined in their academic careers. Most of them tend to choose to skip all the classes and merely finish the assignments by searching for answer keys on the Internet. Staying at home and only listening to the lectures from laptops deprives the University's learning atmosphere to many international students, which makes them regard themselves as not attending college. According to research about asynchronous courses, the learning outcomes of asynchronous classes are inferior to in-person learning after the researchers conducted several times of quiz assessments [8].

2.3. Internship and Future Career Worries

Thirdly, the pandemic has notably influenced the professional trajectories of Chinese international students, subsequently diminishing their sense of belonging. The ancillary repercussions emanate from two interrelated elements: the stringent constraints imposed by the OPT/H1B policy on international students, and the escalating adverse perceptions of the American public towards individuals of Chinese descent. These elements are not isolated; instead, they operate in tandem, amplifying their impacts on one another. It is universally acknowledged that international students aspiring to secure off-campus employment post-graduation must navigate the extension of their student visas through Optional Practical Training (OPT). However, the pandemic gave rise to the postponement of OPT in a high possibility. Concrete evidence can be found in the news written by Marcelo Barros. The USCIS used to process international students' OPT applications from around 70 to 90 days while the procedure is slowed down these days, delayed to about 120 days [9]. This delayed release of OPT is seen as a severe disaster for all the international students who are eager to find a job in the US. Suppose that a Chinese international student applies for the OPT on time, and if the USCIS proceeds in general working efficiency, he will get the legalized working right within 60 days, a granted extended period for students to seek jobs. However, the delayed OPT will directly expel international students from the US since they have exceeded the granted 60 days. Aside from the delayed OPT issuing, the US public's attitude toward the Chinese is not optimistic, which indirectly reduces the employment chances for Chinese international students. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, China has been affirmed as the country that spread the virus by people all over the world as it is the first country in which the virus has broken out. In *Experiences of Chinese International Students During COVID-19*, the researcher claimed that the misunderstanding of China as the virus spreader caused the surge in employment, which indicates that Chinese people are "repeatedly scapegoated and targeted" during the economic downturn [10]. Given the economic recession in the United States caused by the pandemic, the job market has been stagnant for a long time, which signifies massive layoffs in every walk of life. In this case, a lot of native people lost their jobs, and thus, an increasing number of native Americans were forced to find new jobs, which compressed the job spaces for international students to acquire a job. Concurrently, manifestations of discrimination against individuals of Chinese descent appear to be intensifying within public spheres in the United States. Shen elucidates this trend, noting a prevailing racialization of Chinese people as purported vectors of disease, leading to the perception amongst some U.S. citizens that they are contaminating the national territory [10]. This pernicious stereotyping has precipitated a reluctant, if not averse, stance among companies to engage Chinese candidates in employment opportunities. Even amongst those Chinese individuals who successfully navigate the employment landscape, many

continue to confront experiences of isolation and discrimination within their professional environments.

Generally speaking, the pandemic has negatively impacted Chinese international students in socializing, academic study, and employment opportunities. All these three factors have a strong correlation with their sense of belonging. As a result, it is inevitable that we should find out appropriate ways to alleviate this problem.

3. Solution

3.1. Organization Specifically for Chinese International Students

The first solution is supposed to be building an association that exclusively belongs to Chinese international students. The organization can have different branches targeting Chinese international students' different demands including socialization, academic support, and internship advising. In China, there are a lot of tutoring centers for both students' academic and internship support. Under this circumstance, many Chinese international students have gotten used to the help from these tutoring centers aside from their original schools. However, they may find that the American education environment doesn't have such tutoring centers, which leads to the consequence that many Chinese international students find it difficult to catch up with their learning progress. The suggested foundation of the organization specifically for Chinese international students is not merely a tutoring center, but a combination of improving their overall strengths in both academic and future job careers. The first obligation of this organization is to improve Chinese international students' language-speaking skills. According to research conducted by Andrade, one of the most significant troubles internationals face is the language barrier, which is evidently reflected in their struggle to adapt to all-English lectures compared to domestic students as well as lower collaborating impetus with local students due to language barriers [11]. It is widely acknowledged that international students are forced to experience adjustment toward an entirely different language and cultural surroundings. The pandemic deprives opportunities for them to personally habituate to the language environment, which strengthens the need to improve their language skills systematically in the organization. The organization will have several language tutors for Chinese international students who ask questions at any time and offer daily practice exercises. It won't be a boring one-semester course, but more like a language helper to promote Chinese international students' language confidence since Andrade pointed out that most students are afraid to talk instead of really lacking speaking ability. With the help from the organization, Chinese international students would have more confidence in contacting their foreign classmates to discuss course content and speak in class. Whenever they feel overwhelmed by the academic work, they know that there are always Chinese helpers supporting them, which will largely enhance their sense of belonging on the academic level.

3.2. Visa/OPT Assistant Center

On top of that, this organization will take charge of the F1 Visa or the OPT issues that most Chinese international students face while they are chasing their future careers. As mentioned above, most of the international students were stuck in the trouble of delayed OPT release, which led to the forced departure from the United States. The organization will include a workshop that provides service exclusively for solving OPT-related problems. In fact, the delayed OPT was not merely caused by the government but was also affected by factors such as wrong information in the fill-out form. Through being guided by the workshop, students will not make such mistakes which largely avoids delays or rejections for their OPT applications. Meanwhile, given the condition that many Chinese international students don't have much information about working visas, the only way they know to stay in the US is by applying for OPT. The workshop will provide them with backup plans such as applying for Curricular Practical Training (CPT), which can be seen as a valuable alternative for students who cannot get OPT on time.

The second solution tends to be cultural exchange programs, which target solving the socialization issue for Chinese international students. In the post-pandemic era, many first-year and second-year Chinese international students first got attached to the United States culture and the unfamiliarity may drive to anxiety and thus lack of connection to the outside world as mentioned above. By providing routine cultural exchange programs both in-person and online, Chinese international students would find a channel to share their native culture with foreign students, which is supposed to be an effective way to break the cultural gap and thus make it easier for them to socialize with foreign friends. During this process, a mutual understanding between Chinese culture and Western culture will be fostered. A better comprehension of culture will definitely bring closer the distance between each other.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Chinese international students in the United States suffer from a lack of sense of belonging in academics, socialization, and internships during the post-pandemic era. They are struggling with the depressed mood and pressures generated by these three aspects. It's both the government's and the people's responsibility to conquer this problem.

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