

## A Systematic Review of Chinese Students' Academic Adaptation Overseas

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### ABSTRACT

With the economic development and the progress of globalization and internationalization, some Chinese students start to seek overseas study opportunities and China has become the largest exporter of international students since the year 2009. Successfully accomplishing study overseas is a prior task for Chinese students. This review was designed to understand the situation of Chinese overseas students' academic adaptation, including factors affecting their academic success and related strategies to facilitate their study. Twenty-one empirical studies were identified to meet the criteria and these studies show various factors such as language capacity, pedagogic differences, social support, etc. Related strategies adopted to cope with academic challenges were also revealed.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by identifying 21 research articles that discussed the academic adaptation of Chinese overseas students, which is critical for colleges or universities, whether faculty, administration to address academic challenges and comprehend corresponding strategies

## 1. Introduction

Owing to the progress of globalization and human mobility, pursuing tertiary education abroad has become commonplace (Hofhuis et al, 2019). UNESCO released the data that, till 2020, over 5.6 million higher education students studied abroad. The popular countries for these international students to continue their higher education are mainly the Western counties -the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, China, France, Germany, etc. And the leading places of origin of international students are

basically Asian countries, such as China, India, South Korea, Canada, Vietnam and so forth. Among them, China has occupied the first position of exporting the largest group of international students since 2009, accounting for 33 percent of total number of international students in 2022. The main reason for this phenomena is the rapid economic growth. Many middle-class Chinese families looked for an alternative to receive different learning methods but not the rote-based learning methods in China, and almost 90 percent of Chinese students afford the cost of studying abroad by their families (Zhu, 2016; Chen et al, 2021).

Adapting to an unfamiliar environment is challenging for Chinese overseas students. different cultural patterns differ greatly between and Western countries, reflecting Chinese collectivism and Western individualism. Two cultures tend to contract in many areas, such as core value, life style, and behavioral pattern (Schwartz et al, 2006). Then Chinese international students probably experience cultural shock. Ching et al. (2017) elaborated variables affecting Chinese international students' adaptation in the U.S., including cultural distance, cultural shock, social support, stress and anxiety, language barrier and classroom transition. Oramas and her teammates' research results are similar (Oramas et al, 2018). They identified the barriers that Chinese international students face from socio-cultural, academic and psychological aspects. In response to these three-type barriers, specific themes were found such as cultural differences, food, transportation, different working processes and discourses, language barrier, feelings of loneliness and rejection, and discrimination as obstructions impeding their adaptation.

For Chinese overseas students, the primary task of studying abroad is to obtain decent academic results and achieve their educational goals. In Asian culture of collectivism, achieving academic success is not only a personal target, but also family honor. Besides, Chinese overseas students are likely to base their contingency of self-worth on academic competence. Research illustrated that instead of emphasizing on learning itself, Chinese students with high contingency of self-worth on academic competence put their eyes externally and are preoccupied with their academic performance, which brought them greater stress. In other words, Chinese students care a lot from the external contingencies which affect their psychological health (Liao & Wei, 2014). Cao et al (2018) proposed in their study that Chinese international students suffered from the academic stressors including academic competency, academic cultural shock, academic resources, intercultural communication and pressure. The heritage culture strongly affected Chinese students' behavioral features and their responses to academic stressors.

The mobility of a large number of Chinese international students, the drastic differences in cultures and education systems, it is worth exploring the biggest group of international students' academic adaptation overseas. At present, existing literature around Chinese students' overseas experience varied, largely exploring their language ability, identity, socio-cultural, psychological and academic adaptation, etc. Based on the priority of academic adaptation during overseas study, this systematic review is designed to review empirical studies on what is known about Chinese overseas students' academic adaptation in these ten years to contribute to a broader understanding of challenges they face and how they adapt into a different academic context. Thus, this study attempts to explore What factors affect Chinese students' academic adaptation overseas and how do they academically adapt to the overseas study?

## 2. Academic Adaptation

On the definition of academic adaptation, scholars have put forward their views. Entering a new educational context which differs from prior educational background and experience, international students may suffer from the “academic shock” (Sovic, 2008). The process and result of students adapting into the new educational environment has been identified and defined by scholars with different terms. Tinto (1993) simply explained academic adaptation as an individual's ability to be involved in positive educational outcomes. Park (2016) further explained it as “the process of appreciation and acquisition of the target culture in academic situations' ' is academic adaptation. Shamionov (2020) viewed the “process and result of students adapting to the educational environment and involving the system of interpersonal relations in education, educational activities and educational space” as academic adaptation.

Other scholars adopted the term “academic adjustment” or “academic acculturation”. Zhu (2016) put forward the term adaptation is “more frequently referred to in biology literature than in other disciplines' ". The term adjustment is often employed by scholars in psychology, while acculturation is normally applied in anthropology. In addition, acculturation concerns groups of people contacting other groups of people from different cultural backgrounds and changing their original cultural pattern. However, both adaptation and adjustment concern changes made at the individual levels. The difference between them is that adaptation is adopted on long-term residents, while adjustment is adopted on short-term residents. Hence, Zhu (2016) used the term “academic adjustment” in her book to learn Chinese students' adjustment in Germany. Zhu's (2016) explanation of academic adjustment includes the awareness of different academic expectations and adoption of strategies to cope with difficulties caused by these differences, improvement of language proficiency to conduct intercultural communication in academic activities and with local students and academics, and the development of self-confidence and personal growth in educational development. Liu, Li and Zhang (2022) encapsulated the academic adjustment as the process of adjusting to a different environment related to the matter of learning. It is not just about academic progress but also entails understanding the regulation which governs interpersonal relations in host culture.

Academic acculturation is also employed by researchers to learn international students' study abroad. Xing and Bolden (2019b) conceptualized international students' academic acculturation as a dynamic psychological adaptation process which involves a complex interplay between academic and non-academic experience. Wang and Bai (2020) didn't give definition of academic acculturation, but used the acculturation model established by Ward, Bochner and Furnham to examine Chinese students' pre-departure academic acculturation before their study in Australia. Wang and Riihä (2021) also didn't define the concept of academic acculturation but adopted John Berry's acculturation model to teach Chinese doctoral students academic acculturation in Finland. It can be seen from this that researchers who employ the term “academic acculturation” normally used acculturation models to facilitate their research on international students' overseas study. They usually didn't offer a definition on academic acculturation.

In this study, the term “academic adaptation” is adopted. First, like Zhu's (2016) statement, both adaptation and adjustment concern changes made at individual levels, which is suitable for international students since there are different individual outcomes on their academic performance. Second, adaptation is thought to be used on long-term

residents, while adjustment is adopted on short-term ones. However, Kim (2001) elaborated in her book that no matter what the length of sojourn, every sojourner experiences a certain cross-cultural adaptation involving in a new and unfamiliar milieu. Everyone is challenged by the new environment so as to engage in at least some degree of new cultural learning and modification in original cultural habits. Hence, under the guidance of Kim's (2001) view, this study adopted the term "academic adaptation" to describe Chinese overseas students' academic experience. But when searching the related papers on databases, the terms "adjustment" and "acculturation" are also used due to scholars' different understanding and definitions.

### 3. Research Method

To identify the relevant studies on Chinese overseas students' academic adaptation, three databases were adopted. They are Web of Science, Scopus and ScienceDirect, which provided the majority of related and influential papers. The process of searching and reviewing lasted for 2 weeks. Search items include: (1) international students; (2) Chinese students; (3) academic adaptation, and also the synonym (4) acculturation; (5) adjustment.

#### 3.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies were selected, to guarantee the appropriateness of the outcomes, studies were eligible for if they:

- i. included Chinese international students undertaking tertiary education outside the mainland China,
- ii. explored Chinese international students' academic adaptation, research exploring academic acculturation and academic adjustment also meet the criteria,
- iii. written in English,
- iv. illustrated data in a clear manner to avoid misinterpretation, and
- v. peer-reviewed articles,
- vi. published from 2014 onward.
- vii. Studies were excluded if:
- viii. they are conference abstracts,
- ix. reviewed articles,
- x. The data on Chinese international students was unable to be extracted.

#### 3.2. Selection process

By entering the search items on three databases, a total of 245 articles were identified ; then 126 articles were removed because they are clearly irrelevant. The remaining 118 articles were scanned by titles and abstracts. 29 articles were eligible for full text reading and 21 articles remained to meet the criteria. Figure 1 shows the process of selecting articles and Table 1 displayed the overview of each selected article.

Figure 1: Flow diagram for process of article selection

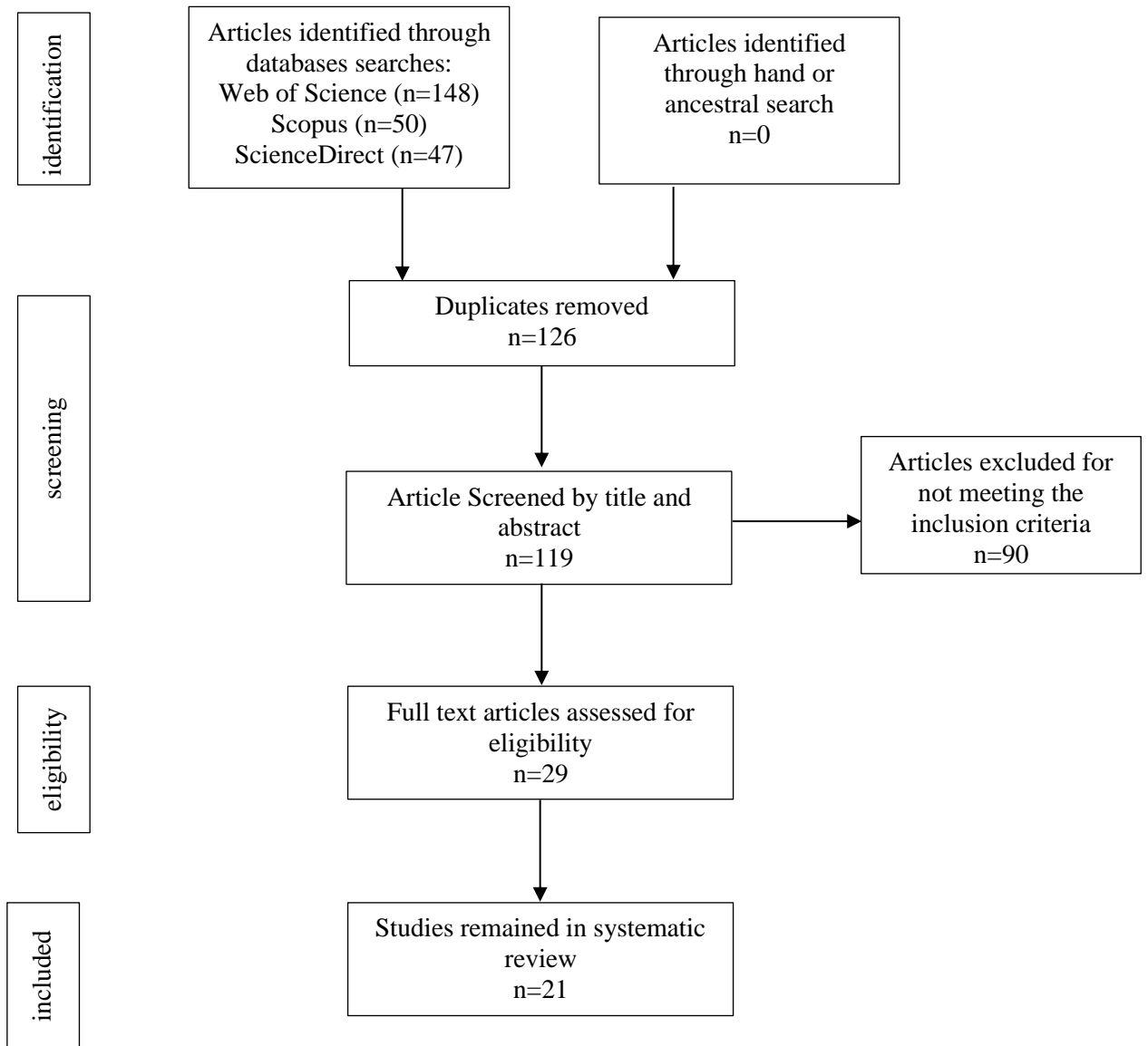


Table 1: Literature review overview matrix

Authors	Sample characteristics	Country and recruitment setting	Dependent variables	Theoretical foundation/framework	Study design	Analytical methods	Findings on academic adaptation
Forbush & Foucault-Wells (2016)	N=120 Chinese students (Female=64, male=53, 3 unknown)	the United States, one university	social adaptation and academic adaptation	not listed	Quantitative: cross-sectional	path analysis	Chinese students with more diverse networks have higher levels of social and academic adaptation in the host culture than students with less diverse networks.
Zhu (2016)	N=16 Chinese postgraduate students with average length of stay 28.9 months in Germany; N=4 Chinese students and 2 German lecturers; N=55 Chinese students with over one year stay in Germany	German universities	academic adjustment	affective, cognitive and behavioral model	quantitative and qualitative method	multiple regression analysis, mixed method analysis	Key factors affecting Chinese international students include (1) background factors, such as interdisciplinary knowledge and knowledge of related disciplines, cultural norms and patterns of communication, major subject knowledge and specialized or set terminology; (2) university environment factors, including academic support, intercultural communication with peer students, and (3) personal factors, like part-time jobs, personality.

Cao & Meng (2017)	N=202 Chinese students (female=118, male=84), aged from 20 and 37	different universities in Belgium	social and academic adaptation	not listed	quantitative: cross-sectional	multiple regression and structural equation modeling approach	Social support satisfaction and English proficiency account for 22% of the variance in academic adaptation. Social connectedness and social support satisfaction fully mediated the relationship between local language proficiency and social/academic adaptation, but partially between English proficiency and social/academic adaptation.
Lee et al (2017)	N=190 int'l, 111 Koreans and 79 Chinese international students	the United States, one large Midwestern university	school adaptation	not listed	Quantitative: cross-sectional	Structural equation modeling	Students gain social support from friends in leisure activities. The seriousness of leisure involvement maintained a direct effect on school adaptation.
Meng et al (2017)	N=206 Chinese students (female=119, male=87)	Belgian universities	social connectedness, social adaptation and academic adaptation	not listed	Quantitative: cross-sectional	Structural equation modeling	Chinese students with English or local language proficiency gain a higher global competence level. Global competence can also result in better social and academic adaptation, and fully mediate between English proficiency and social & academic adaptation
Yu & Wright (2017)	N=124 students (32 local students, 61 mainland Chinese students and 31 international students)	Hong Kong, 4 universities	academic adaptation	not listed	qualitative research: focus group interviews	thematic analysis	Mainland Chinese students had difficulties in adapting to unfamiliar modes of teaching, learning and assessment. Adaptation to an English-medium-of-instruction was a concern. Teacher-student relations and teaching approaches were different from prior educational experiences.



Anderson & Guan (2017)	N=74 students, 36 Chinese students from Chinese universities, 38 Australian students from one Australian university; N=65 Chinese international students in Australia	China and Australia	acculturation and academic adjustment	Acculturation model	Quantitative: cross-sectional	multiple regression analysis	Academic adjustment was positively correlated with increasing implicit identification with Chinese culture. Students who invest time and resources to adapt the host culture may lessen their time on academic aims. And students who put more time on academic adjustment remember the temporary nature of their migrant status.
Li et al (2018)	N=13 East Asian int'l, 7 from mainland China, 2 were from Taiwan, 3 were from South Korea, and 1 was from Japan (female=5, male=8)	the United States, 1 large-sized public university	academic adaptation	acculturation model	qualitative research method: semi-structured interview	consensual qualitative research (CQR) method (within-case analysis and cross-analysis)	East Asian students reported English proficiency and course readiness as challenges. And the feelings they described were associated with academic stress. In relation to academic adaptation, students used self-reliance, dependence, integration and isolation strategies. They tended to cope with issues by themselves and their attitudes and behaviors of help-seeking are focused on self-improvement, self-motivation and self-worth.



Vyas & Yu (2018)	N=202 Chinese mainland students (51.5% female and 48.5% male)	three universities in Hong Kong funded by University Grants Committee	acculturation	not listed	quantitative and qualitative method: large-scale open-ended survey questions and follow-up interviews	phenomenographic approach and thematic analysis	The education and learning culture, language, and (perceived) discrimination/ labeling are the challenges that Chinese mainland students face. The challenges related to education and learning cultural differences can be gradually overcome. And since the respondents are postgraduate students who are more mature and experienced, they are more capable of overcoming behavioral changes. Chinese students' perception of academic integrity was affected by Confucian philosophy, collectivist assumptions, and a resultant convenience mind-set, which was different from the U.S. academic integrity standard. They need to learn the mechanism, overcome the mind-set, accept the U.S. ethical expectations and change.
Jian et al (2018)	N=15 Chinese graduate students	the United States, one public university	ethical practices and adaptations	not listed	qualitative research method: semi-structured interview	inductive analysis approach	Even though Chinese international students face academic challenges abroad, including language, different teaching style, intellectual background and higher education system, they developed their coping strategies to cope with these challenges well.
Li (2019)	N=58 Chinese tertiary-level degree students (30 students in Finland, including 18 females and 12 males; 28 students in Germany, including 12 males and 16 females)	Finland and Germany	academic integration	not listed	qualitative research method: semi-structured interview	thematic analysis	Even though Chinese international students face academic challenges abroad, including language, different teaching style, intellectual background and higher education system, they developed their coping strategies to cope with these challenges well.

Xing and Bolden (2019a)	N=4 Chinese undergraduate students	a mid-sized Canadian university	academic acculturation	academic acculturation, international students' English language proficiency and Self-Determination Theory	qualitative research method: semi-structured interview	cross-case synthesis	During the academic acculturation, because of the limited spoken English capacity, 4 Chinese students experienced psychological stress, which negatively impacted their sense of competence, autonomy and particularly relatedness.
Xing and Bolden (2019b)	N=6 Chinese undergraduate students	a mid-sized Canadian university	academic acculturation	Expectancy-value theory	narrative inquiry method by preliminary and follow-up interview	re-storying and inductive analysis approach	There is a positive relationship between oral English proficiency and successful academic acculturation. Low English proficiency brought psychological stress. Respondents' expectancy of success of learning oral English peaked at the initial stage and declined as academic acculturation progressed.
Yu et al (2019)	N=2201 mainland China-born students (female=1632, male=569)	6 public universities in Hong Kong	psychological and academic adaptation	not listed	quantitative: cross-sectional	multiple regression analysis	Academic self-efficacy, social support, and low levels of perceived discrimination predicted both psychological and academic adaptation. Language competence in English and Cantonese was an additional factor in students' academic adaptation.

Chen & Bang (2020)	N=12 int'l, 7 from mainland China, 3 from South Korea, 1 from Hong Kong, 1 from Taiwan, aged from 19 to 27	the United States, five universities	academic success	grounded theory	qualitative research: semi-structured interview	thematic analysis	Knowledge of English and American culture is a core factor affecting students' academic success. Although they attended preparation programs to help them better adapt in colleges, they still faced challenges from language and cultural adaptation.
Pang (2020)	N=298 Chinese students (female=132, male=166)	Germany, one public university	cross-cultural adaptation, academic integration	cross-cultural adaptation theory	Quantitative: cross-sectional	descriptive analysis	Social support from host and home nationals on SNSs are beneficial for facilitating students' psychological adaptation and academic integration/adjustment. The major differences between Chinese and Australian academic culture were reported as lecture-tutorial models, the learning and teaching approaches, and assessment methods. Chinese students were not well prepared in China before starting their study in Australia.
Wang & Bai (2020)	N=22 Chinese students (female=6, male=16)	Australia, one university	academic acculturation	Acculturation model	qualitative research method: semi-structured interview	thematic analysis	The challenges Chinese doctoral students encountered included language proficiency, knowledge gap, interactions with supervisors and expectations from Chinese family. Students achieved academic development and personal growth by developing learning ability, tolerance with academic difference and developing self-identity
Wang & Rähä (2021)	N=9 Chinese doctoral students (female=5, male=4)	Finland universities	academic acculturation	Acculturation strategies model	case study	thematic analysis	The challenges Chinese doctoral students encountered included language proficiency, knowledge gap, interactions with supervisors and expectations from Chinese family. Students achieved academic development and personal growth by developing learning ability, tolerance with academic difference and developing self-identity

Yu (2021)	N=196 Chinese mainland students (female=156, male=40), aged from 17 and 38	Hong Kong, one university	cross-cultural adaptation	not listed	Quantitative: cross-sectional	Structural equation modeling	Academic adaptation mediated the effect from psychological adaptation to socio-cultural adaptation. L2 WTC (willingness to communicate in a second language) plays a facilitating role in academic adaptation. Three obstructions affecting Chinese students' academic and psychological adjustment in the UK during the pandemic include COVID-specific challenges, COVID-enhanced challenges and language barriers and cultural differences. Chinese students leveraged individual-level, interpersonal level strategies and institutional provision and support to solve the challenges.
Liu et al (2022)	N=8 Chinese students enrolled in master programme	the United Kingdom	psychological and academic adjustment	not listed	qualitative research method: semi-structured interview	thematic analysis	Students preferring separation and marginalization reported better academic adaptation than those preferring integration and assimilation. Academic adaptation cannot be predicted significantly by demographic variables and sociocultural adaptation, but by psychological adaptation.
Lai et al (2023)	N=315 Chinese students (female=152, male=163), aged from 18 to 48 years old	the United States, 19 universities	socio-cultural adaptation, psychological and academic adaptation.	acculturation theory	quantitative: cross-sectional	mid-point split method, Chi-square test and hierarchical regressions	Students preferring separation and marginalization reported better academic adaptation than those preferring integration and assimilation. Academic adaptation cannot be predicted significantly by demographic variables and sociocultural adaptation, but by psychological adaptation.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Publishing rates**

21 articles were published since the year 2014 and met the criteria. The publishing rate from 2014 to 2023 is 2.1 studies per year. In the year 2014, 2015 and 2023, there were no studies on exploring Chinese international students' academic adaptation. In the productive year 2018, 6 studies were closely associated with Chinese students' academic adaptation or acculturation. In other years, there were basically 2 to 3 studies per year examining academic adaptation.

### **4.2. Type of studies**

All of these 21 articles are empirical studies. 9 of them employed quantitative methods, 10 studies used qualitative methods and the other 2 research adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaires are commonly used to collect data within quantitative research to examine Chinese international students' socio-cultural, academic and psychological adaptation, and also the cross-cultural adaptation and acculturation. These quantitative studies proceed various analysis methods, comprehending path analysis, structural equation modeling, multiple regression, mid-point split method, Chi-square test and hierarchical regressions. In qualitative studies, most researchers collect data via semi-structured interview and others choose the methods of focus group interview, case study and narrative inquiry, and the data analysis were conducted by the methods of thematic analysis, cross-case synthesis, inductive analysis.

### **4.3. Sample Characteristics**

These 21 studies were conducted in eight countries. 6 studies were carried out in the United States. 2 studies were organized in Germany, Belgium, Canada, for a total of 6 studies. 1 study has been respectively operated in Australia, Finland and the United Kingdom, for a total of 3. There were 2 comparative studies completed between Australia and China, Finland and Germany. The other 4 studies were managed in Hong Kong. Respondents in 17 research are Chinese students with different education levels, ranging from undergraduates to PhD candidates, and also different length of stay. 4 studies have been conducted in the United States and Hong Kong to probe East Asian students and international students' academic adaptation, and most of the respondents were Chinese or Chinese mainland students. In addition, the sample size in quantitative studies is sufficient, the minimum number of respondents is 139 and the maximum one reaches 2201.

### **4.4. Chinese students' academic adaptation**

#### *4.4.1. Factors affecting academic adaptation*

By reviewing these 21 identified articles, some studies uncovered the factors affecting Chinese students' academic adaptation. Language proficiency has been mentioned in many studies. [Meng et al \(2017\)](#) concluded from their study in Belgium that English or local language proficiency gain a higher global competence level which results in better social and academic adaptation and also fully mediated between English proficiency and

social and academic adaptation. [Cao and Meng \(2017\)](#), in 2017, they also managed a study in Belgium and proved that English proficiency and social support satisfaction accounted for 22% of the variance in academic adaptation. [Wang and R ih a \(2021\)](#) exposed that even for PhD students studying in Finland, they still face the challenge from language, especially the oral-English. Respondents in [Liu's et al. \(2022\)](#) research who studied in the United Kingdom admitted that language barriers are long-standing obstacles.

The situation in North America is almost the same. [Li et al \(2018\)](#) explored East Asian students studying in the US, students admitted English proficiency and course readiness as challenges. [Chen and Bang \(2020\)](#) also invited international students from East Asia to share their academic experience, and students reported the knowledge of English and American culture are core factors affecting their academic success even though they attended preparation programs before. [Xing and Bolden \(2019a, 2019b\)](#) organized two studies in Canada and the result also reported the limited spoken English capacity affected Chinese students' successful academic acculturation, and brought them psychological stress.

Though in Hong Kong, the special administrative region in China, Chinese mainland students also face language challenges when studying there. [Yu et al \(2019\)](#) conducted 4 studies in Hong Kong, proving adapting to an English-medium-of- instruction was a concern and also elaborated the importance of language capacity, including English and local language Cantonese, which is consistent with [Meng's et al \(2017\)](#) study highlighting the significance of local language.

Other scholars also pointed out the pedagogic differences between Chinese and Western education as challenges for Chinese international students, firstly reflecting on the different teaching or learning style, assessment and intellectual background. Chinese students received result-oriented teaching, grammar-translation approach, spoon-feeding teaching in China, but they need to adapt to a completely different academic culture, such as lecture-tutorials model, being inspired to speak in class, diversified assessment techniques and so on ([Yu & Wright, 2017](#); [Vyas & Yu, 2018](#); [Li, 2019](#); [Wang & Bai, 2020](#)). In addition, teacher-student relations also play a pivotal role ([Yu & Wright, 2016](#)), especially for those postgraduate students, who are under supervision by their supervisors. Chinese PhD students in Finland mentioned in the interview that they expected their supervisors to give them explicit and rigid supervision, but they focused more on individual freedom and self-motivated learning ([Wang & R ih a, 2021](#)). What's more, Chinese students' perception of academic integrity was affected by Confucian philosophy, collectivist assumptions, and a resultant convenience mind-set. These cultural premises clash with American academic integrity standards. They need to learn the mechanism, overcome the mind-set, accept the American ethical expectation and make changes ([Jian et al, 2018](#)).

One study specifically investigated Chinese international students' academic and psychological adjustment during the COVID-19 period. [Liu et al \(2022\)](#) conducted a case study in the United Kingdom to trace eight Chinese international students' psychological and academic adjustment. They found the reduced access to university facilities and resources was the most significant barrier impeding Chinese international students integrate into academic life. All of the participants in the study voiced the belief that online learning during the pandemic dismissed social interaction, relied too much on technology and lacked practice-based learning.

Facing such challenges, social support seemed to be vital to facilitate Chinese students' academic adaptation. [Lee et al \(2017\)](#) suggested that engaging in leisure seriously has a positive association with gaining social support from friends. Then, such support was a predictor of school adaptation. He highlighted the importance of serious leisure engagement in the lives of Asian international students adapting to college. [Cao' s et al. \(2018\)](#) research also proved the pivotal roles of social support satisfaction and connectedness because they fully mediated the relationship between language proficiency and social/academic adaptation. [Yu et al \(2019\)](#) discovered that Chinese students who received support from host institutions, other international students and students from their cultural group experienced lower levels of difficulties in psychological and academic adaptation. [Pang \(2020\)](#) further developed that social support from host and home nationals on SNSs are beneficial for promoting Chinese students' psychological and academic integration in Germany. This result was congruent with [Forbush and Foucault-Wells's \(2016\)](#) study confirming that Chinese international students with diverse networks have higher levels of social and academic adaptation in the host culture.

But another interesting fact is that though some Chinese overseas students acknowledge that they need support from their left-behind family in China, other students confess their anxiety and stress coming from their family. This is also congruent with the aforementioned Chinese collectivism culture. Chinese PhD students studying in Finland show their anxiety and worries from family expectations about their dating, marriage or family life. Married candidates suffer from the great pressure to take care of family while pursuing doctoral degrees. Unmarried female candidates may receive discrimination from Chinese society for their age ([Wang & Rähkä, 2021](#)). It seems that Chinese students' families not only provide them support but also bring them stress.

The above research was mainly organized in a cross-sectional way, but researcher [Zhu \(2016\)](#) carried out 3 studies in Germany to learn Chinese international students' academic adjustment, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods and ascertaining longitudinal changes to comprehensively explain Chinese students' academic adjustment. [Zhu \(2016\)](#) proposed three key factors with ten different categories--background factors, university environment factors and personal factors. Students' insufficiency of interdisciplinary knowledge and knowledge of related disciplines, understanding of cultural norms and patterns of communication, unfamiliarity of major subject knowledge and specialized or set terminology belong to the background factor. Academic support, intercultural communication with peer students, which involves interpersonal communication were identified as university environment factors. In addition, on personal factors, students' part-time jobs negatively affected their study in Germany, but the open attitude or the extroverted personality can help them adjust to the host country.

#### *4.4.2. Strategies*

In order to successfully complete study overseas and achieve their educational goal, Chinese students have taken some measures to overcome the challenges. Among these 21 studies, some studies exposed strategies that Chinese students employed to ensure their smooth education overseas. Before leaving their home country, some East Asian students, including Chinese students, made some preparations to equip themselves. East Asian students in [Chen and Bang's \(2020\)](#) research stated that they took a test-training



program as a common strategy to obtain a decent score in IELTS and TOEFL test. Besides, some of them also signed up for language preparation programs, study abroad programs & college courses and programs taught by native English speakers in homelands to help them better prepare for their college study in the U.S because they were provided an English-speaking environment. Their confidence in speaking English and participating in class were motivating. Despite such preparations, these students still faced challenges from school when they started their study in the U.S. American culture and English proficiency.

Then they had to adopt other strategies. Chinese students who study in Germany and Finland claimed that when they met learning challenges in their study, they would resort to peers from a study group or look for online communities for help (Li, 2019). But interestingly, [Li et al \(2018\)](#) found something different. They conducted a research to dig out how East Asian students (including Chinese students) overcome their academic challenges in the U.S. The research consequence showed that, in relation to academic adaptation, students applied self-reliance, dependence, integration and isolation strategies, namely depending on self, asking help from others, relying on both self and others and relying on neither self or others respectively. They prefer to cope with issues by themselves and their attitudes on help-seeking are focused on self-improvement, self-motivation and self-worth.

Chinese master students who studied in the United Kingdom faced intricate psychological and academic challenges because of the COVID-19, such as the threat of infection, anti-Asian racism and hate incidents, anxiety exacerbated by parents and social media use, etc. Then students leveraged individual-level strategies (such as students previous lockdown experience in China and building optimism and resilience), interpersonal-level strategies (i.e. the development of monocultural relationship patterns) and institutional provision and support ([Liu et al., 2022](#)).

As a matter of fact, for those postgraduate-level students, they are more capable to meet the challenges. Chinese mainland students who experienced different learning and education culture, language barrier in both English and Cantonese and also perceived discrimination are more mature and experienced and more capable of overcoming behavioral changes ([Vyas & Yu, 2018](#)). PhD candidates who studied in Finland explained that as the learning experiences deepened, their academic difficulties decreased. They consciously negotiate their ways to improve their English level. In addition, due to the academic difference between China and Finland, they changed their learning habits to fit the Finnish education system. And after their effort, they indicated that the reconstruction of self-identity was an important outcome of their intercultural learning ([Wang & Rähä, 2021](#)).

## 5. Discussion

This systematic review aims to contribute to an understanding of Chinese students' academic adaptation overseas by exploring the factors and strategies they adopted. A total of 21 quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies were identified.

The studies show various factors affecting Chinese students' academic adaptation. Most of them noted that language barrier is the foremost factor, even though they have passed the language test like IELTS and TOEFL, language barrier was still a problem in host countries and impeded their academic success. The second commonly-mentioned factor

was the pedagogic differences between China and Western countries. Chinese students may have difficulties with different academic norms, new teaching and learning paradigms, classroom structure, teacher- student relationships and education system (Oramas et al, 2018). In addition, a few researchers mentioned factors such as family, host culture, discrimination, self-efficacy which also play a role in students' academic adaptation. Such findings were consistent with Ching et al's (2017) research, elaborating cultural distance, cultural shock, social support, classroom transition and language barriers as prominent variables influencing Chinese students' adaptation to life in the U.S. Then social support accentuates its function of mitigating academic stress and facilitating their academic success, and social media allows Chinese students to obtain social support from both home and host countries.

Confronting changes and challenges in a new environment, Chinese students made efforts to improve their strength. They attended language and preparation programs in their host country. And when they met difficulties overseas, they sought help from peers, co-nationals, senior Chinese students and online communities, or some students even depended on themselves to cope with academic issues or established optimistic attitudes so as to develop learning ability and achieve personal growth.

Among 21 studies, 7 of them demonstrated that social-cultural, psychological and academic adaptation were closely related. Yu (2021) proposed that academic adaptation mediated the effect from psychological adaptation to socio-cultural adaptation. Lai et al (2023) put forward that academic adaptation cannot be predicted significantly by demographic variables and socio-cultural adaptation, but by psychological adaptation. Because when students experience challenges from study or situated in a new environment, they may also experience a certain level of discomfort and stress. That's the reason why researchers examined both academic and psychological adaptation simultaneously in their research. Furthermore, when Chinese students with a good English proficiency, both their social and academic adoption were strengthened. So, language study is often associated with academic and socio-cultural adaptation.

Another implication drawn from the current review is that only a few researchers interviewed classmates and lecturers of Chinese students. Chinese students provided their answers and responses via questionnaires and interviews. However, to objectively understand their academic adaptation overseas, it is better to obtain data from people or departments who work with Chinese overseas students so as to deeply and comprehensively evaluate Chinese students' academic adaptation overseas. More research on this field is appealing.

## 6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the existing literature by identifying 21 research articles that discussed the academic adaptation of Chinese overseas students, which is critical for colleges or universities, whether faculty, administration to address academic challenges and comprehend corresponding strategies. The strengths of the literature include the diversity of countries and recruitment settings, the various factors affecting Chinese students' academic adaptation and the corresponding strategies. Given the stable trends of overseas study and as the largest population of international students, Chinese students continue to pursue education overseas. Related studies on probing Chinese overseas students' academic adaptation will go on.

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## Conflict of Interest

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