

Understanding Chinese International Students' Struggle in Canadian University during COVID-19: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The economic impact of international students in Canada is tremendous. As the enrollment of domestic students has decreased, the admission of overseas students has made up for the financial losses that Canadian institutions suffer due to the drop in domestic student enrollment. China is a significant exporter of international students to Canada, sending a sizable number of them there yearly. Chinese international students' entrance to Canadian universities is being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article contends that because of their temporary immigration status, international students in Canada are at risk. It does this by drawing on the literature analysis approach. They are not included in the majority of government assistance initiatives intended to assist Canadians during this outbreak. The majority of overseas students struggle financially and psychologically as a result of the pandemic. The circumstance is causing a further drop in the admittance of international students, with economic repercussions for Canadian institutions. The report advances our knowledge of the struggles faced by international students and educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the issues they face as well as the methods needed to increase their resilience and universities' capacity.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Pandemic, Chinese International Students, Canada, Remove Universities*

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to significantly impact international higher education (Altbach & de Witts, 2022; Mok, 2022). Due to travel restrictions, campus closures and changes in national study abroad policies, many students have changed or cancelled their study abroad plans (Mok, Xiong & Ke, 2022). In this case, the number of international students enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in major destination countries such as Canada and the United States has dropped significantly from 2019 to 2020. For example, according to a survey conducted by the Institute of International Studies, approximately 90% of Canadian and USA colleges and universities have reduced enrollment of international students, and 30% of HEI indicated a significant reduction in enrollment in the 2020/21 academic year (Martel, 2020). Amyot (2021) reports that, compared with the 2019-20 school year, the number of international students at Canadian universities in the 2020-21 school year has dropped by 20-30%. When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the beginning of 2020, new students were barred from entering the country, resulting in an estimated 11% drop in the enrollment rate of international students in the United States and Canada. In addition, through Xiong and Ke's study in early 2022, it is notable that nearly 80% of Chinese respondents still have little intention of continuing to study abroad after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The number of Chinese international students in Canada is significant for several reasons. Firstly, Chinese students comprise a substantial portion, accounting for 22% of the total foreign student population in 2019 (Buckner, Morales, Brown & Clerk, 2021), contributing to Canadian

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educational institutions' diversity and internationalization. Moreover, their economic impact is notable as Chinese students spend approximately 4 billion Canadian dollars annually in Canada (O'Sullivan & Guo, 2010), benefiting local businesses and supporting job creation. Additionally, Canada's reputation for quality education and welcoming environment attracts Chinese students, fostering cultural exchange, enriching the academic environment, and establishing valuable networks that can lead to future collaborations, trade partnerships, and diplomatic ties between the two countries. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Chinese students cancelled or modified their study abroad plans in consideration of safety and travel restrictions. Besides online questionnaire surveys, limited qualitative studies have been conducted to explore the challenges encountered by international students studying in China. Furthermore, there is a lack of in-depth data collection and analysis to examine the experiences of these students closely, and the extent of this knowledge gap remains unclear.

In addition, many studies have investigated the challenges and issues of students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aucejo et al., 2020; Aylie et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Amendola et al., 2021; Conrad et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). As a minority group on campus, international students face greater barriers to maintaining their studies during the COVID-19 pandemic and may require more attention due to their unique challenges and stressors. However, previous studies often overlooked the special attention to the needs of international students or regarded them as the same as local students. Of the more than

642,000 foreign students in Canada in 2019, 22% came from China (Buckner, Morales, Brown & Clerk, 2021).

The COVID-19 outbreak has sparked more inquiries regarding the future of global higher education. In addition to considering their own health and safety issues, it is also important to determine how international students' studies are affected by unfavorable policies in target countries and whether the current global health crisis will fundamentally change the learning mode of international students. In this regard, recent research also has recognized the impact of international students during the pandemic (Aucejo et al., 2020; Aylie et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Amendola et al., 2021; Conrad et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Qualitative research has a gap as it lacks sufficient attention towards the challenges faced by Chinese international students who live overseas. This literature review is essential as it synthesizes all the data on the challenges faced by Chinese international students enrolled in Canadian institutions during COVID-19. Its significance lies in providing a comprehensive overview of the obstacles they encounter.

Many Chinese scholars, teachers and students chose to enroll in different programs in Canada to immerse themselves in a native English-speaking environment and develop their real-world experience (Palmer, 2016). Furthermore, Chinese students enrolled in academic programs in Canada are more sensitive to pedagogical methods and learning environments (Liu, 2016). However, in the COVID-19 context, they encounter even more unexpected academic and social challenges. As a result, these students are deprived of the same opportunities to immerse

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themselves in native English-speaking environments. This underscores the importance of researching these barriers within the context of online learning and understanding the unique challenges it introduces, as highlighted by Howlett (2022).

This research will examine the impact that COVID-19 has had on the life experiences of Chinese international students in Canada. Specifically, I intend to explore the intersection of these students' educational experiences and cultures in the context of the pandemic to address a central research question: What cross-cultural experiences and challenges do Chinese international students encounter during the pandemic?

Significance of the Study

International student tuition fees remain one of Canada's major sources of revenue. Many universities have been aggressively pursuing Chinese international students due to the financial benefits, and are increasingly dependent on the money earned (Long, 2022). Furthermore, in 2019, China was Canada's second-largest source of international and the third-largest source of new permanent immigrants (Government of Canada, 2021). Therefore, Chinese international students' satisfaction with their study abroad experience will most likely determine whether they settle in Canada. Furthermore, Chinese international students enrolled in education-oriented programs have a unique perspective and expectation of curriculum and pedagogy compared to domestic educators. Unfortunately, the pandemic resulted in the loss of many Chinese international students. Travel restrictions are not the only reason that needs to be explored in depth; an overall paradigm shift and reform of international students' education may also be

necessary. The Canadian government and educational institutions may find this research helpful for investigating the impact of the pandemic not only on Chinese international students, but also on all international students and strategies that can help them during crises.

Additionally, this research will aid in understanding how Chinese international students struggle socially because of neo-racism. This will make it possible for educators to take the required actions to aid students' psychological integration into the community. Additionally, to improve learning outcomes for international students, educators in Canada can collaborate with other important stakeholders to foster a more welcoming environment (Hail, 2015).

Methodology

To conduct a comprehensive literature review, four prominent online databases, namely ProQuest Education, Google Scholar, York Libraries, and Omni Libraries, were meticulously explored to retrieve empirical publications. The search process involved strategically utilizing the following keywords: "Chinese international students*," "COVID-19*," "Canada*," "experience*," and "challenge*." To ensure the reliability and academic rigor of the sources, only peer-reviewed journals were considered, and a specific timeframe spanning from 2019 to 2022 was set as the search criteria. However, due to the relatively recent nature of the topic, the databases mentioned above yielded limited articles. Consequently, to enhance the depth of the research, relevant books and news articles were incorporated. Although it is important to acknowledge that the search may not have encompassed all existing literature on the subject, the identified studies are likely indicative of the current body of knowledge in this field.

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Findings

According to Xiong's (2020) findings, in the pre-pandemic era, there has been a growing discourse surrounding the future of international education, marked by increasing debates and controversies. Particularly, there has been a rising scrutiny regarding the value and advantages of international education, prompting people to question its long-term viability. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again raised questions about the future of international higher education. In addition to considering their own health and safety issues, international students' studies are also affected by their psychological, academic, and financial stress.

This study will present a summary of six convergent findings related to the barriers faced by Chinese international students enrolled in Canadian universities during COVID-19: academic stress, psychological stress, anti-Chinese biases, financial stress, intersecting issues and institutions policy voids. With examples from the literature, each of these topics will be covered individually.

Academic Stress

According to Varughese and Schwartz (2022), many Chinese students claim that they have trouble adjusting to online learning. Chinese international students collectively outlined a variety of challenges that can be categorized into six areas: technological difficulties, instruction, linguistic difficulties, time zone differences, and self-control.

The participants highlighted various technical issues, with a particular focus on the reliability of the network connection and the usability and accessibility of online tools. Chinese international students who participate in synchronous learning reported that the course's quality was impacted by their internet connection (Ji, 2021). Students who return to China must use a VPN to access these websites because China censors a lot of international websites. Chinese students who enroll in online courses often struggle because they can't access required websites, such as the Google Suite.

Collectively, Chinese international students felt that learning in online classrooms confronted two major barriers: a limited amount of time and constrained communication options. Chinese students say that they find that face-to-face classes typically take longer due to a variety of factors, including student engagement. Students are able to understand the material more efficiently and establish deeper connections when teachers spend more time discussing it and responding to their queries (Ji, 2021). However, as lectures in online courses are typically shorter, students have less time to interact with and process the material (Busteed, 2022).

The lack of connection with other students in online courses, in the opinion of most international students, negatively impacted their entire educational experience (Ji, 2021). The lack of interaction is the main reason why Chinese students find online learning to be challenging. Lack of social networks, inability to use school facilities, and difficulty to experience and adjust to Canadian culture were among issues that hindered their entire

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educational experience (Simamora, 2020). According to Wu (2020), while those whose institutions have completely moved to online education are forced to forsake this important component of the student experience, those students who can enroll in person are concerned that campus life will have been irreparably changed, at least in the short term.

The language barrier has, however, had a more detrimental effect on international students since the pandemic. In an investigation of the influence of reported Chinese international students' online learning experience in predicting academic stress among international students, Ji (2021) found that Chinese international students' language challenges in online education have been noted in the study. Language barriers seem to be the biggest problem facing Chinese educational graduate students in their academic and social adjustment (Myles & Cheng, 2003; Xiao, 2021). Chinese international students have difficulty communicating with their peers and teachers in English during online classes (Yang, 2017). This lack of language skills limits their experience in establishing social networks, integrating into the community, participating in the classroom, and connecting with teachers. Although they have taken English courses in Chinese schools and universities, and many of them have passed standardized English tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), their language skills may not be adequately prepared for the needs of academic research (Hu & Trenkic, 2019). Before the pandemic, language constraints had already had a significant negative impact on Chinese students' academic and social development.

According to Ji's study (2021), one of the key issues created barriers for students who returned to China for online classes: jet lag. In addition to creating barriers to social engagement, jet lag created other problems related to health, sleep, and learning outcomes. Due to the time difference, international students returning to China attend classes late at night or early in the morning. Students generally believe that attending classes at that time of day is harmful to their physical and mental health. The frustration of staring at a class on a screen late at night is compounded by irregular sleep patterns, leading to feelings of fatigue and depression among students. Chinese students recognised the value of receiving good scores, but it was allegedly challenging for them to succeed academically due to the timing of quizzes and tests in synchronous sessions. For instance, Chinese students' ability to focus was hampered by their inability to join the online class at a reasonable time (Ji, 2021).

Another unexpected issue reported by Chinese students during the pandemic related to online courses was the significant lack of self-discipline. As traditional classroom settings were abruptly replaced with virtual platforms, students found themselves grappling with newfound challenges in managing their time and staying focused. The absence of physical supervision and the comfort of a structured learning environment proved to be daunting for many, leading to procrastination and reduced motivation. Without the immediate presence of teachers and peers, students struggled to maintain the necessary level of self-discipline required to stay on track with their coursework. The distractions of home environments, such as family members, household

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chores, and personal devices, further hindered their ability to concentrate effectively.

Recognizing this unforeseen obstacle, educators and institutions had to implement strategies to support students in cultivating self-discipline, offering guidance, and emphasizing the importance of setting goals and maintaining a consistent study routine in order to succeed in the virtual learning landscape (Gelles, Lord, Hoople, Chen, & Mejia, 2020).

Psychological stress

The study found that overseas students in China were highly susceptible to a series of mental and psychological problems during the COVID-19 epidemic, which was higher than other types of people during the same period, suggesting that the mental health support work for such groups is urgently needed (Anan et al., 2020). The psychological issues that Chinese overseas students collectively identified can be categorised into two categories: their reluctance to seek counselling and assistance and their unresolved psychological difficulties.

According to Jiang (2020), Chinese students live in a culture where seeking mental health support can be stigmatized. Most Chinese students said that the epidemic and online learning have made them feel quite anxious lately, and that they lack conversation with friends. This indicates that the majority of Chinese students studying abroad are afraid to ask for assistance. Based on the aforementioned circumstance, it is important to note that a lack of motivation to assist may contribute to the growth of mental and psychological issues and the emergence of new issues. Additionally, the traditional passive acceptance of mental health services may not have

been timely, efficient, or targeted for such individuals into necessary intervention, which may have more severe repercussions. Even when they finally found the strength to ask for assistance, they had trouble getting in touch with the school's counselling department and attempts to schedule appointments were fruitless since so many people needed assistance (Jiang, 2020).

The mental health work for Chinese students studying abroad has not received enough attention due to a lack of evidence-based support in the pertinent literature and an uneven distribution of resources for mental health services. Because the students are apart from their family, friends, and familiar cultural milieu, studying abroad can feel monotonous. Feelings of isolation can be particularly acute during COVID periods when socialising activities are curtailed, and everyone is required to keep their physical and social distance. Loneliness can make people miserable, interfere with their sleep, and cause depression (Hammond, 2018).

Anti-Chinese Biases

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an increase in bigotry against Canadians of Chinese or Asian heritage, which is an ongoing concern for many Chinese international students. This study investigates the anti-Chinese occurrences experienced by Chinese students in Canada and the Chinese students' impressions of the situation in response to the anti-Chinese sentiment caused by COVID-19.

Reports of anti-Asian events have increased in Canada since the coronavirus started to spread from mainland China to the rest of the world in early January. There have been a number

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of violent incidences involving physical assault and verbal abuse, yet most instances of discrimination are likely to be subtle, such as avoiding Chinese people on busy sidewalks or moving away from them on public transportation. On Chinese social media, reports of anti-Chinese racism are extensively disseminated, and footage of Chinese people being attacked in major North American cities has sparked outrage and shock among many Chinese citizens. These incidents have instilled fear and anxiety among Chinese students (Moir, 2020).

Chinese international students are concerned about the rising level of prejudice that Canadians of Chinese or Asian heritage have been subjected to since the COVID-19 outbreak. As Sinophobia continues to rise, almost 60% of Chinese students lack the motivation to enroll in Canadian universities (Jiang, 2020). In addition, according to Jiang (2020), during the epidemic, there was a great deal of tension between the United States and China, and Chinese students were worried that this conflict would spread to Canada. However, the increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad in Canada is optimistic. This finding, in Moskowitz's (2020) opinion, indicates that Canada might have a relative advantage in attracting Chinese students. Compared to other regions of the world, they might not notice a significant increase in Sinophobia in Canada.

Financial stress

Chinese parents are finding it harder than ever to support their children financially because of the epidemic, and companies are firing international students from part-time employment both on and off campus, putting them under financial stress (Hu et al., 2022). This section describes the financial stress Chinese students had throughout COVID-19 and their complaints about the ongoing tuition cost hikes.

According to Coulton (2022), due to the epidemic, many international students were already living on tight budgets and using currencies that were weaker than the Canadian dollar; as a result of widespread layoffs, their financial resources are now completely depleted. For example, due to the epidemic, the biggest financial struggles faced by international students were the loss of family or spousal income and the loss of salaries from on and off-campus jobs. Even though the Canadian government offered the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to overseas students who lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19, many of them did not fulfill the conditions. For instance, to qualify, students must have made at least \$5,000 in 2019 or the 12 months before the application deadline (Government of Canada, 2021).

Despite demands from numerous students—domestic and foreign—for financial assistance in the form of reduced tuition, some universities raised costs for the 2020–21 academic year. According to the *Academica* survey (2021), more than half of overseas students expect financial assistance from their institutions; 67% say they would prefer assistance in the form of reduced tuition and concerns regarding their ability to properly fund their education in Canada. Many

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Chinese students come to Canada for studies while carrying significant family debt and high expectations from their families and communities (Hune-Brown, 2021). Most Chinese students believe it is unreasonable for Canadian colleges to require them to pay the same price for courses delivered online given how much of their education is spent online (Coulton, 2022).

Intersecting issues

According to Stacey's research (2022), about 40% of Chinese international students face academic stress, slightly more than 70% experience psychological stress, and about two-thirds experience financial stress. More than 25% of respondents reported experiencing emotional and financial stress but not the academic difficulty, while about 20% reported experiencing all three categories of stress. The researcher discovered that collective losses were made worse by the interaction of psychological, academic, and financial strains. For instance, a lack of a job makes people more anxious, and high levels of anxiety can impair focus, which in turn can hinder academic achievement. We can see from the data above those Chinese students throughout the epidemic faced complex and diverse issues. Many elements interacted to affect how they experienced their Canadian education.

Institutions Policy Voids

International students contribute to Canada's success by paying substantial tuition fees and becoming future citizens and permanent residents. Understanding their particular vulnerabilities and creating workable policy solutions are urgent.

Chinese students may find it challenging to access mental health treatments because there are so few Canadian universities that offer these services exclusively to international students (Lian et al., 2020). The challenges Chinese students face in receiving treatment for their psychological discomfort point to the need for better, more accessible, and culturally sensitive mental health services in universities and colleges (Varughese & Schwartz, 2022).

There is a need for targeted and ongoing financial assistance, including emergency grants and loans and the extension of tuition price payment deadlines, given the financial precarity that many overseas students face. Although Canada was relatively sympathetic in allowing international students who met the conditions to obtain the \$2,000 per month Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), Canadian universities and colleges did not provide ongoing financial assistance. Economic hardship can result from the loss of a job, an extended period of illness, or an injury even without the pandemic. Therefore, the financial circumstances that international students are in would be acknowledged and supported by emergency assistance.

Discussion

We must also acknowledge that the epidemic is a double-edged sword that offers overseas students both challenges and opportunities (Yue et al., 2021). The epidemic has helped Chinese students become more autonomous learners. For these issues, several students have created workarounds. For instance, some Chinese students believe that keeping track of their progress is made easier by developing a study calendar based on the due dates of their online courses.

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According to Suen (2021), institutions must be acutely aware of the special circumstances that the 140,000 Chinese students attending Canadian universities confront as a result of the epidemic, especially in light of the escalating racial discrimination towards people of Chinese heritage in areas like Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. This is a reminder to educators that during these challenging circumstances, certain prejudices can become more pronounced. There is a moral requirement for school employees to speak up when they witness prejudice and injustice (Moir, 2021).

Most Chinese students are confident that their university will take any discriminatory incidents seriously, and they have no plans to abandon their studies in Canada; they also said that although the presence of discrimination may cause some trouble in their studies and life, they will not give up their opportunity (Moir, 2021). The racists need to make concessions, not discriminate against victims.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Firstly, the article solely discusses the difficulties Chinese students had during the epidemic and does not go into detail on the positive aspects. Future research can therefore be described based on the opportunities they were given during COVID-19. Second, the analysis above has revealed six dimensions that have been linked to how Chinese international students struggle during COVID-19 in Canadian universities. The literature does, however, have its limitations. As a result, a detailed investigation into additional components with significant associations may continue in future studies. Third, although half of the research analysed specifically at Chinese

foreign students, the other half looked at international students as a whole. Future studies should continue to focus on this particular subset of Chinese students given the small sample size of studies that exist. Research on a sample of Chinese overseas graduate students is noticeably missing from the literature. Because of this, future research should concentrate on Chinese graduate students who are studying in Canada to better understand the difficulties and opportunities that this particular group faces.

Conclusion

This paper reviews the literature on Chinese international students' struggles in Canadian universities during COVID-19 with the aim of better understanding their situation. Six consistent findings emerged in response to the research question, encompassing academic stress, psychological stress, anti-Chinese biases, financial stress, interconnected issues, and institutional policy gaps. These results contribute to the understanding of how the epidemic has affected Chinese international students studying at institutions in Canada as well as the crisis management tactics that can be used to assist them. For instance, appropriate online course instruction or workshops could be provided before online learning, which is a significant academic stressor for Chinese students. Likewise, psychological counselling for international students could be implemented at colleges and universities to help international students cope with a crisis. Finally, higher education institutions can take additional actions to support international students in overcoming discrimination, making friends with native Canadians, assisting in their transition in emergencies, and fostering cultural diversity on campus. Only with

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sufficient institutional support will people be able to comprehend racism properly and react appropriately to racial experiences (Bell, 1987).

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