

# Addressing Mental Health Challenges Among Overseas Chinese Students: Fostering Belonging and Community Support

Zhihui Yang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of the Arts London, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Zhihui Yang, University of the Arts London, United Kingdom.

doi:10.56397/AS.2024.04.09

## Abstract

This article discusses the mental health problems of overseas Chinese students, and by citing a number of studies and cases, it reveals the serious challenges faced by this group. The article first identifies a series of factors that contribute to the mental health problems of overseas Chinese students, such as the New Crown Epidemic, racial discrimination, and economic pressures, and discusses their difficulties in seeking psychological help. The article then focuses on the importance of building an active community to foster a sense of belonging, and proposes a series of interventions, including the creation of community exchange platforms, the provision of counselling services, and the encouragement of participation in activities. Finally, the article calls for increased attention and research on the mental health issues of overseas Chinese students and suggests directions for future guidance.

**Keywords:** overseas Chinese students, mental health, sense of belonging, community support, interventions

## 1. Introduction

On 28 April 2021, Princeton University sadly announced the death of Kevin Chang, a 19-year-old student, while on 12 April 2021, several media reports detailed the tragic death of Praveen Rao, a 27-year-old international student from Toronto who ended his life. These incidents highlight the worrying state of mental health among overseas Chinese students. A study by Yale University revealed alarming figures, with 45% Chinese students surveyed reporting symptoms of depression and 29% experiencing anxiety (Xin Lang News, 2018). Additionally, the study showed that a significantly lower percentage of Chinese international students who ultimately died by suicide sought mental health counseling compared to native students (22.2% vs. 57.1%). Another survey found that while 54% of Chinese international students experienced depression, only 9% sought counseling help (New York Times newspaper, 2017), highlighting their reluctance to seek external help, which may exacerbate their mental health challenges and even lead to tragic tragedies.

College students, including Chinese nationals studying abroad, face higher mental health risks. A study of Chinese university students reported varying degrees of anxiety, with 21.3% experiencing mild anxiety, 2.7% moderate anxiety, and 0.9% severe anxiety (Jinghui Chang, Yuxin Yuan & Dong Wang, 2020). In addition, Chinese students abroad not only had to cope with anxiety but also racial discrimination, and often had to appease distant family and friends amidst the challenges of the New Crown Pneumonia (COVID-19) pandemic. Measures such as city closures further impact mental health, as do policies such as school closures and online teaching, resulting in many international students not being able to return to campus and facing uncertainty about exams, graduation, and employment. Perceived discrimination exacerbates anxiety among Chinese overseas students, with 31% reporting discrimination in their communities, 58.2% in media reports, and nearly all expressing concern about COVID-19 infection. Therefore, it is essential to develop and optimise psychological intervention programmes tailored to the needs of Chinese students, which can be used to alleviate their psychological stress, develop a sense of security, belonging and well-being, and build a vibrant community.

## 2. Literature Review

The number of international students has been increasing in recent years, and the number of Chinese students in particular has been growing rapidly. This article provides a comprehensive discussion of the various aspects of this issue, including the mental health of international students, the reluctance to seek help, COVID-19 and discrimination, among other factors. In addition, it discusses in depth how building a vibrant community that fosters a sense of belonging should be used as a means of addressing this issue. The prevalence of mental health issues among overseas Chinese students, as highlighted by tragic incidents such as the deaths of Kevin Chang and Praveen Rao. It's all about realising the seriousness of the situation. Studies, such as one conducted by Yale University, rates of depression and anxiety in the international student population are already very high, and some of them are already showing visible symptoms of their illnesses but have not yet sought help anywhere (Xin Lang News, 2018; New York Times newspaper, 2017).

In addition, it is not just mental health that can be problematic for Chinese students studying in foreign countries. Factors like racial discrimination, COVID-19 pandemic stress, and economic factors can all lead to immense stress. Geography and cultural differences can also exacerbate feelings of isolation and uncertainty, further affecting students' mental health (Jinghui Chang, Yuxin Yuan & Dong Wang, 2020).

The reluctance of many overseas Chinese students to seek help when they are experiencing problems is a major obstacle to effectively addressing these issues, so help should be offered to them proactively or more publicity should be given. Communication barriers of language or lack of awareness of available resources contribute to this, and despite the very large number of students with symptoms of depression and anxiety, the percentage of students seeking counselling is very low (New York Times newspaper, 2017).

To address this issue, it is important to foster a sense of belonging and vibrant community support. According to the survey, building strong social connections and a sense of belonging is necessary to alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation and effectively reduce the risk of mental health problems. (Brunsting et al., 2018; Sawir et al., 2008). Due to geographical and cultural differences, many Asian students may face additional barriers and challenges in integrating into local life (Mori, 2000).

Cultivating and building a sense of belonging and a vibrant community for overseas Chinese students can take many forms. And there are already a number of organisations doing just that, including school orientation sessions, community-organised multicultural events and charity projects. These activities can promote social interaction, strengthen community ties and give overseas students a greater sense of belonging (Brunsting et al., 2018; Sawir et al., 2008).

In conclusion, to address the mental health issues faced by Chinese students abroad, more organisations and communities need to join forces, both in terms of the individual support provided and some collective interventions. By building vibrant communities through fostering a sense of belonging, both educational institutions and community organisations can contribute to the mental health of these students and create a more inclusive and supportive benign and healthy living environment for all.

## 3. Evaluation

Major causes of mental health problems affecting international students:

Epidemic factors:

Since the outbreak, many universities have adopted online teaching models to control the epidemic. Students are undergoing self-quarantine. However, what followed was a "prison" life for international students in a foreign country, where they were forced to self-exclude and encourage each other day after day in isolation.

The "unfounded accusation" factor:

In recent years, accusations of "espionage" and "theft" against Chinese students and Chinese nationals have been on the rise, with the FBI and other organizations frequently interviewing universities and scholars, and even proposing special investigation motions. These allegations have not only put pressure on international students but have also led to some innocent people being implicated.

### 3.1 Asian Discrimination Factor

The frequent occurrence of Asian discrimination incidents has made international students feel pressure and rejection from society. These incidents not only make them lose their homes but even doubt their worldview, triggering self-denying psychological negativity.

### 3.2 Job Hunting as Well as Economic Factors

The epidemic has caused the economy to dwindle, and problems such as business closures and stock market turmoil have led to a drastic reduction in jobs, and the job-seeking market has become more competitive. Many international students are facing unemployment and economic pressure, and are even burdened with debts that

make it impossible for them to maintain their lives abroad.

### *3.3 Lack of Communication Factor*

In the face of all kinds of difficulties, many international students choose to hold back and not communicate their worries and confusion with their families. This leads to a psychological imbalance and ineffective discharge of emotions, which may even lead to more serious problems.

Sense of belonging, also known as affiliation, refers to a person's emotional need to be accepted as part of a relationship or group. It can be simply understood as the idea that there is a "you" in me and a "you" in me, and this "you" can be a person or a group. This "you" needs me, I can find my place in it, and I also need this "you", in which I can feel my value and the contribution that my value brings to the "you", and give it to the "you". I can feel my value, and my value for "you" to bring the contribution, and to give the feedback is my heart needs, I and "you" is common progress, mutual nourishment.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the need for belonging and love is classified as the third level, above physiological needs and safety needs.

If a person wants to gain a sense of belonging, he or she must first satisfy the first two needs.

Therefore, building a vibrant community that fosters a sense of belonging is the key to alleviating this problem.

The major challenge for international students is to re-establish a positive social relationship in the local area. Enhance the sense of belonging in this learning and living environment. High-quality local social relationships are important for the mental health of international students (Brunsting, Nelson, Zachry, Corinne & Takeuchi, 2018), and international students who engage in more cross-cultural interactions perceive higher levels of social support and have lower levels of anxiety and depression (Berry, 2005). However, the reality of international students' social relationships is not encouraging. A study of 200 international students in New Zealand found that two-thirds of international students felt lonely just a few months after arriving (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). For Asian international students, the cultural value of collectivism makes it more difficult to integrate into the local social life compared to international students from other Western cultural backgrounds (Mori, 2000). As a result, barriers and difficulties at the social level are likely to directly trigger increased levels of anxiety and depression in international students.

Increasing an individual's strong sense of belonging can reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation, which is essential for preventing mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. It is when people feel that they truly belong as part of a group that they are more likely to reach out for help, which can be very helpful in coping with life's stresses. A sense of belonging can also boost a person's self-confidence and self-esteem, making them feel accepted. People with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to be actively involved in their community, which also contributes to a better community atmosphere. Research has shown that good social relationships and a strong sense of personal belonging are also important for physical health and can reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

In summary, enhancing a sense of belonging to build a vibrant community can help improve the physical health of individuals, enhance community cohesion and create a more positive social environment.

A number of organisations have already taken steps to do this, such as schools organising orientation sessions to help new students integrate into the community, and communities organising charity and voting events to increase community interaction and help people integrate better into local life.

So carrying out the following methods can be an intervention for people who lack a sense of belonging:

#### 1) Creating points of contact between communities:

- Create community meeting points to provide more space for people to meet and interact. For example, parks or recreation halls.

- Organise regular community events to encourage people to attend and build connections between participants.

#### 2) Provide mental health counselling services:

- Community or school counselling rooms can be established to provide psychological counselling services to help people cope with mental health problems.

- Increase mental health education and publicity activities to encourage people to communicate more with the outside world.

#### 3) Encourage students to participate in activities:

- Organise social activities such as parties and hobby groups.

- Set up volunteer programmes to allow people to build self-local connections through service to others.
- 4) Promote more inclusive and diversity-filled activities:
  - Organise multicultural events to promote diversity among different backgrounds and cultures.
- 5) Enhance more teamwork activities in schools:
  - Team-building activities should be strengthened in schools to encourage mutual co-operation.
  - Increase the promotion of co-operation and teamwork to help people improve their communication skills and teamwork.
- 6) Provide personalised support:
  - Individualised and targeted support, such as one-to-one help, should be provided for individuals with special needs.
- 7) Utilise online networking resources:
  - Utilise social media and various online platforms to connect students who feel isolated and anxious.
  - Develop specialised apps or online communities to facilitate communication and connection between people.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the future, guidance on mental health problems of Chinese international students should continue to be deepened. Firstly, long-term investigation and research should be carried out to further understand the development trend and influencing factors of mental health problems of Chinese international students, so as to take more effective defence measures. Secondly, publicity and education on mental health problems of Chinese international students can be further strengthened to encourage seeking help from the outside world, and to improve international students' attention to mental health and self-management ability. In addition, online publicity can be strengthened to encourage international students to actively participate in collective activities through the Internet and social media. Comprehensively using online and offline resources, more diversified and personalised mental health services are provided to Chinese international students, and through continuous efforts, a healthier and more positive learning and living environment is eventually created for Chinese international students.

#### References

- Brunsting, N. C., Nelson, G., Zachry, C., Corinne, R., Takeuchi, R., & J. A. Martin., (2018). Refugee children and families: The mental health effects of immigration trauma and family separation. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 26(1), 1-13.
- Jinghui Chang, Yuxin Yuan, Dong Wang, (2020, February 20). Mental health status and its influencing factors among college students during the epidemic of COVID-19. (In Chinese) *Journal of Southern Medical University*, 40(2), 171-176. Available at: 10.12122/j.issn.1673-4254.2020.02.06
- Mori, S. C., (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78(2), 137-144.
- New York Times newspaper, (2017). Available at: <https://cn.nytimes.com/opinion/20171213/chinese-students-mental-health/>
- Sawyer, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G., (2008). Loneliness and international students: An Australian study. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(2), 148-180.
- Xin lang news, (2018). Available at: <https://news.sina.cn/global/szxx/doc-ifyrzinh1425937.d.html>

#### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).