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The Social Class Worldviews of Chinese International Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, we investigated the social class worldviews of Chinese International Students (CIS) in the United States. Social class worldviews are a constellation of beliefs, attitudes, and values that individuals use to maintain a sense of psychological equilibrium within their perceived social class groups and culture. Having interviewed eleven CIS in a midwestern city in the United States, the researchers found that their experiences reflected five themes: (a) social class consciousness; (b) social class socialization; (c) social class resources; (d) social class values; and (e) social class challenges. Suggestions for research and implications for higher education are discussed.

Keywords: Chinese international student, higher education**,** social class worldview, multicultural, qualitative

Chinese international students (CIS) represent the largest contingent of international students in the United States, consisting of 34.7% of the population (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2021a). Research on this population has primarily focused on understanding their study abroad experiences as well as the academic and cultural issues that this group faces, including microaggressions,

discrimination, and the process of adjusting to different cultures, languages, and norms (Heng, 2018; Li et al., 2017). With this background in mind, it is also worth considering how the topic of social class can help researchers more fully understand the experiences of CIS in U.S. higher education settings. In general, social class issues are associated with students' psychological and social well-being; for instance, explicit and implicit social class divides tend to impact students' sense of belonging and academic experiences (Buckley & Park, 2019; Xie et al., 2021). Research shows that CIS often encounter stereotypes, such as the monolithic narrative that CIS are children of affluence (De Costa et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2021). However, how a person experiences social class is complex, nuanced, and subjective (Liu, 2011). Barratt (2012), for instance, noted that social class is a multilayered concept that incorporates identity, perception, intercultural experience, resources, roles, and systems. According to Noonan and Liu (2021), social class can be meaningfully understood by exploring how individuals construe their social class markers, messages, values, interactions, and behaviors. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the CIS social class worldview, or the lens that individuals use to organize and construct the meaning of the world as a social and economic hierarchy (Liu, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Each year, a growing number of Chinese students study abroad to earn a degree and obtain a global experience (Chao et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2020; Gao, 2014). One of the noteworthy macrolevel social class contexts related to this phenomenon of studying abroad is the economic reform that gave rise to labor markets and facilitated social mobility (Bian, 2002). This mobility caused economic stratification and heightened the general awareness of social class differences (Bian, 2002). Moreover, China's implementation of the one-child policy supplanted the tradition of the large family investing a little in each child to the smaller family investing greatly in one child (Fong, 2004). This shift meant that it was possible for parents to provide more resources to their child, thus increasing the child's chances of attaining higher living standards and educational degrees, including those from U.S. institutions.

According to IIE (2021b), the primary source of funding for studying abroad is personal/family finances; however, undergraduate and graduate students often diverge in terms of how they financially support their education. In 2020, for instance, 90% of undergraduate CIS relied on family finances, whereas only 56% of graduate CIS relied on their family finances (IEE, 2021b). Fong (2011) also noted that receiving financial support from family members does not necessarily mean that CIS belong to a high social class; indeed, families that support their children financially as they study abroad are often required to sell their apartment or take out loans in their home country.

These nuanced social class contexts suggest that social class may be an influential factor in how CIS adjust to living in the U.S. As an extension of this thought, Xie and colleagues (2021) determined that more than half of the CIS had encountered the stereotype "wealthy Chinese"—a label that this population

perceived as negative. The researchers also observed the inherent tension between CIS from a higher social class and their American peers. This stereotype tended to damage CIS collective self-esteem, adversely affecting their adjustment and psychological well-being and causing them to feel noticeable shame (Xie et al., 2021).

Recently, researchers have shown more interest in how social class plays a role in CIS education and adjustment. Studies have suggested that the lifestyle that CIS seek to maintain when studying abroad is often dictated by both their family resources and the currency exchange rate (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Chinese students who wish to study abroad must therefore have as much confidence in their family's financial support as they do in their own academic capabilities (Cheng et al., 2020). Studies also emphasize that CIS are often barred from socializing with American students due to their limited experience with American culture and language, thus propelling CIS to socialize primarily with other CIS (Liu & Dong, 2019; Moglen, 2017). Although this evidence is informative, the topic of social class has not yet been considered a central factor in understanding how these students' experiences are impacted by social class values, markers, relationships, and emotional and behavioral responses.

Conceptual Framework

The social class worldview model-revised (SCWM-R; Liu, 2011) conceptualizes the relationships among macro/microeconomic contexts, social messages, norms and values, social class and classism consciousness, and behaviors. Exposure to social class groups and resources results in the adoption of social class-related messages and behaviors. Individuals also observe and experience firsthand how people behave differently toward others based on the interplay of their social classes, which is based on the social and economic hierarchy and, by extension, classism. Such classism, which refers to the experience of prejudice or discrimination based on one's social class, can take four distinct forms (Liu, 2011): (a) upward classism, or attitudes against "snobs" or "elitists" who are perceived as better off; (b) downward classism, or attitudes against "lazy" individuals who are perceived as worse off; (c) lateral classism, or the tendency of individuals in similar social class groups to remind each other that they might otherwise fall behind, also denoted as "keeping up with the Joneses"; and (d) internalized classism, which involves the stressful psychological experience of being unable to meet one's social class norms and demands. These elements constitute one's worldview as a "a collection of lenses" through which to make sense of oneself and others in a social hierarchy (Liu, 2011, p. 83). Social class worldviews are dynamic and continually adapt to resolve psychological disequilibrium; such disequilibrium occurs when one experiences the dissonance of new social class contexts, sparking questions about the self and others. To achieve psychological homeostasis, individuals adjust their behaviors, attitudes, values, material possessions, and social class consciousness.

Researchers have employed the SCWM-R to assess a wide spectrum of students. Olson-Garriott and colleagues (2015) revealed that some graduate-level

students struggle to reconcile their educated, middle-class background with their present financial burdens—a state that negatively impacts their social relationships. Social class worldviews also influence the behaviors of first-generation college students (e.g., "I have to dress a little bit better to look middle [class] or rich") (Rice et al., 2017, p. 9). In Garrison et al. (2017), the social class worldviews of students in prestigious universities involve a process of internalizing educational meritocracy and emphasizing individual work ethic as a vehicle for upward mobility. Martin (2015) found that low socioeconomic college students tend to overextend themselves to survive, which impacts their capabilities to engage in campus life. Lapour and Heppener (2009) showed that social class worldviews inform how adolescent women perceive achievement, academic expectations, career options, and their own social class privileges. It is therefore evident that connecting SCWM-R to individuals' perceptions and behaviors has the potential to expand our understanding of the role of social class worldviews on the experiences of CIS.

The Present Study

Students in higher education settings generally have a heightened awareness of their own social class and that of others, as college provides greater opportunities to interact with those from diverse social class backgrounds (Aydin & Vera, 2020). For CIS in the United States, the new social class context may be even more pronounced. Having established this, the purpose of this study is to explore the social class worldviews of CIS whose experiences are influenced by both Chinese and U.S. environments. A Midwestern U.S. higher education setting was chosen based on the fact that it houses several CIS populations; when compared to other common destinations for CIS (e.g., the urban Northeast or West), this setting is more limited in terms of cultural diversity (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). In limiting their intercultural exposure to others, CIS and those who interact with them are less likely to examine stereotypes that may arise about the students' abilities, sociability, and behaviors. As such, this study aims to increase researchers' understanding of students' transition from China, as well as the psychological responses that are associated with such challenges. Our overarching research question is as follows: What are the patterns among CIS in regard to examining social class (their own and that of others) in a new environment? This question is guided by the following queries: 1) What social class markers, messages, and behaviors are important in construing the social class worldview of CIS? and 2) What are their psychological and behavioral responses to a new environment, referent groups, and norms?

METHOD

Eleven CIS patients with a mean age of 23 years (SD = 2.14) completed the study. Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit CIS who were born in China, had lived in China for more than half of their lives, and had lived in the United States for at least six months. All of the participants lived in a Midwestern college

town in which the residents were predominantly White. The public university in which the participants were enrolled had a diverse international student body, and the majority of this diverse student population was CIS. Six participants were female, and five were male; six were graduate students, and five were undergraduate students. Table 1 provides the participants' demographics in further detail.

Table 1: Participants' Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Educational Status/ Major	Family Social Class	Parents' Occupation	Hometown/ Province
Cuifen	23	Female	U/Economics	"In the middle."	Both parents: Business owners	Shanghai
Jia	24	Female	G/Communication Studies	"Probably, part of the middle. A little bit higher."	M: Government servant researcher F: Retired government servant	Zhengzhou
Liang	27	Male	G/Engineering	"Typical middle-class"	M: Nurse F: Retired hospital worker	Wuhu (Anhui)
Meizhen	20	Female	U/Psychology	"May be middle. Not too rich, but not too poor."	M: International accountant F: Banker	Shenzhen, Shanghai
Mingzhu	23	Female	G/Educational psychology	"Middle or lower middle"	M: Human resource manager F: Professor	Chengdu
Rou	19	Female	U/Finance and Sociology	"Middle-class"	M: Professor F: Professor	Beijing, Tianjing
Weimin	23	Male	U/Economics	"White collars"	M: Working security stock F: Working at court	Jinan
Xiaoqing	23	Female	U/Communication studies and international business	"Middle."	M: HR real estate F: Oil business	Xinjiang, Shanghai
Xue	23	Male	G/Educational measurement	"Middle-class."	M: Engineer F: High school teacher	Shanghai
Zhilan	25	Female	G/Language and literacy	"Gōngxīn jiēcéng"	M: A hospital doctor F: Engineer	Bengbu, Beijing
Zhixin	23	Male	G/Informatics	"Middle, probably."	M: Retired from banking industry F: Social science researcher	Guangzhou

Note. U = undergraduate student, G = graduate student, M = mother, F = father

Research Team

Our research team consisted of four Asian international and Asian American researchers. The first member of our team is a psychology professor who grew up in a home environment that was a combination of working-class and middle-class

culture. The second member is a faculty member in psychology; she identifies her family social class as middle-class. The third member is a first-generation Chinese American, and he is a health psychologist; he grew up in a working-class family with limited resources. The fourth member is a second-generation Chinese American psychologist. She identifies her family's current social class as upper middle-class, although it was working-class when the family arrived in the United States in the 1980s.

To establish trustworthiness, the research team discussed their assumptions and biases throughout the research process. Member checks were sent to the participants to review the accuracy of the interview transcriptions. After our data analysis, a U.S.-based psychologist from Hong Kong who specialized in CIS mental health conducted an external audit. In addition, a CIS pursuing a U.S. psychology doctoral program contributed to an additional audit. Both of the auditors reviewed all transcripts and code lists, provided feedback on those social class contexts that vary between the U.S. and China and offered suggestions to enhance the accuracy of data presentation.

Procedure

This study received Institutional Review Board approval. The participants were recruited through the distribution of study flyers and snowball sampling. The research team developed the interview protocol after consulting with two experts who engage in graduate-level teaching and scholarly publications on qualitative research methods and social class. Interview questions included "How would you describe you and your family's social class in China?" and "What is it like interacting with people here in the United States?" Data were collected from one-on-one semistructured interviews that lasted 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, and the research team transcribed the interviews verbatim.

Data Analysis

Our research team conducted thematic analysis, a method that required the researchers to identify codes and themes that represent the data (Boyatzis, 1998). The term theme is defined as both "something important about the data in relation to the research question" and "patterned responses or meaning within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). We chose thematic analysis because the method is suitable for research that is informed by SCWM-R, although the method is not prescribed by theory (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Boyatzis, 1998; Nowell et al., 2017). According to recommendations (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017), our research team engaged in the following steps: 1) becoming immersed in the data; 2) developing initial codes; 3) generating and reviewing themes; and 4) defining and revising themes.

First, our team familiarized ourselves with the data as well as the depth and breadth of the research topic, including repeatedly reviewing the interview data as well as discussing concepts, observations, and literature. Second, we generated

initial codes based on the participants' own words and the SCWM-R constructs. After individually reviewing the interview transcripts, we discussed whether each code contributed to our understanding of CIS social class worldviews. After compiling the coding notes, we discussed any rationale and assumptions that may have impacted the coding. Third, we discussed broader themes; this involved comparing each theme according to the participants' context as well as any researcher bias. Finally, we created coding cards and arranged them in multiple ways to represent the relationships among the codes by discussing the definitions of the themes based on the research team's observations of the data. Once the steps were completed, we received feedback again from the auditors and revised our final summary of the results.

RESULTS

Five themes were identified from the data: (a) social class consciousness; (b) social class socialization; (c) social class resources; (d) social class values; and (e) social class challenges. The following paragraphs contain the participants' quotes that are relevant to the themes, as well as the participants' appropriate pseudonyms.

Social Class Consciousness

The theme of social class consciousness consists of three subthemes: (a) subjective social class membership, (b) consciousness of class structures, and (c) perception of the social class of others. Throughout the theme of social class consciousness, the participants relayed their observations across regions in China and the United States.

Subjective Social Class Membership

The participants used a variety of methods to describe their social class. For instance, Weimin highlighted, "[My parents] don't own the company and they're not poor either." Similarly, Zhilan used the word "gōngxīn jiēcéng" (工薪階層, or working-class). Adding that "gōngxīn" means wage in Chinese, Zhilan chose this word to suggest that her family's social class consisted of "paid work," as opposed to that of employers or owners. Overall, the participants' descriptions of their family's social class membership were largely subjective. Mingzhu added that her social class depends on "what group of people you compare [it to]." She elaborated on this point by saying, "In Chengdu, I'm middle-class. However, if I compare my salary and income with Shanghai people or Beijing people, it's below middle-class."

The participants also highlighted how their social class privilege provided them with educational opportunities, stating that their decision to study in the United States was only possible because of their parents' financial support. In addition, the participants' identification with middle class status was bolstered when they juxtaposed their lives with those of other reference groups. Jia, for

instance, described her privilege compared to that of older generations. Meizhen also shared that her ability to afford her own tuition meant that she was more financially privileged than other American students. Weimin offered a more nuanced perspective, saying, "My family was not so rich. However, [my parents] sent me to this rich school. They borrowed money." Weimin also concluded, "I'm lucky enough to go abroad and see everything," insinuating that his friends in China do not have the same access to education.

Consciousness of Class Structures

The participants were also aware of the broader economic structure that influences their understanding of social class, discussing at length China's rapidly growing economy and economic polarization. For instance, Cuifen discussed the "huge inequality in economic status" that persists in her hometown of Shanghai. In coming to the United States, the participants perceived less economic polarization and a more robust middle- class, with Mingzhu sharing, "America seems to have a very big proportion of middle-class people." While Liang attributed China's social stratification to inherited wealth and resources, he also added, "The social class in America starts from education." As such, it can be argued that varying social contexts affected the participants' consciousness of social class.

Perception of the Social Class of Others

Although all of the participants were aware of the social class of other people, the degree of such awareness varied among the groups. The participants all perceived, for instance, that their college town was predominantly middle or upper class. Jia shared, "Most of the people living here are middle-class, so they have all these basic houses, cars…basic stuff they need." Cuifen clarified, "Social class also includes intelligent class. I think [my college town] is, if talking about intelligent class, high or something like that." Three participants reported that they did not notice any social class differences among the city's residents. In perceiving other CIS as middle- or upper-class members, Xue shared, "[Undergraduate CIS] do not have funding. However, for graduates, they can have funds. Xue's insistence that "undergraduates are richer" indicates that he is aware of varying social class statuses within the school's CIS population.

Social Class Socialization

The participants shared the messages that they received from family members and school representatives regarding social class status, as well as their own observations of those in China. This theme considered two subthemes: (a) migration as a means of upward mobility and (b) U.S. education a means of higher status and prospects.

Migration as a Means of Upward Mobility

The participants described those who migrated from their hometown as well as those family members who left their hometown for better educational and economic opportunities. As noted by Meizhen, the participants' parents migrated "to create their own business, to make money, [and] to find resources to make money for their families." Indeed, the participants' and their families' decision to migrate was largely driven by a desire for upward mobility. Some of the participants moved away from their hometown to attend schools with good reputations. In addition, Mingzhu shared that she was taught from a young age that migration is desirable. She stated, "When I was young, my teachers always said, 'If you don't study hard, you will stay in Chengdu forever.' Therefore, every student in class wants to go outside for their college" as this behavior implies a higher sense of ambition, work ethic, and intelligence.

U.S. Education as a Means of Higher Status and Prospects

All of the participants noted that China holds earning a U.S. degree in high esteem, with Meizhen sharing, "Because of my parents' generation, they all think the U.S. has a better educational system. Therefore, I probably thought the same way, too." The participants added that earning a U.S. degree was advantageous when entering the job market. Jia shared, "It's more competitive. It will make you experience [things] differently and make you competitive when you enter the job market." Cuifen added that, according to her father, the "U.S. is now ranking first in economic status." These statements indicate that CIS associates earning a U.S. degree to enhanced power and economic and occupational status. The participants also noted that China's college-ranking system is extremely competitive, as only a limited number of students are admitted to esteemed Chinese universities, also known as "211 colleges" or "first-level colleges."

Social Class Resources

The participants' transition from China to the United States impacted their perception of social class resources. This theme incorporates three subthemes: (a) personal resources (acquired abilities); (b) social resources (social support and networking); and (c) economic resources (material possessions and tourism). The possession or nonpossession of these types of resources appears to influence the participants' personal experiences.

Personal Resources (Acquired Abilities)

The participants described their experiences with speaking English, which was not their first language. In so doing, the participants appeared to associate English fluency with social class status. Jia shared, "You need to have that financial support to learn another language in the Chinese language environment."

Furthermore, the participants challenged themselves to improve their abilities to enhance their social status. Xiaoqing shared, "In America, you need to make native speaker friends to practice English and to know their culture." Similarly, the participants desired to appear competitive in their professional worlds, with Xiaoqing elaborating that she wanted to be "what's 'hot' in the job market" and Weimin expressing a desire to excel as an employer. The participants also pushed themselves to be more active, as they believed these abilities contributed to their qualifications as a job seeker.

Social Resources (Social Support and Networking)

The participants also highlighted their limited access to social resources, sharing that their attempts to build a social network with their American peers were challenging. Rou added, "I don't know how to interact with [American students]." Mingzhu also emphasized the difficulties of finding social networking opportunities, stating, "If you want a job, we know that America also has a lot of connections and relationships. If you have very good relationships or social networks, it's easy for you to find a job because of recommendations." Additionally, the participants reported that their social networks in the U.S. consisted predominantly of CIS, which indicates a lack of diversity. Weimin shared, "The people who I hang out with most are Chinese people. I feel like it's just like back in China. There's no difference."

Economic Resources (Material Possession and Tourism)

The participants reported that they were either unable to afford or chose to refrain from displaying materials that they described as "luxury," "fancy," "brand," or "expensive." As Meizhen explained, "[In China], we all wore the same uniform, the same school backpacks, and the same shoes so that might ease some pressures from students who are poor…I just wear sweatpants and more like Americans because I want to fit into their culture." In addition, the participants disclosed that CIS with social class privilege can often afford travel excursions that were not feasible for most of the participants. These individuals, Jia added, can "go to Disneyland. They will actually go to Universal Studios to hang out for two weeks." Furthermore, the participants highlighted that education is considered a more valuable marker than possessing or displaying material items. Liang stated, "Having the money or having the status doesn't mean you have to wear them. If you have the education, you will sort of know that it doesn't matter how good you look." They added that owning certain material items was not necessarily a social class marker in China. As Zhilan stated, "Unlike in China, some ordinary Americans own a car. That is not the criteria [in China]."

Social Class Values

Participants discussed various values related to their social class experiences. This particular theme incorporates (a) independence; (2) autonomy; and (3) contribution.

Independence

The participants shared that they value financial independence because it aids in reducing their parents' financial burden. Zhixin stated, "I have to find a good job so that [my parents] don't have to worry about my life." Rou himself learned the value of independence as a child, saying, "My parents wanted to train me for independence." Mingzhu also added, "I'm still dependent. Therefore, maybe in the future, I want to be independent. I think that's the most important thing I want to do in the future." From Meizhen's perspective, her time in the United States contributed to this desire for personal independence, sharing, "It was definitely the experiences [I had] here that made me more independent."

Autonomy

Despite the fact that their parents encouraged them to pursue traditionally prestigious or stable jobs, the participants shared that they autonomously chose a career based on their own interests. Weimin, for instance, shared that his parents have "golden bowl" jobs in China or civil servant positions that involve working for the government (Gong Wu Yuan; 公務員). Weimin, however, chose instead to become a co-founder of a media company. Meizhen also added, "[My parents] wanted me to become a finance major, but I wanted to do psychology because it's fully my interest." Rou—whose parents are both professors—made the same career choice but followed a different process to get there. Initially, disinterested in becoming a professor, as he felt it was too familiar to his upbringing, Rou eventually confessed, "However, now, I kind of changed my mind because it's truly a good job."

Contribution

In general, the participants highly valued contributing to family and society. Xue shared, "My parents want me to go back to China after a few years of work experience here…I'll go back to China because living with parents is a good thing." Taking care of his aging parents emotionally and financially was essential to Xue's future plans, as he wished to pay his parents back for their social class sacrifice and investment. Mingzhu added, "I want to bring something new back to China. If I do not go back to China, I want to do some happy and useful jobs in America."

Social Class Challenges

The participants reported experiencing certain challenges that were associated with social class reference groups and norms. This theme includes (a) social tensions and (b) stress and coping.

Social Tensions

The participants acknowledged that a tense social divide existed between various class reference groups. In sharing her thoughts about the social class behaviors (e.g., spending behavior and work ethic) that she had witnessed in others, Meizhen expressed, "[CIS] don't truly work hard or study hard because they're rich. They have future plans already planned by their parents." Meizhen shared that those CIS who do not value education are, in Chinese vernacular, "the second generation of politicians" or 'the second generation of businessmen." However, Xiaoqing offered a different observation, noting, "Some Chinese people don't have much money." Mingzhu recounted interacting with wealthy individuals in the U.S., stating, "It's hard to keep the same pace as them," which speaks to the concept of lateral classism ("Keeping up with the Joneses"). Meizhen added, "I think rich people will always stick with rich people. Somehow, in the Chinese circle, I see people who have similar socioeconomic backgrounds." She continued, "You can definitely see some people, maybe from a rich background, who have truly fancy clothes, fancy bags, and stuff…And some other people, they might dress normal. Therefore, it may create some tension between even groups of Chinese people in our Chinese circle."

Stress and Coping

The participants reported experiencing psychological stress during their transition to the United States; it is worth arguing that such stress stemmed in part from the fact that they were interacting firsthand with Americans and CIS, who had a higher social class standing and more social class resources. Overall, they expressed feeling pressure to work harder to achieve a lifestyle or social status that they desired. In other words, they primarily relied on work ethic-based coping strategies to keep up with their American peers, as Liang expressed, "I need to do more as an international student than my American peers." Before moving to the United States, Jia believed that she would be able to achieve a lifestyle that was "not competitive, not intensive," based on what she saw in the media. Her life in the U.S., however, contrasted with these assumptions, as she found herself isolated from her peers and working around the clock. Many of the other participants experienced social isolation, as well, with Rou sharing that he feels that he will "always be an outsider." For Mingzhu, working hard and avoiding interactions with wealthy students are acts of coping with social class-related stress. In speaking to CIS who are not wealthy, she added that social events are "a burden on the family and for themselves. However, if they just stay in the library, it's easy. It's kind of self-protection."

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the patterns in CIS social class worldviews as they relate to social class markers, messages, and psychological and behavioral responses that arise in the adjustment to a higher education setting in the Midwestern United States. The responses of the eleven participants revealed that

their social class worldviews were initially shaped by their family and hometown economic culture, social class values, and socialization in China. These social class worldviews ultimately evolve as the CIS expands its resources and opportunities, strengthens or refines its social class values, and responds to various social class norms and behaviors in the United States. Overall, our findings are consistent with Liu's (2011, 2013) SCWM-R in that the CIS social class worldviews illustrate how they construe their own behaviors and those of others and cope with various forms of classism as they interact with new social class referent groups. Moreover, congruent with the literature on social class in higher education, the participants relayed their experience with noticing and making sense of how dress, fashion, English language, social interactions, and social skills (both their own and those of others) indicate social class (Barratt, 2012; Martin, 2015, Rice et al., 2016).

In more specific terms, our findings showed that the subjective social class of CIS is related not only to their family resources but also to their awareness of other people's behaviors. Indeed, the frequency at which our participants positioned themselves as middle-class citizens has several implications. From a certain perspective, these participants do in fact align with the middle class in varying ways, including being raised by parents with stable jobs and having access to a U.S. degree; this finding is consistent with previous studies (Miao, 2017; Xu, 2021). Although the participants themselves did not earn these privileges, they nonetheless highlighted the intergenerational value of belonging to industrious and hard-working classes.

Conversely, identifying as a middle-class member can be a means of protecting oneself from becoming a target of classism in part due to the stereotypes that pervade the CIS population (De Costa et al., 2016; Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Xie et al., 2021). The participants distinguished themselves from those whom they perceived as less educated or wealthier by highlighting their own acquired personal resources (e.g., work ethic, academic motivation, career ambition). This behavior served as a buffer against any undesirable comments that might have been made about their social class (e.g., being perceived as "lazy"). Alternatively, participants invoked their values as separate from those who are perceived as rich. The participants expressed that their appreciation for modesty and frugality was to some degree an attempt to avoid being perceived as "spoiled," each of which alluded to upward classism (Colbow et al., 2016). These actions (or lack thereof) are consistent with research on first-generation or low-income American college students who negatively perceive those who spend money on luxury items (Rice et al., 2017). In the same vein, the participants emphasized the importance of education and hard work over acquisitiveness (Martin, 2015).

Finally, while our participants were grateful for the social mobility of earning a degree in the United States, their experience with social class challenges was laden with social tensions, psychological pressures, and behavioral isolation. These manifested as feelings of inadequacy, a tendency to judge or a belief that they were being judged by others, an inability/resistance to conform, or the pressure to work harder to prove their worth academically or in the workforce. Indeed, the participants valued hard work as a means to mitigate the psychological

and social challenges that stemmed from perceived class differences. These findings are consistent with the concept of psychological disequilibrium (Liu, 2011). They are also consistent with evidence that indicates that perceived classism is positively correlated with perceived stress and anxiety (Cavalhieri & Chwalisz, 2020). CIS may thus attempt to compensate for their social standing through certain coping strategies (e.g., avoiding social interactions with individuals from different social class backgrounds and prioritizing academic work) to achieve psychological homeostasis. These findings add a more nuanced perspective to the evidence on how acculturative challenges result in uncomfortable or painful thoughts and feelings and how these challenges are associated with self-isolation (Xu et al., 2020).

Another method that CIS may employ to reduce psychological disequilibrium involves re-examining their own social class values, assumptions, and behaviors, as well as those of others. Indeed, the participants developed an awareness of both social class and classism and became more conscious of how they viewed themselves and other members of society. In learning to recognize how others behave differently according to their social class, these individuals tended to strengthen or change their values and behaviors in an attempt to decrease their psychological equilibrium. The participants noted that the opportunities that derive from their international transition enabled them to grow as independent, contributing, and professional individuals. As documented in Lapour and Heppner (2009), our participants also challenged themselves in their educational achievement and occupational aspirations. These findings are consistent with Rice and colleagues (2017), who suggest that attending college leads to increased exposure to class differences and, consequently, a more nuanced social class perspective and a denial of certain social class distinctions.

Taken together, our findings extend preliminary knowledge about the adjustment, stress, coping, social relationships, work ethic, meaning of education, and personal and professional growth of CIS. Our findings also expand the theoretical application of the SCWM-R to CIS. Our study therefore offered a more nuanced understanding of how the value of education as well as one's personal capabilities, materials, and lifestyle are an expression of social class identity, a vehicle for status maintenance and upward mobility, and a process for coping with classism.

Limitations

As our sample consisted of students who primarily identified as middle class, our findings are limited in their capacity to understand CIS who diverge from the middle class. We also concede that our sample may not be representative of CIS in the United States, as the data stemmed from CIS in the Midwest whose parents hold a high degree of educational attainment and, to some extent, occupational privilege in China. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge that bilingual (Chinese/English) interviews may have yielded more nuanced cultural expressions of the CIS social class worldviews.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Institutional policy-makers, administrators, educators, and staff may choose to integrate the findings of this study into their staff training and student services. These individuals are encouraged to consider the fact that students who come to the United States—as well as those who study abroad—may experience social class transition and challenges as their broader contexts shift. Student orientation and workshops are thus essential to informing these students that their experiences are a normal part of their transition and that support is available through campus resources. First, in designing programs and policies that focus on CIS, professionals should be aware of how social class worldviews influence the lives of CIS around them. Overall, by creating space for CIS to share their perceptions and understanding of social class contexts, student advisors, faculty, and staff may be invited to more fully understand their transition to new social class environments. Second, professionals should help CIS recognize how their transition can exacerbate their psychological disequilibrium and how this imbalance subsequently influences their psychological and social stress; for instance, college counselors could invite their students to share how living in the United States has impacted how they make sense of and display their social class identities. Third, educators may consider how social class dynamics, differences, and biases (in their family, friends, and campus members) impact their students' social support and connections. As previously discussed, certain social class differences and tensions may make it more difficult to establish social connections. Last, social class variations among international students should be more heavily considered when providing financial funds to students in the program who are in need.

This study offers several possibilities for researchers who wish to deepen their understanding of social class worldviews in education. Future research may, for instance, explore the issues outlined in this study by using diverse international student samples drawn from other cultural and national contexts. Moreover, as CIS are a culturally diverse group, intersectionality-based investigation may help broaden our understanding of this group's academic, cultural, and social experiences. Last, it is important that future research more fully examine these students' experiences with the English language (e.g., social class resources and messages related to language acquisition and performance and perceived racial or language discrimination).

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the social class worldviews of CIS by describing the patterns of social class awareness, markers, messages, values, and behaviors from the perspective of eleven CIS students in the U.S. Midwest. This study challenged the pervading stereotypes about CIS by illuminating the nuanced meanings of the social class worldviews that CIS use to understand their social class contexts and develop/re-examine their social class values and awareness. Indeed, these social class worldviews shaped the participants' emotional and

behavioral responses to cultural transition and new social class reference groups, as well as their motivation to pursue a degree and gain experience in the United States for the purpose of maintaining and achieving a desired social class identity.

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