



## Motivation and Experiences of Studying Creative Arts Therapy among Chinese Doctoral Students in South Korea

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### ABSTRACT

*Chinese students accounted for 40.4% of international students in South Korea in 2022. Universities in China require doctoral degrees to teach art. Creative arts therapy (CAT) has increasingly gained attention. In this study, we investigated the experiences of six Chinese students in a study abroad program for creative arts therapy in South Korea. We gathered data from visual artworks and interviews. The analysis yielded six themes: No doctoral degree, no job position for art educators in university, China; Expectations for the development of CAT in China; Despite majoring in art, CAT is a new discipline; Study abroad while unprepared in terms of language ability; Wanting to escape due to academic pressure; Motivation to continue studying abroad. Findings revealed that psychological and emotional support programs would help international students across different nationalities and cultures. Students' study abroad experience and how it contributes to their lives beyond obtaining a degree requires further consideration.*

**Keywords:** *creative arts therapy, Chinese international student, doctoral study, study abroad, South Korea*

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has increased significantly. Universities in South Korea have actively attracted international students, and the number of overseas students in universities in South Korea, especially from China, Vietnam, and Mongolia, has dramatically increased (Tian, 2021). Among international students studying in South Korea in 2022, the number of Chinese students was 67,439, accounting for the most significant proportion (40.4%) (Ministry of Education of South Korea, 2023).

Recently, universities in China have come to regard the doctoral degree as necessary for qualified professors to teach art in universities (Ministry of Education of China, 2018.). Moreover, Chinese universities have increased the number of hired art professors with doctoral degrees, with the hope of establishing an open art teaching system to enhance international exchanges and cooperation (Yang, 2022). Chinese students are more inclined to study in other Asian countries due to similar geographical environments, lifestyles (Yuan, 2019), and traditional philosophies such as Confucianism. Thus, they share similar educational ideas and lifestyles (Li, 2019). Additionally, the number of Ph.D. degrees in art majors offered in China still being very low (Pang et al., 2020). As a result, South Korea has become an appealing option for pursuing higher education (Li, 2019) and finding art-related majors.

With the growth of art as a subject in China, the exploration of art therapy has begun to receive more attention (Chinanews Net, 2022), leading artists to pay attention to creative arts therapy (CAT). Five majors fall under the CAT umbrella: art, music, dance/movement, drama, and poetry (using creative writing) therapies (Malchiodi, 2005). A range of art media is applied to improve cognitive and sensorimotor function, foster self-awareness and emotional resilience, promote insight, and enhance social skills, and for increased social security (Kempf et al., 2024; Malchiodi, 2005).

In China, CAT is a new academic field, recently beginning to receive recognition and development as a discipline (Pang et al., 2020). Some Chinese art colleges and universities actively expanded CAT research perspectives into the field of art education in 2016 and continued its educational practices. Since 2018, the China Academy of Art has held academic seminars on CAT research cases. Scholars at the Central Academy of Fine Arts have also introduced fundamental international theories, such as CAT, and have set up appropriate studios for students at their institute (Pang et al., 2020). Additionally, a few universities offer optional CAT-related courses. However, no CAT degree courses are available (Cui & Wang, 2022). At present, few formal training institutions in the discipline exist in China. To improve the CAT field in China, more artists should earn doctoral degrees in CAT and become art professors (Pang et al., 2020). This situation may lead to Chinese artists studying for the CAT degree in South Korea. International students can be confronted with many challenges, such as financial problems, academic achievements, language ability, interpersonal relationship formation, social support, and the influence of cultural differences, the worries

faced increase the risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Carolyn & Donna, 2024; Kim & Yoon, 2018; Li et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022). Chinese students in South Korea are required or associated with adaptation during study abroad (Razgulin et al., 2023; Tian, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). In addition, these challenges lead to various psychological problems, such as experiences of loneliness and homesickness for the homeland (Yin, 2023). Moreover, existing studies used mainly quantitative research methods to clarify the relationship between variables such as age, Korean language proficiency, retention time, school, cultural communication ability, school facilities, relationships with professors, and successful adaptation to studying abroad (Kim & Kim, 2011; Kim & Yoon, 2018). Therefore, considering the potential growth of CAT in China, the motivation of Chinese doctoral students for majoring in CAT and their experiences with studying it are meaningful to explore. This study hopes to provide valuable information for future students considering CAT studies in China.

## **METHOD**

This study used the descriptive qualitative research method. Descriptive qualitative research method is usually adapted to sensitively capture the complex reality that forms the attitude and cognition of a specific group or individual (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The rationale for using the descriptive qualitative method is to provide straightforward descriptions of perception and experiences (Doyle et al., 2020; Sandelowski, 2010), as well as participants' different experiences and descriptions of problems (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Individual semi-interviews and artwork were obtained to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What motivates Chinese doctoral students studying CAT in South Korea?
- (2) What are the experiences of Chinese doctoral students while studying CAT in South Korea?

### **Recruitment of Participants**

The researchers used the snowball sampling method to recruit study participants. This method is used to examine people or organizations within interactive contact networks (Naderifar et al., 2017). Participants were added through the recommendations of the respondents in the first round. To recruit participants, the researcher introduced the recruitment manual of the study, including an explanation of the study purpose, interview hours, and criteria for participants, through WeChat, a chat software mainly used by Chinese doctoral students. Study participants were recruited in April 2022. The selection criteria included being born and raised in China, being a Chinese international student majoring in CAT and having had studied in South Korea for over one year, and being willing to participate in the study.

A small sample in a qualitative study allows for a focused, in-depth understanding of a specific social and cultural context, which is usually not

possible with larger samples. Since knowledge is co-constructed by the researcher and the participants, qualitative research adopts a constructivist approach (Boddy, 2016). Instead of using larger samples, some researchers propose a guideline for a saturated sample size in qualitative studies, known as the "multiple of 6" (Guest et al., 2006).

This study was conducted in 2022, and the selected number of participants was small, considering the health and safety of participants from the COVID-19 outbreak. Six Chinese international students who met the criteria were selected as participants. All six participants (one female and five males) were Chinese students majoring in CAT in a doctoral program at the same school in South Korea. Their ages ranged from 26–38 (mean = 32), and their duration of residence in South Korea was 22–34 months (mean = 27 months). All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Regarding the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), which ranges from Level 1 to Level 6, a higher number indicates proficiency in Korea. Participants' TOPIK level was between Level 3 and 4. A level above Level 4 must be achieved to be eligible to graduate. Table 1 lists the basic information on the participants.

**Table 1: Basic demographic information of participants**

Pseudonym	Gender /Age	Previous Major	Current Major	Semester /Topic Level	Residence in South Korea (months)
Gong	Female /32	Gu Zheng (Chinese instrument)	Music therapy	4 <sup>th</sup> /4	22
Yun	Male /38	Vocal music	Music therapy	4 <sup>th</sup> /4	22
Liu	Male /32	Violoncello	Music therapy	6 <sup>th</sup> /3	34
Li	Male /30	Vocal music	Music therapy	5 <sup>th</sup> /4	28
Shi	Male /31	Calligraphy	Art therapy	5 <sup>th</sup> /3	28
Han	Male /26	Art design	Art therapy	2 <sup>nd</sup> /3	28

**Data Collection**

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted by a researcher who speaks Chinese (the participants' native language) to facilitate extensive verbal sharing. The first interview was conducted in a quiet space in the art therapy room at a university. The second was conducted via WeChat (2022), a free messaging and calling app. Each interview lasted for approximately an hour. The researchers gave verbal instructions to participants before the interview. The visual artworks

were gathered from the participants by asking them to bring some visual artworks related to their experiences studying CAT in Korea.

### **Data analysis**

Moustakas's (1994) method was used to analyze data. MAXQDA (Verbi, 2022) software was used to analyze the data. The analysis process was as follows: (1) reading the data to get familiar with its content; (2) transferring the data into the MAXQDA program, wherein all meaningful statements were coded; (3) combining similar and repeated semantic units, reviewing and modifying semantic units based on peer reports; (4) repeatedly confirming the original data and ensuring proposed analytical feasibility, obtaining sub-components by combining semantic units and components by combining the sub-components; and (5) identifying the saturated final themes, categories, and subcategories. Mandala artwork was manually analyzed.

### **Triangulation**

Member-checking was conducted to ensure an accurate understanding of all participants individually. During data analysis, peer-debriefing was conducted between two authors and one art therapist to ensure feasibility and coherence. Member-checking was conducted, and the interview transcripts were shared with participants to confirm accuracy and modify or delete the interviews as needed (Mabry, 1998). Peer-debriefing for data analysis occurred throughout the study, sharing the original transcription with codes to ensure feasibility and consistency (Lewis, 2015). The researchers transcribed the collected data and forwarded copies to study participants to confirm sections that required modifications and deletions to ensure the accuracy of the interview content. For example, participants Gong and Li were asked to add more details about their difficulties studying in South Korea during the member checking phase.

### **Researchers' reflections**

The first author is also a Chinese doctoral student majoring in CAT in South Korea and had similar experiences to the participants, leading to heightened sensitivity to this research topic. The researchers were explicitly aware of the influence this sensitivity would have on the data analysis. Therefore, they checked their biases and preconceived knowledge on this topic to avoid the influence of previous experience on the process, results, and interpretation by conducting discussion between two researchers and writing a memo, which helped to bracket their own bias. The interviews were conducted in Chinese to provide the best circumstances for sharing their experiences. To ensure the accuracy of the data, the researchers hired professional translators, and hence, verification of the translations was conducted meticulously.

**Ethical considerations**

This study is derived from the author’s doctoral dissertation (Mo, 2023), which was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The data used in this study were not used for the author’s doctoral dissertation, but were meaningful to explore. All participants were given details of the research project and informed of their right to refuse or withdraw from the study without any penalties. All the information was collected with the consent of the participants.

**RESULTS**

The analysis of the interview transcriptions yielded 98 codes related to the research topic. Consequently, six themes and 12 categories were identified: (a) no doctoral degree, no job position for art educators in Chinese universities; (b) expectations for the development of CAT in China and need for professional knowledge learning; (c) despite majoring in art, CAT is a new discipline; (d) study abroad while unprepared in terms of language ability; (e) wanting to escape due to academic pressure; and (f) motivation to continue studying abroad. Each theme contained unique categories derived from the data analysis. Table 2 lists the six themes and 12 supporting categories.

**Table 2. Data analysis results.**

Themes (6)	Categories (12)
Requirement of doctoral degree in university, China	To enter the Chinese universities for employment
	To obtain a better promotion at work
Expectations of blooming CAT in China	Expect CAT to flourish in China
	Gain knowledge of CAT in Korea
Despite majoring in art, CAT is a new discipline	Learning that accompanies inner work
	Art psychotherapy requires knowledge about psychology
Inadequate language ability	Academic stress caused by a lack of language ability
	Cultural differences reflected in language
Wanting to escape due to academic pressure	Academic pressure
	Adaptation stress and discrimination
Motivation to continue studying abroad	Enhance international perspective through cross-cultural experience
	Encounter unique opportunities in a foreign country

*Note. Due to word count limitations the 98 codes were excluded.*

## **Theme 1: Requirement of doctoral degree in universities, China.**

### ***Category 1: To enter the Chinese universities for employment***

Participants chose to study abroad, because they want to gain employment in Chinese universities, which requires them to hold a doctorate degree. They mentioned the grave employment situation in China and the professional environment of university teachers; thus, emphasizing the need for doctoral degrees. All participants majored in art- or music-related academic fields prior to their enrollment in a Ph.D. program, and they had a certain level of understanding of and interest in CAT in the previous learning process, leading them to choose a CAT doctorate. All the unemployed participants said their most significant motivation for studying CAT in South Korea was their career requirements, i.e., to find employment in universities in China and become an education practitioner.

### ***Category 2: To obtain a better promotion at work***

Participants working in universities in China said that their primary motivation for studying CAT in Korea is career ambitions—to get promoted and achieve better career development in their employment with Chinese universities. Liu said, “My profession requires a CAT Ph.D. I came to South Korea to pursue it.” Gong stated, “Currently, the employment situation in China is grim, and educational requirements are increasing... I worked at a university but could not establish myself there. I decided to pursue a CAT Ph.D. in South Korea to obtain a stable job.” Similarly, Han said, “I hope to get social recognition by becoming a doctor, and a university in Korea allowed me to pursue a CAT Ph.D. of my interest.”

## **Theme 2: Expectations of blooming CAT in China**

### ***Category 1: Expect CAT to flourish in China***

Participants indicated that they had high expectations and confidence in the vigorous development of CAT in China, which has boosted their determination to study abroad. Gong said, “For me, the biggest reason to study abroad is expectation. I hope I can gain something in this major, and one day I will be able to return to China to build this major and help it develop better in China.” In addition, Yun expressed a positive outlook for the future of psychology and spoke about his expectations for the bright future of Chinese CAT: “Now, everyone is very interested in psychology. I believe that this will lead to good future development in China.”

### ***Category 2: Gain knowledge of CAT in Korea***

All participants expressed that they had acquired professional knowledge, which was an important motivation for studying abroad. In addition, they expressed their hope of improving their academic abilities by studying abroad,

such as their professional knowledge of CAT music, fine arts, and psychology. This interest promoted their determination to study abroad. For example, Yun said, "I really like music. I want to continue to obtain relevant professional knowledge through higher studies. I intend to conduct my research in CAT related fields in the future." Li said that while studying music therapy, "I learned various music therapy methods, and realized the characteristics and effects of vocal psychotherapy, which is very meaningful." Yun said he was allowed to explore and gain more expertise in CAT (Figure 1).

In addition, participants said that they experienced a difference between CAT and previous art major studies. Gong said, "The direction and goal of the music therapy major is to heal the psychological pain, which is different from my previous major." She also mentioned the differences in how music is played, "I used to study musical instruments, and I found that the use of music therapy was quite different from the music I learned for more than 20 years. I never imagined that music could be relaxed and spontaneous." Shi said that in CAT, communication is more important than the aesthetic nature of artworks: "The biggest difference, I feel, is that in the process of art therapy, painting is not based on aesthetic standards, but is more focused on communication." Gong also said that their expertise gave her immense hope and strength.

### **Theme 3: Despite majoring in art, CAT is a new discipline**

#### ***Category 1: The learning that accompanies the inner work***

Participants indicated receiving an opportunity to know themselves in the treatment work. Li said, "In the process of learning, I participated in many therapeutic activities. Through the communication with the therapist, I felt a clearer understanding of myself, which is my own experience." Participants reported experiencing the healing power of CAT. Gong said that she realized the healing power of music therapy.

#### ***Category 2: Art psychotherapy requires knowledge about psychology***

Although the participants had received different master's degrees in China, none had majored in CAT. Thus, their level of understanding of CAT was poor. The participants expressed the difficulty of studying CAT, which was a different discipline from what they had learned in the past in their previous arts-related field in China. Shi said, "I studied CAT here, but in China, I studied calligraphy, and it has little to do with my major now. Hence, I feel that the subject is slightly difficult." Gong discussed the challenges of combining music and new psychology with her major. She said, "I have only studied music so far; I know nothing about psychology... I feel helpless because I have started doubting my capability to earn it."

Furthermore, participants expressed difficulties in learning the CAT specialty. Yun was under tremendous academic pressure: "In the process of learning music therapy, what bothers me most is the knowledge of psychology,

which is a very profound subject, which puts me under great pressure.” In addition, Gong discussed the difficulties of expressing oneself through playing in the professional study of music therapy by saying, “It is difficult to really follow my heart. In addition, I have never seriously tried to be introspective in art therapy. When I really started to introspect, I was also very painful, and I was unwilling to face my own past pain.”

Li said that he lacks an understanding of the role of professional instruments in music therapy. “At first, I thought music psychological therapy was a simple, song-based intervention. After learning, I found that many musical instruments are used in music therapy, some of which I have never seen.”

Notably, the participants indicated that cross-professional learning had difficult and positive experiences. Yun mentioned an interest in new disciplines, “opening the door from one discipline to another; you will encounter a lot of magical things. There are a lot of different things between the different subjects. It's actually very attractive.”

#### **Theme 4: Inadequate language ability**

##### ***Category 1: Academic stress caused by a lack of language ability***

Participants studied Korean for one semester before entering a Korean university. However, they still face language barriers in their learning process. The participants in this study were all required to achieve TOPIK 4 before graduation, not for the entrance, thus, their language levels were all different. Participants revealed that they encountered difficulties in professional learning due to the language barrier. For example, Li said, “Around 80% of the lectures are inaudible, and about 10% are not well understood.” Shi said, “In the process of learning, because of the language barrier, I feel that it is difficult to gain subject knowledge.” Regarding language difficulties, Han shared, “Communicating with my professor was also tough. The professor and I were miserable. This was the toughest experience I ever had.” He was sometimes unable to actively participate in the course, leading to a decrease in his confidence. He said, “I didn't dare speak in class because I was afraid that I'd hinder it. Since many professional terms are taught in class, and I really can't understand them....” Gong mentioned that she studied abroad without adequate language preparation. However, she was required to obtain a degree quickly, causing her to experience more pressure. “These language and cultural differences put pressure on me during the process of studying abroad because I don't have much time to learn the language...” In addition, Gong also felt guilty, helpless, and inferior due to her lack of ability in the Korean language.

##### ***Category 2: Cultural differences reflected in language***

The lack of Korean language ability lies in the difficulties of degree programs and the challenges of cultural differences. Participants expressed psychological distress, such as helplessness, stress, fear, alienation, and depression, owing to

communication issues. Li expressed the powerlessness experienced in daily life due to such communication difficulties: “After I came to South Korea, I realized that my Korean language proficiency was inadequate... these were the times I experienced difficulties as I couldn’t communicate easily.” Yun expressed stress and fear regarding communication issues as follows:

Communication is my biggest obstacle, and the lack of Korean language ability has created a lot of psychological pressure. When I was in urgent need of information, there was a language barrier, and I was under tremendous psychological pressure for a short time. At that time, I felt completely confused. What I expressed was not understood by others, leading to substantial information deviation and greatly impacting my life. I would feel scared.

Han expressed his sense of alienation and depression due to communication issues: “I was very afraid and even felt depressed. I did not dare to discuss it with the others.” In addition, in the process of studying abroad, the participants’ Korean language ability is also constantly improved, leading to an increase in self-confidence (Figure 1).

## **Theme 5: Wanting to escape due to academic pressure**

### ***Category 1: Academic pressure***

Participants believed that the most significant stress during their degrees was academic, mainly manifested as pressure related to writing thesis papers and adapting to Korean teaching methods. Most participants stated that they were under tremendous academic pressure when studying abroad. Shi shared her academics through an image (Figure 1). Liu mentioned academic pressure (Figure 1).

Participants said that the teaching method in South Korea differs from that in China. Therefore, Chinese doctoral students find it challenging. Liu stressed the difficulties caused by the different educational methods between South Korea and China by saying, “The Korean learning, thinking, and teaching modes are somewhat different from those in China, so I encountered great difficulties in the learning process and was very depressed.”

### ***Category 2: Adaptation stress and discrimination***

Participants expressed fear of an unfamiliar environment, loneliness, homesickness, worrying about their safety, and many other psychological struggles experienced while studying abroad. They reported experiencing discrimination as foreigners. Gong said, “As a foreigner, I have faced discrimination. Even being treated in contempt when shopping in the mall, this kind of thing is not tangible, but it can be felt.” Han said that he was terrified of discrimination. “I feel that the attitude of Koreans toward international students is different from that toward the locals.”

**Theme 6: Motivation to continue studying abroad**

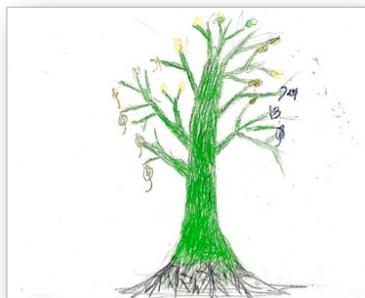
***Category 1: Enhance international perspective through cross-cultural experience***

Most participants paid greater attention to pursuing cross-cultural experiences, cultivating international perspectives, and improving personal abilities. Liu expressed that by living in a different country for a long time, he could better understand the country and experience diverse cultures. “Growing up, I had a strong desire to study abroad. I like to experience different cultures, not just through TV series, but to live, experience, and feel it in reality.” Shi clearly emphasized the importance of an international perspective and individual independence. “I think studying abroad and living alone can help me further develop my skills. I really can’t understand the world through the Internet, so I want to travel and understand the kind of country China is from an international perspective and how foreigners view China.

Han mentioned that obtaining international information is difficult in China. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the information lag and objectivity problems. For example, he said, “Instagram is banned in China, and a lot of information is strictly controlled there, whereas a lot of information is unrestricted abroad. I can view information that I can’t when I’m at home.” These experiences indicate that Chinese doctoral students hope to learn about global cultures by studying abroad, thus gaining an international perspective. Studying overseas can fulfill Chinese doctoral students’ desire to gain cross-cultural experience. Furthermore, it broadens their international perspective and improves their personal qualities as cultural capital, as reflected in the interview.

***Category 2: Encounter a special fate in a foreign country***

Most participants mentioned the important support peers from the same country and culture to them provided. For example, Gong said that making friends has become an influential factor in her study abroad experience: “With the company of friends, studying abroad is no longer that boring or scary.” Shi mentioned that chatting with peers can relieve anxiety and stated, “Sometimes, I go fishing with my friends, so I feel more relaxed.” Some participants express the desire not to let their families down and to have the power to study abroad. Han said, “I always want to not disappoint my family, so I have to stick to it even if I want to go home.”



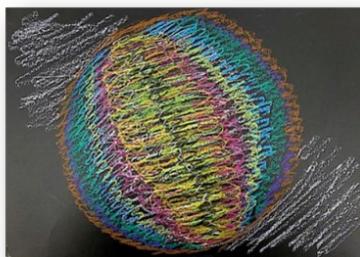
Note. Yun, The tree of growth. This image symbolizes Yun's personal and academic growth while studying CAT.



Note. Han, Help. This image reflects Han's frustration due to unprepared language.



Note. Shi, Busy with academic pressure. This image reflects Shi's academic pressure and exhaustion in his daily life.



Note. Liu, Confusion. This image represents the moments of losing focus in class, reflecting his inner world of chaos and confusion in classroom.

**Figure 1. Images presenting studying CAT in South Korea**

## DISCUSSION

Themes 1 and 2 support Research Question 1. The participants hoped to earn a Ph.D. degree in Korea and improve their academic competence, and contribute to the development of CAT in China. They also look forward to the bright future of CAT in China. They emphasized the new choice of cultural experiences, including experiencing multiculturalism and enhancing their international perspective, which is consistent with the findings of Luo (2022). With the rapid development of China's economy, many Chinese students can afford to study abroad and choose to do so (Ko & Kim, 2020). Given this economic and cultural background, numerous Chinese students hope to experience diverse cultures by studying abroad. Participants expected studying abroad to become their psychological turning point by temporarily avoiding dissatisfaction with life.

Themes 3, 4, 5, and 6 support Research Question 2. Faced with a new discipline, participants said that although they majored in art, art psychotherapy

was an emerging discipline. During the CAT study, the participants experienced the healing abilities of the CAT discipline. CAT helped participants deepen their self-awareness and relieve their anxiety and loneliness. Moreover, unfamiliarity with psychology, lack of Korean language ability, and different ways of learning led to difficulties in participants developing CAT expertise and were under tremendous academic pressure.

Furthermore, insufficient Korean language skills caused academic pressure and cultural adaptation difficulties. This suggests that the Korean educational system should be given more careful consideration when administering entrance exams for foreigners. Also, the situation of needing to pursue a degree quickly caused pressure on Chinese doctoral students in South Korea. In addition, through cross-cultural experience, participants enhanced their international exposure during their study in a foreign country. Most participants emphasized the experience of new cultures, including multiculturalism and enhancing their international perspective, which is consistent with the findings of Luo (2020).

Participants received support from peers from the same country and culture as them. Therefore, the company of friends was an influential factor in their study abroad life; they conversed with peers to eliminate anxiety. This result is consistent with Shin and Kim's (2019) finding that dating helps Chinese students adapt to college life. In addition, some participants' willingness not to disappoint their families has given them the power to study abroad. It can be observed that family has an extraordinarily significant place in the minds of Chinese people (Li & Gao, 2014).

Second, the study revealed that the participants use "studying abroad" as a means of escape. They wanted to escape their dissatisfaction with life, the pressure of work, and alleviate the stress and controlling behaviors from their parents. Western society generally emphasizes individual independence in terms of values (Hong, 2007). In the long-term process of historical development in China, individuals are in a group relationship, emphasizing the mutual dependence between individuals within the group. Under the traditional family culture in China, the concept of "filial piety" is deeply rooted in people's hearts, and children are encouraged to assume the responsibility of supporting their parents on the premise of having the ability to support them (Wei, 2010). Thus, studying abroad can be a way to help participants avoid these cultural pressures.

Participants experienced discrimination as foreigners and were fearful of it. The discriminatory treatment of Chinese students in South Korea stems from Koreans' prejudice against China (Lee et al., 2021). This factor is critical in promoting interpersonal difficulties among Chinese students and unfavorable feelings toward South Korea. Ethnic biases can lead to prejudice against multicultural groups, and this negative experience poses difficulties in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students, requiring consideration of policy programs to reduce this bias. There was also an unexpected finding, which was not directly related to the research question: The sense of isolation and increased pressure caused by COVID-19 for the participants. The unexpected circumstances caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 and its impact on Chinese international students in particular may need to be examined. This study has several limitations.

First, while translating direct quotes from interviews, it is possible that the meaning of certain words were altered. Second, the participants in this study were not representative of all CAT majors, as they were either from the art or music therapy division.

## **Implications**

The Ministry of Education in Korea has developed and implemented several projects promoting higher education in Korea, leading to a significant increase in the number of international students from various countries, including China. However, the study findings revealed that the entrance exam systems vary depending on the university. Therefore, it is crucial to assess language ability prior to admission rather than before graduation to prevent stress caused by language inadequacy.

This research specifically focused on the experiences of studying CAT in Korea and highlighted the importance of offering emotional support to Chinese students. Results suggest that psychological and emotional support programs would highly benefit international students from different nationalities and cultures. As demonstrated by previous studies, Chinese international students in the U.S. increased the risk of mental health problems in relation to depression, anxiety (Ma et al., 2022) and a stigma around seeking mental health services (Carolyn & Donna, 2024).

Extant literature on this topic primarily focuses on the factors necessary for a successful study abroad experience. From a long-term perspective, research exploring the implications for Chinese students who have chosen Korea as their study abroad destination and returned to their home country after completing their studies is limited. It is important to investigate how this experience contributes to their lives beyond merely obtaining a degree. Given that studying abroad requires a significant investment of time, effort, and financial resources, this topic should be further examined.

## **Conclusion**

Education in the era of globalization needs to extend beyond cultural differences between countries to explore the authentic mode of human existence that encompasses all cultures and understands different ways of life. Understanding Chinese doctoral students' motivation and experiences studying abroad will ultimately guide how they evolve from artists to creative arts therapists. We hope this study provides insight and guidance for Chinese doctoral students preparing to study abroad to transform themselves from artists to creative arts therapists and ensure their success while studying abroad.

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