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Acculturation Experiences among Chinese International Students: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Studies

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ABSTRACT: *Chinese international students (CIS) are among the largest and most mobile student populations globally, yet their acculturative experiences in host countries remain complex and underexplored. This systematic literature review synthesizes qualitative research on the acculturation experiences and stressors faced by CIS in foreign universities. Drawing on 16 peer-reviewed studies (2014-2024), the review explores the psychological outcomes and key stress domains: linguistic, academic, social, financial, and environmental. While some students reported personal growth and academic enrichment, the majority experienced significant challenges shaped by structural misalignments between their cultural-educational backgrounds and host country systems. These interrelated stressors often compound negative impacts on mental health and academic performance. This review addresses a gap by centering qualitative insights into how CIS navigate context-dependent transitions. By illuminating systemic and interpersonal dynamics underlying acculturative stress, the study offers a reflective lens for students, institutions, and policymakers seeking more equitable and supportive international education environments.*

Keywords: acculturation, acculturative stress, Chinese international students, higher education, international student experience, systematic literature review

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education has internationalized rapidly over the past decade, with Chinese international students (CIS) among the largest global student groups. Their presence has reshaped institutional practices and intercultural dynamics across host destinations. Recent geopolitical tensions, anti-Asian racialization, and the far-reaching disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified the precarity of studying abroad, exposing CIS to heightened vulnerability and uncertainty (Mok et al., 2021; Yu, 2023). These shifts underscore the need to reassess how CIS experience acculturation within changing educational and sociopolitical environments.

Acculturation involves ongoing negotiation of unfamiliar cultural, social, and academic contexts (Berry et al., 1987; Šimienė, 2023). Within this process, acculturative stress has been identified as a critical challenge affecting international students' academic engagement, social integration, and physical and psychological well-being (Kristiana et al., 2022; Xue & Singh, 2025). Existing studies are largely quantitative (Al-Jaberi et al., 2020; Bashir & Khalid, 2022; Liao & Wei, 2023), often obscuring context-specific experiences of CIS and framing stress at the individual level (Alzukari & Wei, 2024; Le, 2022; Silva et al., 2024).

A qualitative systematic synthesis is therefore necessary. Although individual qualitative studies offer rich insights, their findings remain fragmented across contexts and approaches. Without systematic integration, recurring patterns and gaps remain difficult to identify. A systematic literature review (SLR) consolidates dispersed qualitative evidence, enabling higher-order interpretations beyond single-study contexts (Fendt, 2025).

Focusing specifically on qualitative evidence further strengthens this contribution. A qualitative SLR captures processes, meanings, and contextual dynamics, including how linguistic, academic, social, financial, and institutional stressors interact and how students' responses are shaped by systemic factors. This approach helps move beyond individualistic and deficit-oriented explanations by emphasizing relational and structural dimensions of adaptation (Flemming & Noyes, 2021).

The need for this synthesis is further heightened by recent transformations in international higher education. Shifts in mobility patterns, digital learning environments, and immigration constraints have introduced intensified and novel stressors that earlier reviews cannot fully capture (Zuo et al., 2025). As qualitative studies increasingly document these developments, an updated synthesis is required to reflect contemporary conditions.

Prior reviews have either excluded qualitative evidence or predate recent sociopolitical shifts (Kuo, 2014; Soufi et al., 2024), leaving CIS-specific qualitative synthesis underdeveloped. This study addresses this gap by reviewing qualitative research published between 2014 and 2024, providing an up-to-date and integrated understanding of how CIS's acculturation experiences.

Research objectives and questions

This SLR aims to synthesize qualitative evidence on the acculturation experiences of CIS in foreign universities, with particular attention to how acculturation is interpreted and how stress is triggered. Quantitative studies were excluded to maintain analytic coherence with the review's focus on meaning-making and process-oriented inquiry. By integrating findings across studies, the review seeks to identify recurring patterns and underlying dynamics that explain how acculturative stress emerges and persists within CIS's acculturation processes.

This review is guided by two research questions:

1. How do CIS interpret their acculturation experiences in foreign universities?
2. Through what contextual conditions is acculturative stress triggered for CIS?

Theoretical Lens: An Ecological-Relational Approach

This review adopts an ecological-relational lens and conceptualizes acculturative stress as emerging through interactions across multiple contextual levels. "Ecological" refers to the nested structure of influence spanning individual (micro), interpersonal (meso), institutional (exo), and sociocultural (macro) contexts. "Relational" emphasizes that these levels are not independent; rather, stress is produced through ongoing interactions, power relations, and meaning-making processes within and across contexts.

This lens is informed by ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and acculturation theory (Berry, 1997). While both frameworks have been widely applied in international student research, they are often employed to map contextual influences or frame acculturation primarily as individual adaptation. The present lens extends this foundation by foregrounding relational dynamics and power relations as central processes linking ecological levels. Whether enacted between students and faculty, among peers, or between individuals and institutions, these dynamics actively shape lived acculturation experiences. Furthermore, acculturative stress is conceptualized here as situated and dynamic rather than as a fixed psychological condition.

METHOD

This study systematically reviewed qualitative research on the acculturation experiences and stressors of CIS. A systematic review was chosen to ensure methodological transparency and comprehensiveness, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

Search Strategy

The review covered publications between 2014 and 2024 to ensure a clearly bounded and methodologically consistent synthesis of a rapidly growing literature. Although post-2024 developments warrant ongoing attention, they fall beyond the predefined search window and point to the need for ongoing updates. Earlier publications were excluded, as any previously identified research gaps may have been resolved or redundant studies may have been conducted (Booth et al., 2021). Additionally, only English-language and peer-reviewed articles were considered.

The search was conducted across six databases: Academic Search Elite, JSTOR, MEDLINE Complete, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search strategy combined terms related to the target population ("Chinese international students", "Chinese students", "Chinese college students", "Chinese overseas students") and core concepts ("acculturation", "cultural differences", "psychological adjustment", "cultural adaptation", "adaptation", "acculturative stress"). No methodological filters were applied during the initial search to maximize sensitivity. Keywords were informed by prior literature and preliminary scoping searches to balance breadth and relevance. Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used, and search strings were adapted across databases to account for indexing differences. The complete Boolean search strings are provided in Appendix A.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were defined by population, phenomenon, design, timeframe, and publication characteristics. "International students" were defined as individuals who physically cross national borders for education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). This review focused on CIS from mainland China and self-identified as Chinese, excluding students from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Studies were included if they employed qualitative or qualitatively dominant mixed-method designs and researched acculturation experiences and acculturative stressors among CIS. Only peer-reviewed and English-language publications between 2014 and 2024 were eligible. Exclusions comprised quantitative-only studies, secondary research, such as reviews, book chapters, and studies focusing exclusively on online learners.

Screening Procedure

Following the PRISMA checklist (Page et al., 2021), a total of 3,845 records were initially identified and then imported into EndNote 20 software. After removing 1,230 duplicates, 2,615 articles remained. Titles and abstracts were then screened based on eligibility criteria, resulting in 184 articles for full-text review.

Full text could not be retrieved for 45 articles despite attempts to access them through institutional databases and alternative sources, and they were excluded at this stage. While this may introduce a potential risk of selection bias, its impact is likely limited given the breadth of included studies and the consistency of themes identified across multiple sources. The remaining 139 articles were subjected to detailed screening. Of these, 123 were excluded for not focusing on CIS acculturation or stressors, employing nonqualitative designs, or being identified as reviews or intervention studies. Ultimately, 16 studies fully met the inclusion criteria (see Figure 1), including 10 from Web of Science, 3 from Scopus, and 3 from MEDLINE Complete.

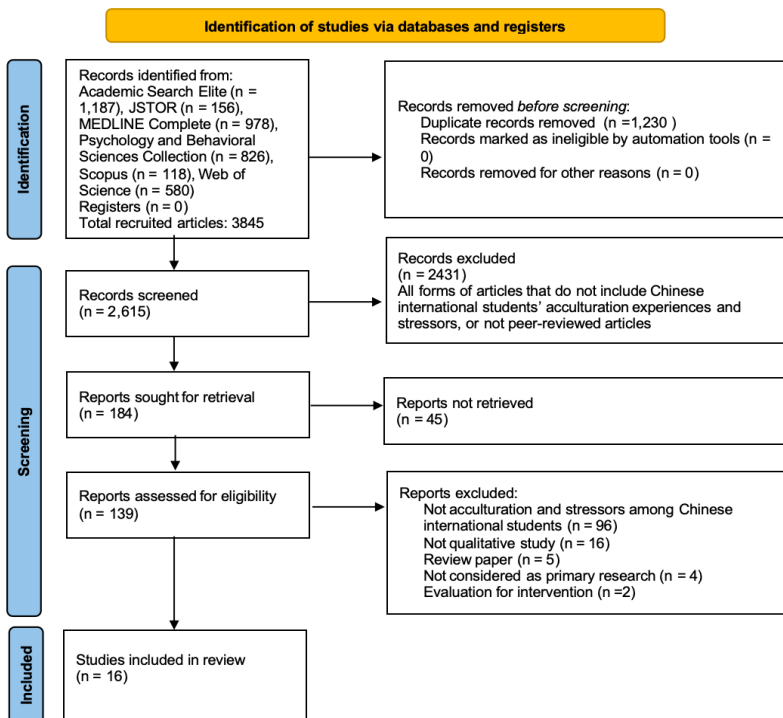


Figure 1: PRISMA diagram presenting the screening and selection process

Quality Assessment

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for Qualitative Research was employed to assess the methodological quality of the included studies. Each study was assessed for design appropriateness, sampling, data collection, researcher reflexivity, ethics, and rigor (CASP, 2024). While the majority of studies (n = 13) met most criteria, several recurrent methodological weaknesses were identified that warrant analytical attention when interpreting the synthesized themes. Only 7 of 16 studies explicitly addressed researcher

positionality, and reporting of recruitment strategies and ethical procedures beyond institutional approval was frequently sparse. These limitations were considered in the synthesis: findings from less transparent studies were interpreted with greater caution, while themes consistently supported across multiple studies were treated with higher confidence. A summary of the critical appraisal is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Critical Appraisal of Qualitative Study Following the CASP Checklist

CASP Qualitative Studies Checklist (2024)	Berram et al. (2014)	Blisskovets et al. (2020)	Cao et al. (2018)	Chen & Yang (2015)	Cheng et al. (2019)	Dai & Hardy (2021)	Heng (2018)	Jiang & Xiao (2024)	Le & McKay (2018)	Li & Pihlman (2018)	Lu et al. (2018)	Qi & Li (2021)	Yang & Bai (2020)	Zhang et al. (2024)	Zhao et al. (2023)	Zhou et al. (2017)
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	?	×	√	?	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants	√	?	√	?	?	√	√	?	?	?	√	×	√	√	?	?

been adequately considered?																
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	√	?	√	√	√	√	√	√	?	√	√	√	?	√	√	√
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	√	√	√	√	√	√	?	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
10. How valuable is the research?	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	×	√

Note. √ = Yes (criterion met); = No (criterion not met); ? = Unclear/Can't tell

Data Extraction and Analysis

This study followed a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008), combining inductive coding with iterative categorization. It was chosen for uncovering rich and detailed patterns within experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena. Additionally, thematic synthesis maintains close connections to primary study findings, ensures a transparent synthesis process, and promotes the generation of new concepts and insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All included studies were imported into Endnote. Qualitative findings, including participant quotes and author interpretations, were extracted as the primary unit of analysis. For mixed-method studies, only qualitative components were analyzed, while quantitative results were excluded to maintain analytic consistency.

Initial coding was conducted line-by-line to capture meaning units relevant to acculturation experiences and stress. Codes were generated inductively and refined through constant comparison across studies and then grouped into descriptive themes. These were further abstracted into higher-order analytical themes, revealing four interrelated contextual levels that structured the synthesis, including micro, meso, exo, and macro levels.

Relevant data were extracted, including authors, publication year, objectives, location, participant characteristics, recruitment, data collection methods, analytic approach, and key findings, as presented in Appendix B.

RESULTS

Sixteen qualitative studies, conducted across eight host countries, were reviewed, with the majority based in the United States ($n = 4$), the United Kingdom ($n = 3$), and Australia ($n = 4$). Findings are organized around the two research questions, addressing acculturation experiences and acculturative stressors of CIS.

Acculturation Experiences

The reviewed studies presented a wide range of acculturation experiences among CIS, spanning both positive and negative transitions. Some students reported favorable academic and intercultural experiences (Bertram et al., 2014; Bilotserkovets et al., 2020). One male student reflected on the warmth of American culture:

Americans are actually friendly. . . truly, truly friendly. So I was like a little bit surprised (Bertram et al., 2014, p. 115).

Nevertheless, 14 of the 16 studies primarily reported negative or ambivalent acculturation experiences. They were grouped into three interrelated domains: sociocultural and psychological strain, academic and linguistic challenges, and contextual and structural stressors. The first domain encompassed difficulties in navigating unfamiliar cultural norms, social isolation, and emotional distress (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020; Chen & Yang, 2015). The second domain captured persistent barriers in classroom participation, peer and lecturer interaction, and language proficiency (Cao et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2019). The third domain highlighted broader contextual influences, such as sociopolitical perceptions between home and host countries (Lu et al., 2018) and the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' emotional well-being and adaptation trajectories (Jiang & Xiao, 2024).

Acculturation was depicted as context dependent, nonlinear, and subject to ongoing negotiation between students' home culture and the host environment (Heng, 2018; Dai & Hardy, 2021). Cultural factors strongly influence CIS's expectations and coping strategies, particularly Confucian values emphasizing respect for authority (Le & McKay, 2018). In Finland, economic integration emerged as an additional layer of adaptation, as students' prior work experience and career goals influenced their adjustment (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). Notably, even in culturally proximate contexts such as Singapore, students continued to experience multilayered adaptation challenges across informational, instrumental, and emotional domains (Chen & Yang, 2015), suggesting that cultural similarity does not necessarily mitigate acculturative stress.

While acculturation offers opportunities for personal growth, it may erode mental health under prolonged academic pressure, isolation and perceived discrimination. Sustained stress may lead to a 'downward spiral' of well-being, resulting in a cycle of continuous adaptation, distress, and development (Zhao et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). These challenges are time-sensitive and context

specific, with ongoing fluctuations in the acculturation experiences of CIS (Yang & Bai, 2020; Qi & Li, 2021; Zhou et al., 2017).

Acculturative Stressors

Regardless of whether acculturation experiences were positive or negative, acculturative stress emerged as a consistent theme across the studies. Across the reviewed literature, stressors were traced to five domains: linguistic and communication challenges, academic and competency pressures, social difficulties, financial constraints, and daily living and environmental factors.

Linguistic and Communication Stressors

Fifteen studies highlighted linguistic and communication stressors. Within academic settings, language barriers complicated classroom interactions, assignment completion, and academic writing. Despite meeting official English proficiency standards, participants reported frustration, anxiety, and embarrassment when navigating academic English. Common difficulties included fast-paced lectures, instructors' varied accents, and low confidence in class discussions (Cao et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2019).

Linguistic challenges extended the time required for reading and writing tasks (Jiang & Xiao, 2024). As one participant stated,

I need to look up new words all the time...and sometimes I still don't understand them even if I translate the terms (Zhang et al., 2024, p. 48).

However, for some CISs, language posed less of a barrier than the need to cultivate more effective learning strategies (Le & McKay, 2018).

Beyond academic settings, language barriers hinder the CIS's social interactions in host communities. Students struggled to follow rapid native speech and to formulate timely and appropriate responses (Heng, 2018). Additionally, cultural differences complicate meaningful connections with local peers, as comprehending jokes, slang, and implicit meanings is difficult for foreigners (Zhao et al., 2023). The challenges were magnified in host countries where English was not the primary language, as limited proficiency on both sides exacerbated communication issues (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020). A lack of familiarity with the local language contributed to feelings of alienation and perceived discrimination (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). As one participant in Finland expressed:

"I cannot follow the Finnish news, or even ask for directions since I do not understand the language. I am totally estranged from Finnish society" (Li & Pitkänen, 2018, p. 112).

Academic and Competency Stressors

To study abroad, academic and competency stressors represent immediate challenges for international students. During academic adaptation, CIS face stress

stemming from classroom adaptation, limited access to academic resources, supervision difficulties, and academic writing demands.

Twelve studies detailed classroom adaptation stressors, including unfamiliar teaching styles (Bertram et al., 2014; Cao et al., 2021; Jiang & Xiao, 2024; Lu et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2024), different curricula and pedagogies (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020; Heng, 2018; Li & Pitkänen, 2018; Zhao et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2017), and heavy workloads (Jiang & Xiao, 2024; Yang & Bai, 2020). Additionally, limited access to academic resources, such as small library collections, exacerbated acculturative stress (Cao et al., 2021; Le & McKay, 2018).

Relationships with supervisors were another recurrent concern. Some CIS struggled to seek guidance or interpret feedback (Cheng et al., 2019; Li & Pitkänen, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024). Furthermore, unexpected changes in supervision teams disrupted research progress (Dai & Hardy, 2021; Qi & Li, 2021). Beyond language barriers, academic writing causes significant stress for CIS due to completely new conventions, citation practices, and plagiarism policies (Jiang & Xiao, 2024; Yang & Bai, 2020).

Many participants described difficulties in generating original ideas, highlighting divergent expectations about critical thinking. One participant observed:

Western students are often critical of teachers... and offer their own fresh idea. In contrast, Chinese students tend to accept what teachers and books say (Cao et al., 2021, p. 247).

Moreover, a lack of self-regulation and time management competency became obvious when the CIS faced increased autonomy abroad (Heng, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024). Finally, concerns about future career prospects added additional pressure, as they grappled with making appropriate decisions during the study process (Chen & Yang, 2015; Lu et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2017).

Social Stressors

Social isolation associated with the loss of proximal support networks was reported in all included studies. Although remote communication provides partial emotional support, it fails to fully bridge cultural and experiential gaps (Zhao et al., 2023).

To mitigate loneliness, the CIS predominantly forms social networks with compatriots, finding comfort in shared cultural backgrounds (Jiang & Xiao, 2024). However, integrating into established Chinese peer groups proved challenging, particularly when many had bonded during preessional courses (Zhang et al., 2024). Heavy reliance on the Chinese community also hindered language development and cultural integration (Li & Pitkanen, 2018). Most CISs find it extremely difficult to cultivate close and meaningful interactions with local students due to language barriers, limited opportunities, and divergent cultural backgrounds (Cheng et al., 2019; Jiang & Xiao, 2024). As one interviewee discussed the visa problem with local peers: "I need companies to sponsor my visa, many don't know what that is. Nor are they interested" (Lu et al., 2018, p. 992). Local students' closed social circles with their peers further reinforced

divisions (Li & Pitkanen, 2018). Ultimately, the CIS navigated a delicate balance to avoid social isolation or rejection from both local and Chinese peer groups (Zhou et al., 2017).

Financial stressors

Six studies highlighted financial challenges as integral to acculturation experiences. High tuition fees and living expenses created persistent economic pressure (Heng, 2018). These difficulties were intensified by limited access to financial aid, scholarships, and visa restrictions on employment (Li & Pitkanen, 2018; Qi & Li, 2021). Notably, most CISs were self-funded, increasing their financial vulnerability and sense of insecurity (Zhang et al., 2024). Economic pressure adversely affects students' mental health, contributing to isolation and homesickness, especially when they cannot afford trips home (Jiang & Xiao, 2024). While part-time employment provided temporary financial relief, it also reduced study time and academic focus (Li & Pitkanen, 2018). In severe cases, the financial burden forced students to drop out of their studies. As one participant stated,

One of my doctoral classmates had to give up his doctoral study due [to] a lack of money (Qi & Li, 2021, p. 11).

Daily living and environmental stressors

CIS frequently encounters substantial practical and environmental challenges. Securing housing, navigating transportation, managing finances, and finding familiar food proved stressful due to unfamiliar systems and limited institutional guidance (Chen & Yang, 2015; Lu et al., 2018). Unlike structured campus life in China, students abroad were expected to independently manage rent, bills, and household responsibilities, increasing the CIS's adjustment burden (Zhao et al., 2023).

Lifestyle adjustments involve shifts in diet, routines, and social activities. Some students struggled with local eating habits and had to learn cooking (Heng, 2018; Qi & Li, 2021; Zhao et al., 2023), although others experienced positive shifts, such as healthier diets and regular exercise (Zhou et al., 2017).

Safety concerns were prevalent. Without China's extensive surveillance infrastructure, the CIS felt physically and psychologically unsafe, particularly at night or in unfamiliar environments (Zhou et al., 2017). Reports of theft, harassment, and perceived inaction from local authorities exacerbated these fears (Zhao et al., 2023). Discrimination also occurred academically, including unfair treatment by instructors and peers. One student shared:

There is tutorial discrimination, as some do not like Chinese people.

They will fail you, with no reason (Le & McKay, 2018, p. 1283).

The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these stressors, as initial blame directed at China exposed the CIS to virus-related discrimination and verbal abuse (Jiang & Xiao, 2024).

An Ecological-Relational Model of Acculturative Stress among CIS

Drawing on thematic synthesis of qualitative evidence, this review proposes an Ecological-Relational Model of Acculturative Stress to integrate the diverse yet interconnected stress experiences of CIS. Grounded in recurring patterns across the reviewed studies, the model offers a coherent lens for understanding how acculturative stress is produced, sustained, and occasionally mitigated within higher education environments.

At the micro level, acculturative stress emerges from students' day-to-day engagement with academic and linguistic demands, identity negotiation, and emotional regulation. Linguistic barriers, unfamiliar academic conventions, and difficulties in critical thinking or academic writing often undermine students' confidence and sense of competence. These challenges are not described as temporary burdens that disappear over time; instead, they fluctuate as students encounter new academic tasks, assessment formats, or disciplinary expectations (Dai & Hardy, 2021). Qualitative evidence shows that even students with high formal language proficiency may experience persistent anxiety and self-doubt when communicative expectations shift across contexts, indicating that microlevel stressors are deeply embedded in lived academic and daily practices.

The meso level captures the relational contexts in which the CIS interacts with lecturers, supervisors, peers, and local communities. Classroom dynamics, supervisory relationships, and opportunities for meaningful social interaction critically shape students' sense of belonging and academic performance. Several studies have revealed that limited intercultural engagement, implicit pedagogical norms, and imbalanced power relations constrain participation, which reinforces feelings of marginalization (Zhao et al., 2023; Qi & Li, 2021; Li & Pitkänen, 2018). Reliance on conational networks, while protecting emotional well-being, may simultaneously limit exposure to host-language environments, leading to the dilemma of balancing social relationships in acculturation.

At the exo level, institutional structures and policies pose indirect yet powerful influences. These include assessment rules, academic support services, housing arrangements, mental health support, and immigration or employment regulations. The reviewed studies suggest that institutional support is often fragmented or unevenly accessible, placing the burden of navigation on students themselves. When institutional support remains implicit or there is a lack of cultural consciousness, CISs are positioned as responsible for adapting to the dominant culture, thereby intensifying stress rather than alleviating it.

The macro level encompasses broader sociopolitical and cultural forces that frame acculturation experiences. Geopolitical tensions, discriminated communications, public health crises, and societal attitudes toward international students shape how CIS are perceived and treated within host societies. Qualitative accounts highlight experiences of discrimination, safety concerns, and symbolic exclusion, demonstrating that acculturative stress cannot be fully understood without considering these wider contexts. Macrolevel forces often magnify micro- and meso-level stressors, creating compounding pressures that extend beyond university settings.

Crucially, the ecological–relational model emphasizes the dynamic interplay across levels. Linguistic challenges may restrict classroom participation, which in turn limits social integration and access to academic support. Financial constraints intersect with institutional policies to restrict employment opportunities, thereby exacerbating academic pressure and emotional distress. Over time, these interacting stressors may contribute to what several studies describe as a downward spiral of acculturative stress. Simultaneously, the model accommodates protective factors, such as supportive faculty relationships, culturally responsive institutional practices, and personal resilience, which can interrupt or soften these cycles.

While the model draws on ecological perspectives, it is not intended as a wholly new theoretical framework. Instead, it functions as an integrative synthesis grounded in qualitative evidence, extending existing approaches in two aspects. First, it foregrounds relational processes and power dynamics as central threads linking ecological levels rather than treating levels as analytically separate. Second, it conceptualizes acculturative stress as dynamically coconstructed across contexts over time, rather than as a static individual outcome. Thus, this model provides an empirically grounded framework that links individual experiences and institutional responsibilities, offering a foundation for interpreting the findings of this review and for informing practice, policy, and future research concerning international students in higher education. Figure 2 illustrates how acculturative stress among CIS emerges through these interconnected processes across multiple levels.

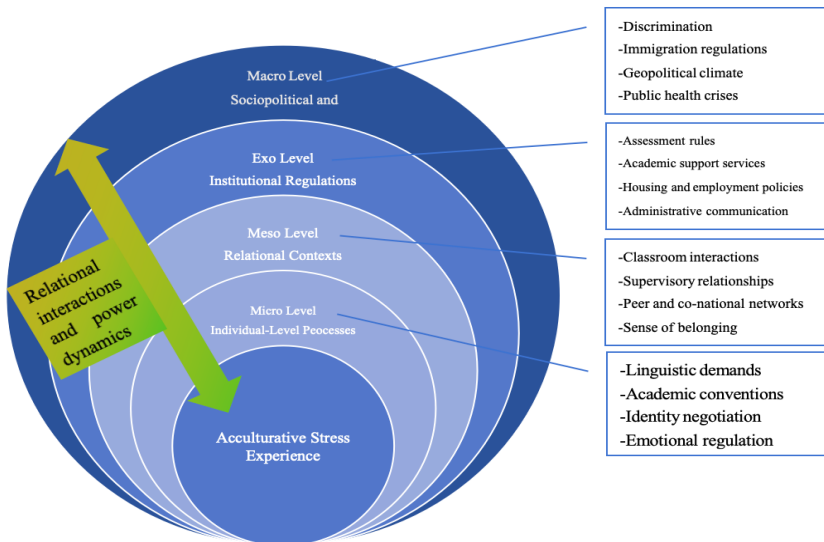


Figure 2: An Ecological-Relational Model of Acculturative Stress among CIS

DISCUSSION

Building on the ecological-relational framework developed in this review, acculturation experiences among CIS are understood as shaped through interacting individual, relational, institutional, and sociopolitical conditions. Rather than a linear process of individual adjustment, the synthesis conceptualizes acculturative stress as a structurally embedded and relationally produced phenomenon unfolding across contexts and stages of study. The following discussion foregrounds three key interpretive insights.

Acculturative Stress as Structurally Produced

A foundational insight emerging from this synthesis is that acculturative stressors identified across the reviewed studies are not best understood as isolated individual difficulties. Rather, it is produced through structural conditions within higher education systems and broader sociocultural environments.

For instance, linguistic challenges persist despite students meeting formal English proficiency thresholds. Participants reported difficulty following fast-paced lectures and unfamiliar accents (Cao et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2019; Heng, 2018). This gap signals a structural misalignment between standardized test preparation and the contextual, discipline-specific communicative demands of international higher education. Similarly, academic challenges often arise from differences in pedagogical traditions (Jiang & Xiao, 2024; Zhao et al, 2023), where implicit norms within host institutions remain unstated yet strongly shape participation and evaluation. Financial pressures and employment constraints further condition students' ability to engage fully in academic and social life, with consequences that extend beyond economic hardship to affect motivation, well-being, and long-term planning (Li & Pitkanen, 2018; Qi & Li, 2021).

Despite their significance, these structural dimensions remain underexplored. Factors such as visa regulations, labor restrictions, and racialized campus climates are rarely researched in depth. Addressing these gaps requires more intersectional and longitudinal approaches that situate acculturative experiences within broader institutional and sociopolitical contexts. Acculturative stress, in this regard, is not an individual response to challenge but a predictable outcome of institutional and policy environments.

The Relational and Multilevel Dynamics of Acculturative Stress

A central contribution of this synthesis is the recognition that acculturative stress operates as a relational and cumulative process across ecological levels. Rather than functioning as discrete challenges, different pressures interact dynamically, producing compounding effects on students' acculturation experiences and well-being.

Difficulties in one domain frequently generate consequences in others. For example, challenges in communication can constrain classroom participation, which in turn undermines confidence and limits opportunities for social

engagement. Academic struggles may reduce students' sense of competence, further restricting participation and reinforcing isolation. At the same time, financial constraints can limit access to academic resources and social opportunities, intensifying both academic and psychological strain. Environmental unfamiliarity and perceived exclusion further amplify these dynamics.

These interconnections contribute to what several studies describe as a downward spiral of distress (Zhao et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024), in which challenges reinforce one another over time. From an ecological-relational perspective, such patterns demonstrate that acculturative stress is not a series of independent problems but a system of interrelated pressures coproduced through interactions between individuals, relationships, and institutional environments.

Reframing Responsibility: From Individual Deficit to Institutional Accountability

Taken together, the findings challenge deficit-oriented interpretations that position CIS as lacking the skills or adaptability required for successful acculturation. Instead, acculturative stress emerges as a relational outcome of mismatched expectations, unequal power relations, and uneven access to institutional support.

Some studies indicate that CIS may experience positive outcomes, including enhanced academic skills, greater self-reliance, and improved emotional coping (Cheng et al., 2019; Yang & Bai, 2020). However, these advantages are not consistently experienced across the population. Such benefits appear to depend heavily on students' access to supportive faculty or peer relationships, institutional resources, and meaningful engagement opportunities (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2018; Heng, 2018). Moreover, the limited prevalence of host-national friendships underscores persistent structural barriers to deep intercultural integration, suggesting that opportunities for social and cultural engagement remain unevenly distributed (Zhang et al., 2024).

This perspective shifts the focus from individual adaptation toward the institutional conditions that shape acculturation processes. Host universities are not neutral contexts but active participants in structuring student experiences through pedagogical practices, support systems, and implicit cultural norms. However, these institutional roles often remain underexplored, resulting in a disproportionate expectation that international students bear the burden of adjustment (Gyasi-Gyamerah et al., 2024).

Reframing acculturation in this way underscores the need to move beyond individualistic models and toward approaches that recognize how support, inclusion, and participation are structurally organized and unevenly accessible. Acculturation, therefore, is better understood as an ongoing negotiation shaped by power, context, and relational dynamics, rather than a unidirectional process of student adaptation.

Implications

The synthesis suggests that acculturation among CIS is better understood as a relational and structurally shaped process rather than as an individual adjustment task. This has implications for how higher education institutions design teaching practices, support systems, and policy responses.

At the pedagogical level, the persistence of linguistic and academic stress points to the limits of the existing language supports. Instead of focusing narrowly on proficiency, institutions should make academic discourse norms, assessment criteria, and expectations for classroom interaction more explicit and culturally transparent. Embedding such guidance within courses, rather than locating it solely in optional support services, may reduce uncertainty and enable more equitable participation.

Institutionally, the findings highlight the costs of fragmented support structures that require students to independently navigate academic, administrative, and welfare systems. A coordinated and cross-unit approach to international student support may help prevent prolonged distress, for instance, a handbook of acculturative stress coping strategies and support services for CIS.

At the policy level, the review underscores that visa regulations, employment restrictions, and housing conditions are not irrelevant to education but materially shape students' academic performance. Institutions should align policies and practices with these factors, collaborating with national and regional authorities where possible to mitigate structural barriers.

For future research, longitudinal and intersectional qualitative studies that trace how acculturative stress unfolds over time and across contexts are needed. Greater attention to institutional and policy-level dynamics, alongside individual experiences, would further advance the understanding of how acculturation processes are sustained or transformed within higher education.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, only English-language studies were included. While this approach ensured consistency in data extraction, it potentially excluded valuable insights from other languages. Future research could incorporate multilingual evidence to capture a fuller cultural picture. Second, while the review foregrounded relational, institutional, and structural stressors, less emphasis was placed on students' internal sense-making processes, such as identity negotiation and emotional regulation. Integrating these into further research would deepen the theoretical understanding. Third, the geographic concentration of studies in Western contexts limits the transferability of findings to other higher education contexts. To enhance global relevance, future research should include more diverse regions, including Asia, the Middle East, and other underrepresented regions. Finally, the review included studies published between 2014 and 2024, excluding work from 2025 onward. This temporal limitation may omit emerging trends or recent policy and institutional developments that could influence acculturative experiences.

Despite these limitations, the review offers an analytically grounded synthesis of qualitative evidence that identifies recurring patterns and mechanisms shaping Chinese international students' acculturation. The findings are therefore intended to be conceptually informative rather than universally generalizable.

CONCLUSION

This SLR synthesizes a decade of qualitative evidence on CIS acculturation, highlighting both resilience and vulnerability. While some students experience personal growth, greater independence, and intercultural awareness, many confront significant acculturative stress that undermines academic success and well-being, linked to persistent stressors across linguistic, academic, social, financial, and environmental domains. Importantly, these stressors often co-occur and reinforce one another.

The synthesis indicates that such challenges are not simply the result of individual limitations but are produced through structural and cultural misalignments between students' prior experiences and the largely implicit expectations of host institutions. Conceptualizing acculturation as a relational and contextually situated process shifts attention away from deficit-oriented accounts and toward the institutional and sociopolitical conditions that shape international students' experiences.

By integrating qualitative evidence through an ecological-relational lens, this review advances the understanding of acculturation as an ongoing process of negotiation embedded within higher education systems. The findings highlight the need for institutional practices that promote mutual engagement, clarify academic and cultural expectations, and provide coordinated academic and emotional support. Future research and policy can build on this synthesis to develop more equitable and sustainable approaches to international education.

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- Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
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- Entire work, with extensive editing*

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APPENDIX A:

COMPLETE BOOLEAN SEARCH STRINGS FOR EACH DATABASE

Academic Search Elite

TX (acculturation OR "cultural differences" OR "psychological adjustment" OR adaptation OR "acculturative stress") AND ("Chinese international students" OR "Chinese college students" OR "Chinese overseas students")

JSTOR

((("Chinese international students" OR "Chinese overseas students"))
AND
("acculturation" OR "cultural differences" OR "psychological adjustment" OR "acculturative stress" OR adaptation))

MEDLINE Complete

TX (("Chinese international students" OR "Chinese overseas students" OR "Chinese college students" OR "Chinese students") AND (acculturation OR "cultural differences" OR "psychological adjustment" OR "acculturative stress"))

Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection

TX (("Chinese international students" OR "Chinese overseas students" OR "Chinese college students" OR "Chinese students") AND (acculturation OR "cultural differences" OR "psychological adjustment" OR "acculturative stress"))

Scopus

TITLE-ABS-KEY("acculturation" OR "cultural differences" OR "psychological adjustment" OR "acculturative stress") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("Chinese international students" OR "Chinese college students" OR "Chinese overseas students")

Web of Science (Core Collection)

TS=("acculturation" OR "cultural differences" OR "psychological adjustment" OR "cultural adaptation" OR "adaptation" OR "acculturative stress") AND TS=("Chinese international students" OR "Chinese students" OR "Chinese college students" OR "Chinese overseas students")

Note. Filters applied across all databases: peer-reviewed journals only; English language; publication years 2014–2024.

Appendix B: SUMMARY OF STUDIES INCLUDED IN THE SLR

No	Author Details	Aims	Location	Participation Sample	Sampling and Data Collection	Data Analysis Methodology	Acculturation Experiences	Stressors
1	Bertram et al. (2014)	Exploring the acculturation phenomena associated with the support systems of CIS sojourning.	US	8 under□ graduate CIS	Criterion sampling Interviews	Consensual qualitative research	-Encountered various problems -Enhanced quality of education	-Language difficulties -Cultural differences -Losing social support -Financial concerns
2	Bilotserkovets et al. (2020)	Indicating the multifaceted problems in the intercultural adaptation experience of CIS in Ukraine.	Ukraine	148 CIS	Interviews Observation	Thematic analysis	-Problems from physiological, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and academic aspects. -Positive interaction with faculty.	-Communication problems -Peculiarities of the environment
3	Cao et al. (2018)	Exploring CIS coping strategies and social support resources toward academic stressors.	Belgium	18 CIS	Criterion sampling Interviews	Consensual qualitative research	Negative experience toward academic integration.	-Competency -Learning style -Resources -Communication

4	Chen and Yang (2015)	Exploring the nature and effectiveness of online social support for intercultural adaptation of CIS.	Singapore	21 CIS	Purposive sampling Documents Interviews	Directed qualitative content analysis Conventional content analysis	U-curve	-Uncertainty -Losing social support from China -Academic problems
5	Cheng et al. (2019)	Identifying emotional stressors experienced by CIS and the emotion regulation strategies that they employed.	UK	33 postgraduate CIS	Purposive sampling -Interviews	Thematic analysis	Negative experiences with stress, but can be minimized with strategies.	-Interactions with lecturers -Interactions with peers -Language barriers
6	Dai and Hardy (2021)	Exploring the micropolitics of cultural change through a doctoral CIS learning journey.	Australia	1 doctoral CIS	Purposive sampling Reflective journaling	Narrative analysis	-Familiarity and uncertainty -Hope and despair -In-betweenness	-Academic cultures and challenges -Supervision uncertainty -Identity reshape
7	Heng (2018)	Investigating strategies undergraduates CIS used to cope with challenges	US	18 undergraduate CIS	Purposive sampling Interviews Journaling	Directed qualitative content analysis	Not as passive as believed.	-Language and communication -Cultural thinking -Classroom adaptation -Freedom and balance

		they faced in U.S. colleges.						-Making local friends
8	Jiang and Xiao (2024)	Exploring CIS's acculturative stressors and their perspectives on intercultural mentoring in UK.	UK	12 CIS	Snowball & purposive sampling Interviews Drawings	Thematic analysis	Cultural differences and homesickness are not main stressors.	-Academic integration -Language barriers -Social integration -COVID-19 pandemic
9	Le and McKay (2018)	Examining Chinese and Vietnamese students' learning experiences and underlying reasons.	Australia	35 CIS	Purposive sampling Interviews Focus groups	Thematic analysis	-More vocal -Less satisfied -Mismatch with expectation	-Discrepant expectations in teaching and learning -Language difficulties -Social networks
10	Li and Pitkanen (2018)	Examining the integration experiences of CIS in Finland.	Finland	30 CIS	Network & snowball sampling Interviews	Thematic content analysis	Including academic, economic, social and cultural integration	-Academic stressors -Economic stressors -Social stressors -Cultural stressors
11	Lu et al. (2018)	Describing graduate CIS coping strategies with adjustment challenges and their subjective appraisal of adjustment.	US	9 graduate CIS	Purposeful & snowball sampling Interviews	Consensual qualitative research method	Experience cultural adjustment challenges in multiple areas.	-Social difficulties -Academic difficulties -Daily living difficulties -Employment difficulties -Financial difficulties

12	Qi and Li (2021)	Examining tourism CIS perceptions of difficulties that experienced during their studies.	New Zealand, Australia, UK, US	22 doctoral CIS	Snowballing sampling Interviews	Constructivist grounded theory		-Academic pressure -Financial pressure -Psychological pressure -Other difficulties
13	Yang and Bai (2020)	Examining strategies that CIS employed to psychologically adjust to their PhD study.	Australia	6 doctoral CIS	Purposeful sampling Interviews	Grounded theory	Negative emotions throughout the doctoral journey.	-Supervision problems -Academic issues -Psychological problems
14	Zhang et al. (2024)	Understanding Chinese postgraduate taught students' transitional experience.	UK	34 postgraduate CIS	Purposive & snowballing sampling Interviews Photo-elicitation and diagrammatic-elicitation	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	From motivations, academic experience, social experience, linguistic experience and psychological experience aspects.	-Language barrier -Academic difficulties -Critical thinking -Social network
15	Zhao et al. (2023)	Exploring threats to the emotional wellbeing of CIS studying in Australia.	Australia	19 CIS	Purposive sampling Interviews	Grounded theory approach	Negative mental health indicators can reciprocally affect on another.	-Language barriers -Shifts in pedagogy -Changes in lifestyle -Safety issues -Social isolation

16	Zhou et al. (2017)	Exploring the roles of leisure participation in helping graduate CIS cope with acculturative stress.	US	15 first-year CIS	Purposeful sampling Interviews	Grounded theory approach	Experienced distinctive acculturative stressors.	-Academic stress -Career stress -Communication & Socialization stress -Safety stress
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