

Navigating Identity and Risk: The Experiences of STEM and Non-STEM Chinese International Students in the U.S. During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This study examines the experiences of Chinese international students in the United States during the COVID-19 era, focusing on the risk factors they encountered and how these factors may have impacted them differently by field of study. Using community cultural wealth as a conceptual framework, this qualitative case study involved interviews with nine Chinese international students across different academic fields. The analysis reveals that, influenced by the pandemic and related policies, Chinese students in different programs develop distinct self-identities when confronted with risks such as academic barriers, psychological challenges, health threats, and racial bias. Students majoring in social sciences and those in STEM fields undergo similar processes of questioning, reconstructing, and reinforcing their self-identity. However, social science majors are more sensitive to changes in their study and living environments, prompting them to engage in this process immediately. In contrast, STEM students, initially less aware of policy changes and self-identity issues, begin to reconstruct their self-identity only after recognizing these gaps. These findings highlight the complex dynamics of sensitivity and resilience within the Chinese international student community during the pandemic, underscoring the need for tailored support for this group, especially in times of crisis. This study suggests that U.S. higher education institutions should offer more diverse support for the large Chinese student population, ensuring that students from various academic backgrounds have the resources to adapt effectively.

Keywords: Chinese international student; Self-identity; STEM; Community cultural wealth; COVID-19

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the United States has become the country of choice for an increasing number of international students, predominantly from China (Bound et al., 2021). Recent data indicate that Chinese students constitute the largest cohort of international students in the U.S., with more than 280,000 enrolled in 2022-2023 (IIE, 2023). Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Asian international students have had to overcome the numerous inconveniences caused by the pandemic while also having to deal with the mental stress caused by the impact of anti-Asian hate crimes and frequent policy changes targeting international students. As one of the most ignored and vulnerable communities in the United States, the situation for Asian students has become increasingly difficult (Lee & Rice, 2007).

It is well-documented that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian international students and Asian Americans (Lipura, 2021). According to Ghazarian et al. (2023), to the students from Europe, those from Asian countries felt less welcomed in the U.S. in the context of anti-Asian disclosure during the pandemic. However, another critical question of how the Chinese international students survived this pandemic remains understudied. Several social work-related studies refer to Asian international students as a relatively marginalized group in U.S. society that has suffered both physically and mentally during the pandemic (Firang, 2020). For instance, Ma and Zhan (2022) explore the dual challenges of stigma and geopolitical tension faced by Chinese students in the U.S. during the pandemic, focusing on mask-wearing as a social and cultural conflict. They highlight the role of stigmatization shaped by power dynamics and the subsequent alienation felt by these students, drawing on stigma theory to frame these experiences. An Asian female student was attacked on the Philadelphia subway simply because of racial hatred (Alvarado & Alonso, 2021). Similarly, Koo, Yao, and Gong (2021) analyze

international students' experiences of racism during COVID-19 through the lens of neo-racism, emphasizing their challenges with social isolation, discrimination, and feeling unwelcome. They argue that these experiences highlight persistent structural racism within higher education and society at large. According to Yao's (2021) and Yu's (2021) studies, structural marginalization existed long before the outbreak, as systemic US-China rivalry has reshaped Chinese students into geopolitical subjects under the "New Cold War" paradigm since 2017, and the outbreak accelerated these tensions through cross-government targeted visa restrictions. Nevertheless, research that takes the perspective of individual Asian international students is still lacking. Due to the vastly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, Asian international students are marginalized in society and on campus. This situation makes life for international students from Asia even more difficult in the context of increased monolingualism, xenophobia, and racism due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the changes in international student mobility brought about by the pandemic cannot be ignored (Mok, et al., 2021), particularly the "China Crisis" in US higher education (Altbach, 2019) exacerbated by pandemic-era policies weaponizing student mobility (Yu, 2021). Peters et al. (2020) use collective autoethnography to document the coping strategies of international students at a Chinese university amidst pandemic disruptions, emphasizing the psychological, social, and academic adjustments required under lockdowns and online learning.

According to an Institute of International Education survey, approximately 90% of U.S. higher education institutions would experience significant decreases in international student enrollment in the 2020-2021 academic year (Martel, 2020). This enrollment collapse was acutely felt in US-China academic mobility: 87 institutions reported Chinese students stranded due to

travel bans, though these represented less than 0.4% of total enrollments, while 43% of universities faced recruitment delays from suspended English testing in China (IIE, 2021).

The systemic decline paralleled localized crises. For instance, a rural university found 73% of its international students grappling with financial precarity and 59% reporting mental health deterioration amid severed peer interactions in virtual learning (Martirosyan et al., 2022). The impact of the pandemic, combined with changes in the social environment and policies, has also affected international students' future career trajectories. Although it is widely accepted and to some extent understood that the surge in the number of anti-Asian hate crimes has impacted the lives and studies of Asian international students, only a few recent studies have addressed the difficulties encountered by Asian international students living in the United States as most ignored and vulnerable group/community during the pandemic (McGarity-Palmer et al., 2024). Jin and Wang (2022) investigate the “double stigmatization” of Chinese international students during COVID-19, revealing the identity shifts caused by stigmatization in both their host and home countries. Their study concludes that these shifts often led to a reevaluation of values, with students gravitating towards individualism over traditional Chinese collectivist ideals. Even fewer have explored Chinese international students, who make up the largest portion of this group.

This research examines how the disciplinary context influences the self-identity development of Chinese international students during the pandemic, an area that has been less explored in studies in this field. While existing literature primarily investigates broad social, cultural, and psychological impacts—such as the stigmatization of mask-wearing, the persistence of structural racism, coping strategies during disruptions, and the effects of “double stigmatization” on transnational identity shifts—this research focuses on disciplinary differences

to uncover nuanced insights into how specific academic environments and cultural wealth shape resilience and identity. Furthermore, by integrating the concept of leveraging cultural assets to foster institutional inclusivity, this research moves beyond documenting challenges to propose actionable strategies for supporting marginalized students in crisis, thereby contributing theoretical and practical value. Our research bridges the gap between broad discussions on Chinese international students' experiences and the specific risks and developmental processes faced by students in distinct academic programs.

The purpose of this study is to understand how Chinese students “survived” the many challenges they faced, and to explore the potential risk factors that Chinese students in different programs faced in higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether these risk factors affected them differently. This study also addresses the developmental motivations and processes regarding the self-identity of Chinese international students in different programs. An understanding of the above-mentioned issues will also have a positive impact on improving the higher education environment as well as the study life of Chinese international students.

Literature Review

This section presents some of the existing research on the problems faced by international students in the COVID-19 pandemic setting. The studies related to this issue are categorized into two main directions. The first direction is the problem of monolingualism and cultural differences that Chinese international students always face. The second direction is the psychological problems commonly faced by international students in a COVID-19 pandemic environment.

Challenges Faced by Chinese International Students

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Problems faced by international students do not only come from the pandemic; many researchers have been focusing on the stresses faced by international students before the pandemic began, and the influencing factors include but are not limited to: psychological problems of international students, academic pressures, and racial bias. Hyun's (2019) study showed that international students face more non-academic challenges, such as time management, mental stress, and loneliness. In the context of Presidential Proclamation 10043 (2020), students with ties to Chinese military-linked universities were prohibited to obtain F or J visas. More than 1,000 Chinese graduate students have been denied visas, and many are stranded in China under multiple stressors (Raja et al., 2023). Based on Hyun's (2019) study, the targeted institutions established more academically centered relationships and interacted with fellow students, faculty, and staff to overcome academic difficulties. Unlike undergraduates, graduate students face compounded stressors from prolonged academic timelines and heightened scrutiny under policies conflating academic work with national security. Chinese graduate students in the U.S. represent a significant group, particularly in STEM fields, where geopolitical tensions have disproportionately targeted their visa statuses and research activities (Nam et al., 2023)

As defined by Rise et al. (2010), self-identity includes salient and enduring aspects of personal self-perception and is a dynamic process through which individuals form and understand themselves (Marginson, 2014). It changes in response to changes in the internal and external environment. For Chinese international students, the transformation of self-identity is an important part of their overseas experience. This process becomes more difficult during special periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought about more layers of cultural and social isolation. These gaps in identity highlight the importance of understanding self-identity.

The impact of language differences on international students has also attracted a lot of attention from scholars. Wolf and Phung (2019) revealed many challenges faced by Chinese international students in the U.S., including language, academic, and social environments, and also suggested ways to improve these situations, such as higher education institutions should provide better ESL and academic support services; faculty members should rationalize the curriculum; professors, faculty and staff should be and local students should be more friendly and patient. However, the current approach to education in the higher education system mostly separates the single language used by international students in the classroom from their native language in such a way that it does not support them in obtaining the resources they need to succeed adequately (Gallo & Hornberger, 2019). At the same time, such a teaching and learning environment inadvertently reinforces the existence of monolingualism in higher education institutions in the U.S. Galloway and Jenkins (2009) used stratified regression analyses to analyze changes in student problems by breaking them down into demographic and English language components. Their study showed that English language issues were the most important single determinant of problems faced by international students, followed by marital status and the level of influence of the country of origin. Higher education institutions widely recognize that effective enrollment practices encompass not only recruitment but also assessment, support, and follow-up processes (Lippi-Green, 2011). However, developing a comprehensive approach to support non-native English speakers (NNES) in academia requires the collaboration of multiple departments, each bringing unique expertise and responsibilities. Despite ongoing efforts, this remains a complex and resource-intensive process (Snow Andrade et al., 2014).

In recent years, due to the continued increase in the number of Chinese students, this group has become the largest percentage of international students at U.S. institutions of higher

education. Scholars have also begun to pay attention to the issues faced by Chinese international students. Ching et al. (2017) proposed the concept of cultural distance, which provides an explanation for the culture shock that Chinese international students may experience when they are exposed to the mainstream U.S. culture, as well as detailing the culture shock, stress, and anxiety that Chinese international students may experience.

Impact of COVID-19 on International Students

There is a growing amount of research examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority students. For example, McGee et al. (2021) conducted a study with 486 minority STEM doctoral students, finding that 54% of respondents reported being significantly impacted by the pandemic. Many of these students reconsidered their place in STEM fields as a result, with some even contemplating changes to their career plans.

Research also suggests that international students faced unique challenges during the pandemic. Firang (2020), in a study based on telephone interviews with five international students, found that the social environment during COVID-19 heightened their anxiety levels. The sources of this anxiety included (1) emotional distress, (2) a diminished sense of self-worth, (3) a loss of interpersonal relationships, and (4) negative impacts on academic performance. Emotional distress was particularly severe, stemming from difficulties such as being unable to travel home or secure living expenses due to delays in international remittances. Furthermore, the isolation caused by COVID-19 disrupted interpersonal connections, making it more challenging for international students to manage stress and release emotions (Firang, 2020).

Some graduate students reported being labeled as “virus carriers” in academic settings, and many minimized these incidents to avoid conflict (França et al., 2024). Between March 19 and May 15, 2020, the Stop Asian American Hate Reporting Center, a website developed by

Asian American organizations, received nearly 1,900 reports of coronavirus-related discrimination against Asian Americans (Ren & Feagin, 2021). Gover et al. (2020) observed that deep-rooted societal racism and xenophobia against Asian Americans often resurface through prejudiced attitudes and behaviors at the individual level, which can be reinforced institutionally during times of crisis. For instance, former U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated use of the term "Chinese Virus" fueled a surge in anti-Asian sentiment (Reja, 2021; Lim, Lee, & Kim, 2023), leading some to rationalize hostility toward Chinese people and Asians more broadly. This rhetoric contributed to the marginalization of Asians in the U.S., where they were wrongly and maliciously perceived as undeserving of equal rights and social standing. Such sentiments create an environment in which Asians are more vulnerable to racial attacks and even hate crimes (Gover et al., 2020).

Wei and Bunjun (2021) further argue that the rise of anti-Asian—particularly anti-Chinese—sentiment in the media and daily life has deepened feelings of loneliness and isolation among many international students. Mok et al. (2021) conducted a survey with 2,739 students from Mainland China and Hong Kong regarding their plans for overseas study during the COVID-19 crisis. Their findings revealed that 84% of respondents expressed a lack of interest in studying abroad after the outbreak. Factors such as the rapid spread of COVID-19, the introduction of restrictive policies toward international students, and the increase in hate crimes against racial minorities have significantly reduced international student mobility and willingness to study in the United States. Among those who still intend to study abroad, many Chinese students now favor Asian regions—especially Japan and South Korea—over the United States and the United Kingdom (Mok et al., 2021).

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Several studies have highlighted how Chinese students studying in the United States experience a transformation of their self-identity when dealing with cultural differences. In Zhao's (2020) study, students initially sought a sense of assimilation, but eventually developed a stronger sense of Chinese national pride through interactions on American campuses. Yan and Berlin (2013) emphasized that common stressors such as cultural isolation and financial pressures often caused students to reaffirm their connection to Chinese cultural values. Fang and Fine (2020) explore how students' choice of English and Chinese names reflects their evolving identity, as many initially adopt an English name but later revert to a Chinese name to express a distinct cultural pride. Together, these studies reveal the complex and determined identity development process typically experienced by Chinese students.

However, the dramatic increase in cultural and social pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to even more complex shifts in self-identity. Ma & Miller's (2021) research shows that many students face the anxiety of being "tied in two places" – torn between the expectations of their families, who want them to return to China after their studies, and their own desire to stay in the US – which amplifies their sense of isolation and internal conflict. Ma & Zhan (2022) found that during the pandemic, contrary to policies implemented in China, wearing a mask in the United States was stigmatized, and wearing a mask became a symbol of cultural tension. Chinese international students were torn between effective self-protection and avoiding discrimination, which also intensified their sense of isolation. Koo, Yao, and Gong (2023) observed that openly expressed racism and discrimination increased Chinese students' awareness of their ethnic identity and reinforced the feeling that being "Chinese" was not welcomed. These studies suggest that in crisis situations, students need to cope with conflicting cultural expectations and social stigmas, and the internal struggles related to identity are thus

exacerbated, which is in sharp contrast to the relatively certain identity they experienced before the crisis.

Recent Trends in Research on Chinese International Students

Emerging scholarship in U.S. higher education demonstrates a twofold shift: theoretically, towards culturally based frameworks such as Chinese discourse studies that decentralize Western epistemologies and prioritize decolonizing analyses of racialization and identity struggles (Yu, 2023). Substantively, recent scholarship has shifted from examining individual-level challenges such as language barriers and culture shock experienced by Chinese students to critiquing systemic anti-Asian racism (Huang et al., 2023), particularly how institutions perpetuate Sinophobia through policies that place academic activities in the middle of geopolitical conflict (Nam et al., 2023). This shifting focus emphasizes the urgency of addressing structural inequalities and implementing culturally informed solutions.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses the community cultural wealth (CCW) as the main conceptual framework to explore the experiences of Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it examines how the pandemic has impacted these students' personal and academic lives across different programs, as well as how these experiences have influenced their self-identity and plans in the post-pandemic era (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023).

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework highlights six forms of cultural capital that students of color bring to educational spaces—aspirations, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. Unlike deficit-based perspectives, CCW emphasizes the strengths, talents, and resources that are embedded in students' cultural and community experiences. These forms of capital enable students to overcome barriers, leverage their networks, and thrive in the

face of systemic challenges, providing an important lens through which to understand and value the diverse contributions of marginalized communities in educational settings. CCW provides a framework for understanding how Chinese international students in the U.S. navigated the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This concept recognizes that marginalized communities, such as Chinese international students, possess valuable cultural knowledge, skills, and networks that help them resist and adapt to forms of oppression (Yosso, 2005). Often, dominant social groups attempt to impose a ‘common language’ or mainstream cultural norms, which may diminish or even suppress the voices, identities, and cultural wealth of minority communities (Liu et al., 2011). This process can lead to marginalized groups feeling isolated, especially in academic and social contexts, where they may struggle to be heard or recognized.

However, increased public awareness and institutional support that validate the cultural values of minority groups can enhance students’ sense of belonging and foster diversity within society. For Chinese international students, especially during a period of heightened racial discrimination, the resilience and resourcefulness embedded within their cultural backgrounds offer vital support as they cope with academic, social, and psychological challenges. Efforts from community members, language program instructors, and other allies can amplify these students’ voices and preserve their cultural heritage, contributing to greater societal diversity and inclusivity (Liu et al., 2011; Li, 2022).

By using a CCW perspective, educators and institutions can recognize the value in fostering cultural and linguistic diversity, which helps mitigate ideological and sociopolitical conflicts that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students may experience. Understanding and promoting these assets can empower Chinese international students to thrive in the face of

adversity and support them in developing a stronger sense of self-identity and community (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso, 2005).

The community cultural wealth (CCW) does more than highlight the assets of minority students; it also positions these resources as forms of resistance against structures that marginalize and silence them (Yosso, 2005). As Chinese international students in the U.S. face academic, psychological, and social challenges amplified by the pandemic, they actively draw upon their CCW as a counter-response to these obstacles. For instance, when confronted with racial discrimination and the feeling of being excluded from mainstream culture, students might rely on *resistant capital*—the strength to push back against exclusionary practices. This aspect of CCW helps Chinese students preserve their cultural identity and community ties, even in the face of xenophobic policies and societal biases (Li, 2022). Therefore, CCW allows these students not only to cope but also to assert and maintain their identity and resilience against marginalizing forces. By viewing CCW as a form of active resistance, this study seeks to illuminate how Chinese students adapt and assert their cultural wealth as a protective mechanism during the pandemic, which can be essential to fostering resilience within marginalized student groups (Liu et al., 2011).

Chinese international students experienced different challenges during the pandemic, such as racial prejudice, health risks, and disruption of academic and social environments. These experiences varied by discipline, influenced students' responses, and shaped the way they constructed and reconstructed their self-identities. For example, social science majors may be more actively engaged in social and cultural issues, utilize resilience capital to confront discrimination, and reflect on their identities in academic settings abroad. In contrast, STEM students may initially focus more on utilizing navigational capital to overcome academic

disruptions, gradually developing self-awareness and identity reconstruction as they adapt to policy changes and social challenges (Li, 2022; Liu et al., 2011)

Research Question

This framework helps to address the central research question: What factors influenced the different responses and self-identity development of Chinese international students from different disciplines in response to environmental and policy changes during the COVID-19 pandemic?

By analyzing the different ways in which these students capitalized on the cultural wealth of their communities, this study aims to shed light on the role of disciplines in shaping the resilience and self-identity development of marginalized groups. Additionally, understanding these responses can guide institutions to create more inclusive support systems that recognize and leverage students' existing cultural assets to foster a more responsive and supportive academic environment in times of crisis.

Methodology

Study Design and Research Approach

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach to explore the experiences of Chinese international students in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative approach aligns with the goal of this study, which is to provide insight into how a complex, context-specific phenomenon unfolds in a marginalized group (Chinese graduate students). The case study retains the participant's life transitions, which is precisely in line with our need to compare the academic/social environments of the pre-pandemic and the mid-pandemic through the detailed narratives of the participants.

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The research design is centered around semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth examination of personal experiences and perceptions, specifically within the framework of community cultural wealth. This framework guided the exploration of how students from diverse academic fields respond to various challenges. To be included in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. International graduate students from China who were pursuing degree programs in the United States at the time of the interviews.
2. Represent STEM or non-STEM academic fields.
3. include representatives of different genders to ensure a well-rounded perspective.

These criteria were developed to facilitate exploration of differences in experience across academic fields, genders, and personal backgrounds. Students were asked to have lived in the United States before and during the pandemic to conduct a comparative study of changes in their academic and social environments. Graduate students typically have longer learning cycles compared to undergraduates, as their programs demand more time for completion on average, and their academic trajectories provide a critical longitudinal perspective for analyzing pre- and mid-pandemic transitions (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Also, their dual roles as both students and institutional employees are structurally situated in a way that reveals institutional tensions during the pandemic (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2023).

Sampling and Recruitment

The sampling strategy used purposive sampling to achieve the goal of capturing the diverse experiences of Chinese international students as comprehensively as possible. I recruited through informal networks, targeting the group of Chinese international students enrolled in public universities located in the southern and western regions of the United States. This focus

on public universities in these regions allowed for the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives shaped by the unique cultural, social, and institutional characteristics of these areas Prior to formal interviews, I conducted initial pre-interviews to determine which participants were willing to discuss potentially sensitive topics such as identity, discrimination, and adjustment challenges.

The final sample consisted of nine students with diverse academic and personal backgrounds, as shown in Table 1. Each participant had a unique intersection of gender, academic field, and time spent in the U.S. before and during the outbreak, allowing for a more diverse perspective on the issues facing this group. In this paper, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their privacy. These pseudonyms were drawn from *the hundred family Surnames*, rather than random English names. Choosing surnames from *the hundred family Surnames* not only enhanced the cultural relevance of this research, but also better represented the identity of the Chinese international student community. This approach reflects the importance of the community's cultural wealth in research and provides a more authentic perspective on the Chinese student experience. By using culturally meaningful pseudonyms, we aimed to respect and highlight the unique cultural characteristics of this group and make the research perspective more consistent with the life experiences of these students.

Table 1. Interviewees by Pseudonyms

Interviewees	Gender	Major	Field	Years in Program	Years in the U.S.
Zhao	F	Chemical Engineering	STEM	2 nd Year PhD	1.5
Qian	M	Computer Science	STEM	3 rd Year PhD	8
Sun	F	Education	Non-STEM	4 th Year PhD	4.5
Li	M	Computer Science	STEM	4 th Year PhD	6.5

Zhou	M	Computer Science	STEM	4 th Year PhD	4
Wu	M	Education	Non-STEM	4 th Year PhD	5.5
Zheng	F	Computer Science	STEM	4 th Year PhD	5.5
Wang	F	Education	Non-STEM	4 th Year PhD	5
Feng	F	Community Resource and Development	Non-STEM	3 rd Year PhD	3.5

For the purposes of this study, the STEM/non-STEM distinction was operationalized using participants' self-reported academic majors, which were then classified according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's STEM Designated Degree Program List. Fields such as chemical engineering and computer science were coded as STEM, while disciplines including education and community resource and development were coded as non-STEM. This categorization was applied consistently during coding and thematic analysis to identify potential differences in experiences, identity development, and the use of cultural capital between the two groups. Coding memos explicitly flagged participant excerpts with their STEM or non-STEM designation, allowing for side-by-side comparison of emerging themes across disciplinary lines.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews via Zoom, with each session lasting approximately 35 minutes. Interviews were primarily conducted in Mandarin Chinese to ensure participants' comfort and clear expression of thoughts. The interview protocol was adapted to capture a broad range of experiences related to the pandemic, focusing on themes such as self-identity reconstruction, academic and psychological challenges, health concerns, and racial bias. A total of nine interviews were conducted. Eight of these interviews were carried out before May 11, 2023, marking the end of the Federal COVID-19 Public Health Emergency as announced by the CDC (2023), and the ninth was interviewed after this date. The interview

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consisted of four main sections: 1) Background Information: Interviewees identified their academic background, including basic information such as major and years of attendance. This section sets the stage for understanding their unique backgrounds in different academic fields. 2) Pandemic-related challenges: Respondents were asked about the academic barriers they encountered during the pandemic and the psychological impact these barriers had on them, particularly how factors related to the respondent's field of study influenced their experiences and coping mechanisms. 3) Self-identity and resilience: This section explored how respondents' self-identity evolved in response to the challenges of the pandemic, examining shifts in their self-perceptions and future plans. Questions addressed how students rebuilt their identities in the face of systemic challenges, racial bias, and acculturation in the U.S. environment. 4) Reflections on support systems: Respondents shared insights into the institutional and community support they received or lacked, and offered suggestions on how universities can better meet the unique needs of international students, especially during COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

To enhance trustworthiness in data collection, this study prioritized linguistic and cultural consistency by conducting interviews in participants' native Mandarin. This approach ensured authentic expression while our deliberate pseudonym selection from the Hundred Family Surnames preserved cultural authenticity throughout the research process. Transparency of cultural positioning was achieved by explicitly documenting the background of participants (Chinese international students pursuing degrees in U.S. education institutions), which influenced the interpretation framework.

This study ensured reliability through standardized procedures: all interviews followed the same protocol and were kept to a fixed length as much as possible, and interviewers followed consistent Mandarin expressions when confronted with questions from different participants.

This operational consistency minimized variability while capturing comparable experiences across participants.

Data Analysis

The community of Chinese students in the United States consists of individuals from diverse educational backgrounds, including undergraduate, graduate, and exchange students, attending public and private universities, community colleges, and other institutions of higher education. This diverse group forms an integral part of the U.S. academic community and the broader Chinese American community.

In analyzing the experiences of Chinese students, this study uses the concept of “community cultural wealth” to understand how cultural assets support students in addressing academic and social challenges. For Chinese students, these cultural assets include traditional culture, traditional language, values and knowledge, as well as connections and networks within the Chinese community. These resources provide the foundation for academic and professional support, resilience, and success. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis was adopted in this study. The coding process involved: (1) organizing transcripts in Excel with code-tracking columns; (2) line-by-line open coding identifying data units; and (3) developing emergent codes with Yosso’s CCW framework through constant comparison. The analysis process began with converting the interview recordings into written transcripts in Chinese, ensuring accuracy in capturing participants’ expressions and meanings. Following transcription, the data was analyzed manually by reviewing the transcripts in detail and identifying themes aligned with the six types of cultural wealth described in Yosso’s CCW framework: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. Rather than employing formal coding techniques, the analysis was guided by these predefined aspects of CCW. Each transcript was reviewed to identify

examples and narratives that demonstrated how participants utilized specific forms of cultural wealth to navigate their academic and social environments.

The use of traditional language and values was categorized as linguistic capital and familial capital, while reliance on Chinese community networks was identified as social capital. Themes such as resilience in the face of racial prejudice were associated with resistance capital. This approach helped to provide a fuller picture of how Chinese students drew on cultural assets during the pandemic and provided insight into their strategies for overcoming challenges and achieving success. By incorporating CCW into the analysis, the study highlighted the dynamic and multifaceted ways in which these cultural resources contributed to students' academic and social resilience.

Aspirational capital, as defined within the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, refers to the ability to maintain hope and dreams for the future despite barriers or challenges. For Chinese international students, this capital plays a critical role in navigating the academic, social, and cultural challenges of life in the United States during the pandemic. The data shows varied ways in which students leveraged or struggled with aspirational capital in response to their circumstances. Some students demonstrated aspirational capital by reconfiguring their goals to adapt to a less supportive environment while maintaining a sense of agency. For example, Li acknowledged the racial bias and social challenges as:

I felt that I didn't need to punish myself for other people's biases and mistakes... my identity as a Chinese international student would not change. But if the policies and environment remain unfriendly, I may consider changing my career plan.

This response highlights their resilience and determination to flexibly adjust future plans to adapt to the changing social environment while maintaining their self-identity. This reflects the dynamic nature of aspirational capital, which combines resilience with practical adjustment.

On the other hand, some students exhibited a lack of aspirational capital due to the overwhelming challenges they faced.

... life has changed so much since the pandemic, and I have been under a lot of pressure in all aspects. As an international student, I didn't feel supported by the school at all, and the social environment was becoming less and less friendly to us. I used to want to stay here and work, but now I don't. Mostly, I feel a bit desperate for this life, and I feel like I'm getting less and less integrated here. Probably I will leave after graduation. (Qian)

Before the outbreak, when people asked me where I was from, I would say China. But after the outbreak, in the face of increasing prejudice, I would be a little afraid to tell people that I am from China... My mom hopes me returning to China after study, I will consider this suggestion seriously. (Sun)

Qian and Sun's statements illustrate how external barriers, such as the perceived lack of support and an increasingly unfriendly social environment, can erode aspirational capital. Their response also demonstrates the tension between external pressure and cultural resilience. This lack of hope directly impacts their self-identity and career trajectory. Although Sun does not fully quit their aspirations, their growing hesitation and consideration of returning to China suggest that aspirational capital is being challenged by the realities of racial bias and discrimination.

In addition to personal statements, a recurring theme among all interviewees was their struggle to maintain hope in the face of increasingly hostile living conditions, while still fearing policy changes and increased racial discrimination. Interviewees often mentioned the internal conflict of preserving their cultural identity while adapting to a society that often marginalizes them. This struggle reflects the use and erosion of aspirational capital, with the degree of suffering depending on the individual's ability to adapt and their support system.

I would worry a lot about being discriminated against because I was a Chinese international student or because I wore a mask... But if the policies and environment remain unfriendly, I may consider changing my career plan. (Li)

Despite these challenges, several participants, like Li, found ways to maintain hope by reframing their aspirations, considering systemic barriers. This adaptive use of aspirational capital underscores the capacity of Chinese international students to balance resilience with critical awareness, reshaping their self-identity as they navigate a biased environment.

By analyzing the data through the lens of aspirational capital, it becomes evident that students' ability to persist and adapt is not uniform. Some leveraged their cultural resilience to remain hopeful and motivated, while others experienced an erosion of aspirational capital due to external pressures. These dual dynamic highlights the complexity of self-identity development for Chinese international students in the U.S. during the pandemic.”

Linguistic capital is used to describe the different language resources available to a person and the value associated with each (Yosso, 2005). For Chinese international students in the United States, their linguistic capital may include their proficiency in both Chinese and English. This can be a great asset for these students as it allows them to interact with other members of the Chinese international student community and native English speakers and use this as a basis for accessing additional resources. In addition, proficiency in English can be significant for Chinese international students, as it is the dominant language of higher education in the United States and is often required for academic success.

I don't think English proficiency will affect my academic capacity. I basically live in a predominantly Chinese environment. I don't need to use a lot of English in my current life, and it isn't urgent for me to improve my English level. (Zhao)

...if English is not good enough, how can we conduct academic research? Accurate expression is a very important thing in the academic field. (Li)

All but one of the interviewees indicated that English proficiency had an impact on academics, especially in the expression of academic-related activities, like Wu mentioned that social science subjects may have higher requirements for English proficiency.

Chinese students' linguistic capital in the United States is a double-edged sword. While proficiency in English and Chinese allows these students to stay close to Chinese-speaking communities, it can also limit their integration into English-speaking environments and lead to feelings of isolation. The statement, "I don't have any native English-speaking friends so far" reflects what Zhao describes as the phenomenon of "living in an America without Americans" highlights the psychological and social challenges they face as a result of limited communication with native English speakers. In addition, the importance placed on English proficiency varies across subject areas. Many non-STEM majors consider English proficiency to be critical for academic success and effective communication, while international students in China and scholars more predominantly in STEM majors report a less urgent need to improve their English proficiency. This contrast highlights the fact that the value of linguistic capital can be influenced by disciplinary and social contexts. This dynamic reveals internal conflicts within monolingual ideologies in which English is viewed as the dominant language, often at the expense of students' heritage language and cultural traditions. For example, fellow STEM students Zhou and Zhao, as well as Zheng, pointed out that given that English is the official language of the United States, it is more important than other languages. In contrast, interviewees in non-STEM programs, where the number of Chinese students is relatively small, would argue that enhancing linguistic diversity is a necessary concern for institutions of higher education. They suggest that environments allowing for a range of languages would help international students better integrate into U.S. society, fostering a sense of inclusivity where all languages are valued equally.

Whenever I speak English, people can tell that I'm an international student. Sometimes I worry that I'll be discriminated against because of my poor English, so I just keep quiet...Everyone tells me that the most important thing to do to improve my English, is to stop thinking in Chinese and think as a native speaker. It's hard, cause I am a Chinese. (Zhou)

I have been trying to improve my English and change my mindset to be more like the locals, as I feel that this may be the easiest way to integrate. I think speaking English more fluently may allow me to avoid some implicit discrimination. However, many people may have already assumed that I must be a foreigner with poor English skills just by looking at my Asian face before they even talk to me. This makes me feel quite confused, do they react in the same way when they speak to Asian Americans? (Wu)

Zhou, Wu and Sun all mentioned their confusion about self-identity in interviews. These linguistic experiences have uniquely shaped the students' self-identities. For some, limited English proficiency can reinforce a sense of "otherness" or marginalization, challenging their confidence and sense of belonging. For others, improved English proficiency can make them feel integrated into American society, protect them from discrimination, but also distance them from traditional Chinese culture, adding a layer of complexity to their evolving self-identities.

Familial and social capital refers to the social and personal resources available to students in their pre-college environment, usually from family, community networks, and peer relationships (Yosso, 2005). For most Chinese students studying in the United States, these resources are limited because they usually do not have family members or established social relationships. This lack of family and peer support can hinder their ability to independently cope with daily life and academic challenges. This challenge is further reinforced by the cultural tendency of Chinese students to "report the good news, not the bad." As interviewees mentioned,

I get nervous when I see news about the "Chinese virus" or hate crimes against Asians, afraid that it might happen to me. But every time I talk to my mom on the phone and she asks me about it I tell her that it's just a small chance and it doesn't happen often. Even though I say that I know that there's actually a lot of bias around me, just maybe not as extreme as what's reported in the news. (Sun)

NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND RISK

I can't tell my parents all my worries and unhappiness, they'd be more nervous than I am and probably feel guilty for not being able to help me. I shouldn't say this, but sometimes I wonder whether I would have fewer problems if I weren't a Chinese international student and my family in China wouldn't have been so worried about me getting hurt.
(Wu)

They are so far away from me. There are a lot of things that even if I tell my parents, there's nothing they can do to help me. But if I were a local, I would probably share my unhappiness with my family. (Qian)

Although these Chinese students minimized their concerns in order to comfort their parents, most of them are still sensitive to the racial bias around them, a reality that impacted their sense of safety and sense of belonging. And this situation ultimately leaves students feeling isolated, with fewer outlets for emotional support or guidance. These descriptions illustrate how the lack of family and social capital, coupled with cultural norms that discourage the sharing of negative experiences, leaves Chinese students largely on their own to cope with their challenges. Without established support networks, they must rely on their own resilience to cope with the emotional toll of adjusting to life in the U.S., while also confronting social biases and a lack of institutional support.

At the same time, in the absence of familial support, many Chinese students seek solace by connecting with Chinese peers with similar backgrounds and experiences. These peer networks provide another form of social capital, offering students a space where they can openly discuss the challenges they face without fear of causing concern among their families. For example, Chinese peers can provide emotional support, share coping strategies, and even offer practical advice on how to deal with the challenges of studying and living in the United States. Such informal peer support networks can help reduce feelings of isolation and provide an important source of resilience to help Chinese students navigate the stresses of a less inclusive environment. Just like Feng said:

The emotional support from my friends is still necessary. The community of Chinese students is quite large, and the support we get from each other makes me feel less lonely and strengthens my sense of identity.

Cultural norms that hide difficulties contribute to a complex process of self-identity reconstruction. Chinese students may become more self-reliant without family support, while also struggling with feelings of loneliness that challenge their sense of identity. The presence of peers in the same situation eases the loneliness of Chinese students, helping them to reshape their perception of themselves and strengthen their identity as “Chinese students abroad.” The need to adapt to the social environment forces these students to reconcile Chinese cultural values with the reality of independent life in the United States.

When one is part of a community that actively challenges inequality and oppression, one develops **resilience capital** (Yosso, 2005). In the interviews, the interviewees all individually expressed their views on this. Zhao argued, “*Why should our universities or society pay more attention to the Asian community? I don’t think it’s necessary, and am I part of the Asian community?*” Zhou argued, “*I’m just an international student, so I shouldn’t be considered part of the Asian community.*” Wang said, “*There are so many labels attached to Asians that I’m even a little bit confused as to what my real self-identity is. Asian? Chinese? Minority?*” On the contrary, both Sun, Li and Feng emphasized that Chinese students should unite like black students and others, fight against injustice, do not give up their own characteristics and cultural backgrounds, emphasize their own self-identity, and let the mainstream campus life see the value of Chinese students. For Chinese international students, the resilience capital often comes from a sense of unity and collective identity, especially in the face of difficulties. Li pointed out: “*This is very interesting. The Chinese seem to be particularly good at uniting together to face difficulties in adversity. Before the pandemic, I basically never considered my identity, except*

when applying for school and visas.” This reflects how experiencing difficulties in adversity, especially during the pandemic, has deepened the connection between Chinese students and strengthened their resilience. Adversity has prompted them to reflect on their cultural identity, which may not have been a prominent part of their identity before these challenges. By uniting with their peers to face common difficulties, these students have not only consolidated their sense of collective identity, but also cultivated a stronger sense of self-identity rooted in resilience. This sense of unity has become a source of resilience capital, enabling them to support each other emotionally and adapt to the unique pressures of living and studying in a foreign country.

Findings

This section presents the findings from interviews with Chinese international students, focusing on how they draw on various forms of cultural capital to navigate their academic and social experiences in the United States. Based on Yosso’s (2005) *Community Cultural Wealth* (CCW) framework, this analysis explores how students’ self-identity development, resilience, and adaptation strategies are influenced by factors such as policy changes, social expectations, and academic pressures. Examining these factors through the lens of CCW, we can observe significant differences in the experiences and challenges faced by STEM and non-STEM students. STEM students often encounter external factors that affect their self-identity, while the identity development of non-STEM students is often more driven by internal factors, rooted in personal reflection and social awareness. This difference highlights the complex interplay between types of cultural capital (including *aspirations*, *resilience* and *navigational capital*) in the context of students needing to face the reality of living and studying abroad alone and as a “marginalized group”. The table and analysis below document these different experiences and

reveal how the CCW framework can help students gain a nuanced understanding of the self-identity and development process.

Table 2. Self-identity Development Process

Aspect	STEM Majors	Non-STEM Majors
Primary Trigger for Self-Identity Development	External	Internal
Nature of Identity Reflection	Occasional and passive, prompted by interactions or experiences from others	Continuous and proactive, influenced by regular academic and personal reflection of identity
Living Environment Influence	Predominantly Chinese environment, leading to a cultural “bubble” and less spontaneous reflection on identity	Mixed environment that encourages exploration of identity as part of academic and social life
Psychological Impact of Triggers	Unexpectedly confronted with identity issues, and finding it uncomfortable or challenging to deal with social justice issues	Gradual self-awareness, potentially leading to increased sensitivity to social justice issues
Sense of Community and Belonging	Strong connection to Chinese peer group as a protective, prefer to stay in familiar space	Broader approach to community, seeking inclusion within both Chinese and non-Chinese communities

Discuss how different sources of identity (external and internal) reflect students’ abilities to adapt and maintain aspirations. Using the *CCW framework*, which emphasizes different forms of cultural capital that support underrepresented communities, we can better understand these diverse influences on self-identification. STEM students can begin to reflect on their self-identity due to a number of external starting points. These external factors include conversations or interactions similar to participating in an interview, as well as very clear incidents of discrimination, which strongly motivate students to think about their identity in ways they have not before. Living in an environment dominated by Chinese students may create a cultural “bubble” for STEM students, who do not usually engage in identity-related self-reflection

frequently until they encounter the aforementioned external challenges. This reactive response to identity development is consistent with the CCW's concept of *navigational capital*, as these students rely on adaptive strategies to cope with moments of identity confrontation in a hostile social environment.

In contrast, non-STEM students developed their identity through *internal triggers*, driven primarily by the academic curriculum and personal reflection. Due to the differences in majors, non-STEM studies are generally more critical and reflective, often involving discussions about culture, society, and identity. This environment encourages students to constantly think about concepts related to self-identity as part of their academic and personal growth. Such an academic environment also facilitates their exploration of identity within the broader social context. This proactive, internal process embodies elements of *resistance capital* and *aspirational capital*, as non-STEM students not only develop self-identity that incorporates their cultural heritage, but also aspire to engage with and reshape their identity in response to a more diverse social environment. As a result, they are more likely to view identity formation as an ongoing, continuous process.

As the CCW framework highlights, other influences also accentuate the differences in these groups' self-identity development. STEM students, who often live in predominantly Chinese environments, tend to rely on *social capital* through social networks of Chinese classmates, seeking support and a sense of belonging within familiar cultural groups. This reliance on in-groups reinforces a sense of protection from external challenges and discrimination. For non-STEM students, on the other hand, frequent self-reflection and critical cultural discussions can heighten their sensitivity to *social justice issues* and promote broader social connections. These students actively strive to build a more inclusive community identity

that includes both Chinese and non-Chinese students, thereby fostering a more holistic sense of belonging.

Table 2 explores factors that influence Chinese international students' self-identity development and sense of community belonging. Building on this foundation, this section discusses the challenges that STEM and non-STEM students face during their studies. While identity development and community connections shaped students' personal growth, other factors such as policy impacts, cultural adjustment, language barriers, academic expectations, and mental health also played a key role in their daily experiences and overall well-being. Table 2 summarizes these life, emotional, and academic challenges, highlighting the different pressures each group faces in America. By comparing these experiences, we can gain a deeper understanding of how STEM and non-STEM students respond to external demands in their academic, social, and cultural environments.

Table 3 Key Practical, Emotional, and Academic Challenges

Challenges	STEM Majors	Non-STEM Majors
Policy Changes	Directly affects visas, employment prospects and career trajectory; focuses on navigating complex policies and securing future opportunities	Very sensitive to policy changes, which are often perceived as a reflection of social justice issues that have a broader impact on international students
Cultural Adaptation	Adapt to cultural expectations in academic and professional environments in the United States; over-reliance on technical and professional language to the neglect of the cultural context around them	Requires in-depth cultural adaptation and understanding of different perspectives; requires constant reflection on cultural values and social norms
Language and Communication Barriers	Communication challenges are mainly related to professional and academic environments; academic	Broader communication challenges, including critical discussion, language of social justice, and engaging in multicultural discourse

	terminology and presentation skills are required	
Academic Pressures and Expectations	There is a lot of pressure to perform well in academic subjects; academic achievement is often linked to future career aspirations and visa status	The curriculum involves a high participation level, critical thinking and reflection on unfamiliar cultures. Since much of the content focuses on identity and cultural values, it requires more emotional and cognitive engagement
Mental Health and Stress Management	Mainly from academic performance, career development and visa-related pressures; mental health is often neglected	Academic stress, cultural adjustment, and sensitivity to social justice are sources of stress; increased need for emotional resilience and coping strategies

Table 3 highlights the practical, emotional and academic challenges faced by STEM and non-STEM students, as well as their different needs. STEM students face a unique set of challenges that are largely centered on external factors, such as responding to complex policy requirements, meeting high expectations for academic performance and learning the academic language in a predominantly Chinese academic environment. These pressures drive a very pragmatic approach to adjustment, with career development and visa access often taking a higher priority than cultural integration. In contrast, non-STEM students face a more diverse set of challenges when navigating high expectations, including deeper cultural adaptation, bridging communication across different social contexts, and effectively engaging with discussions of social justice issues that require them to reflect on their own cultural values. The range of challenges faced by non-STEM students often requires a higher degree of emotional resilience as they navigate culturally centered academic content and seek a more inclusive sense of belonging within the American cultural environment. These distinct adaptation challenges highlight how STEM and non-STEM students develop unique response strategies based on their academic focus and priorities. For STEM students, the need to adapt is primarily external, and these students tend to develop career-oriented and practical responses to policy changes that directly

impact their career trajectories. In contrast, non-STEM students face a broader range of adaptation challenges, including not only practical issues but also emotional and socially oriented concerns. Policy changes, while not always directly related to their career trajectory, can lead to increased sensitivity to the social context of their experiences. For this group of students, adaptation strategies involve ongoing engagement with social and cultural contexts. These findings highlight the importance of a tailored support system that not only addresses the practical needs of STEM students, but also the emotional and social adaptation issues faced by non-STEM students.

In summary, the findings illustrate how the adjustment and self-identity development of Chinese international students can differ significantly based on academic focus, reflecting the unique pressures each group faces living in the United States. Together, these findings reveal that academic discipline not only influences students' actual adjustment strategies, but also deeply shapes their identity and ability to adapt in a cross-cultural environment.

Discussion

This study revealed the factors influencing the development of Chinese international students' self-identity and adaptive responses in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic across different disciplines. The experiences of racism and discrimination encountered by Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a profound impact on their self-identity, influencing how they perceive themselves within the broader social and academic landscape in the United States. As incidents of anti-Asian sentiment and xenophobia surged, many students reported feeling a heightened sense of "otherness," which underscored their status as outsiders and intensified feelings of vulnerability. This external pressure not only affected their sense of belonging but also led to complex internal conflicts regarding cultural identity. For

some, the challenges of navigating an unwelcoming environment resulted in an increased desire to assimilate, distancing themselves from their heritage in the hope of blending into American society. Others, however, found resilience by reaffirming their cultural roots, using their heritage as a source of pride and solidarity among peers facing similar challenges. The findings suggest that students' academic fields significantly influence their adaptation strategies and self-identity processes, with STEM and non-STEM students exhibiting distinct patterns in terms of their ability to adapt, cultural adjustment, and identity reflection. These findings are consistent with previous research that Chinese international students' adaptation processes under the CCW framework are influenced by external pressures and personal identity needs (Lewthwaite, 1996; Yan & Berliner, 2011).

The findings also highlight gaps in the existing literature regarding the specific experiences of Chinese international students in a unique context, particularly in terms of adaptation ability under special social contexts, and thus provide new insights for the application of the CCW framework. The different adaptation strategies observed among STEM and non-STEM students suggest that academic discipline plays a key role in coping with cultural and policy challenges. These divergent responses reflect a process of identity negotiation, where students balance the need for acceptance with a desire to maintain cultural authenticity. Within the framework of Community Cultural Wealth, this process highlights students' use of navigational and resistant capital as they adaptively navigate a hostile environment and resist discriminatory pressures through the reinforcement of their cultural identity. The discipline-based differences observed in the study may be applicable to other international student populations facing different academic expectations and cultural adaptation pressures, which suggests a broader significance for understanding cross-cultural adaptation in different

educational contexts. This study recognizes that STEM and non-STEM international students face unique challenges and pressures and that higher education institutions can support STEM international students by providing career-oriented resources, guidance on visa and immigration policies, and technical communication training. For non-STEM international students, universities can provide more targeted resources for mental health, opportunities for cultural reflection, and platforms for discussing social justice issues, which can help these students address identity challenges in the broader social context. Implementing such support systems can create a more inclusive and responsive campus environment that recognizes the unique experiences of marginalized international student groups.

These findings also suggest practical implications for institutional practices aimed at reducing racialized risk experiences for both STEM and non-STEM students. For STEM populations, whose adaptation processes are often shaped by external triggers such as visa policies, career pressures, and discrete incidents of discrimination, institutions could prioritize timely guidance on immigration policies, career development opportunities that do not exacerbate vulnerability to racial bias, and targeted communication training that addresses the intersection of technical expertise and cross-cultural competence. For non-STEM students, who experience identity development through continuous internal reflection and are more sensitive to social justice concerns, universities could create structured opportunities for critical dialogue on race and equity, increase access to mental health services that acknowledge racialized stressors, and design mentorship programs that bridge diverse cultural and academic communities. Across both groups, proactive institutional acknowledgment of racialized risks (paired with visible anti-discrimination policies and culturally responsive support services) can help students navigate challenges without eroding their sense of belonging or self-identity.

Due to the small sample size of only nine participants, all of whom were Chinese students studying at the doctoral level, the findings cannot be generalized to the full Chinese international student population. The study also focused on Chinese students attending U.S. institutions during a specific global crisis, so the generalizability of the findings may be limited. Recruiting respondents was difficult due to the sensitive nature of the topic, and some Chinese students declined to participate due to concerns about being asked personal questions or exposing themselves to risks related to discussing self-identification, discrimination, and policy challenges. In addition, the authors' status as Chinese international students themselves may have introduced some implicit bias. While this shared identity helped establish connections with participants, it may have also influenced the interpretation of the data, as the authors may have unknowingly projected personal experiences onto participants' narratives. To minimize this bias, the authors used reflective methods, but future research may benefit from a more diverse research team.

Another limitation is that there is little literature that specifically explores the experiences of Chinese international students during the pandemic, and the lack of prior research made it difficult to place the findings within existing frameworks. This study contributes to filling this gap by providing preliminary insights, but further research is needed to more fully understand the factors that influence Chinese students' adjustment and identity development. Given these limitations, future research could explore larger and more diverse samples to assess whether the observed discipline-based differences hold in different institutional and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into the adjustment, resilience, and self-identity development of Chinese international students in different disciplines. These findings highlight

the need for nuanced, discipline-specific support for marginalized international students like Chinese international students in the post-pandemic era to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. By addressing the unique challenges of STEM and non-STEM students, higher education institutions in the United States can create the space for international students to be able to adapt to cultural differences, identify their own identities, and succeed academically. This study lays the foundation for further exploration of the experiences of Chinese international students, especially during a time of global upheaval, and calls for continued efforts to support marginalized students in higher education.

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