

Navigating the Great Wall of Learning: A Scoping Review of Challenges and Institutional Support for International Students in Chinese Universities (2005–2025)

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Abstract

This scoping review systematically charts the literature (2005–2025) regarding the difficulties international students experience at Chinese universities and the institutional responses developed that deal with this type of issue. According to the Arksey and O’Malley (2005) model, the research utilised peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and policy papers. Results highlight a tripartite of barriers: Academic and Pedagogical Barriers, including language needs and foreign teaching strategies; Sociocultural and Psychological Challenges, like culture shock, isolation, and mental health strain; Administrative and Logistical Hurdles, like visa and accommodation challenges. Universities have moved from basic orientation to the development of a more holistic support ecosystem in response. Strategies documented in literature include preparatory language courses, peer and faculty mentorship, curricular internationalisation and dedicated international student offices. The review, however, has also identified key research gaps, including a deficiency of longitudinal studies on the impact of interventions, a lack of focus on the diversity of international students, and a lack of participatory and student-centred research. The paper finds, from this, that Chinese higher education systems will never fulfil their global ambitions unless a paradigm is shifted from a deficit model to one reflecting a strengths-based and inclusive ecosystem.

Keywords: *International Students, China, Higher Education, Challenges, Institutional Support, Scoping Review, Academic Integration, Educational Policy*

1. Introduction

Global student mobility has reshaped the world of higher education, and China is a leading global player. Once a small recipient, China has deliberately risen to be the world's leading destination for international students in Asia and one of the top globally, with more than half a million international students coming this way each year (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The impressive growth is driven along by integrated national policies such as the “Study in China” initiative, significant inflow of resources for university rankings and English-Medium Instruction (EMI) initiatives (Li & Tu, 2020). So far, this influx is not only a diplomatic and economic triumph, but a major pedagogical and organisational enterprise on behalf of Chinese universities, who are now charged with unifying a heterogeneous student population into a unique academic and cultural framework.

A rare combination of challenges beyond what you see as study-abroad adjustment for international students in China. However, while language barriers and culture shock are

problems encountered across the globe, they are felt more acutely within the confines of China's quickly modernising but profoundly traditional society, its politicised educational system, and its linguistically complicated atmosphere (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). For graduates and undergraduates in general, these difficulties emerge academically in terms of dealing with teacher-centric pedagogies, high-stakes exams and research culture norms; socially and practically, through the labyrinth of bureaucracy and the digital ecology of WeChat for the everyday life (Yu & Moskal, 2019). The net result may be a decrease in academic performance, psychological well-being, and satisfaction to an overall extent that contributes towards retention and reputational damage over time toward Chinese institutions.

In view of these challenges, Chinese HEIs have adopted a range of support mechanisms. These range from compulsory language classes and airport pick-up to more-complex cultural acclimation workshops, peer mentorship initiatives and international student societies (Huang, 2021). However, the effectiveness, dissemination and the theoretical base of these interventions are still not completely robust and the study under investigation. The existing studies have focused mainly on one institution, one sub-national group or a particular problem in isolation without giving a consolidated picture of the collective knowledge the last 20 years. Thus, the current research seeks to give a structured, exhaustive map for this emerging paradigm. Building upon a scoping review approach, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the main academic, sociocultural and administrative problems faced by international students in Chinese higher education institutions between 2005 and 2025?
2. What institutional strategies and interventions have been documented in the literature to respond to these challenges?
3. What gaps do we currently possess in our understanding of what experiences for international students look like and what are effective supports in China?

Through compiling the body of evidence from 2005 until present, this review will reveal the development of problems and solutions, and will provide useful data for those at universities, student advocates and scholars who wish to improve access to international education at all levels (both on a macro societal and micro level: academia and on campus) in China.

2. Methods

The scoping review method was selected for this research, based on the framework presented by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and later refined by Levac et al. (2010). Scoping reviews are ideal for mapping essential concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in a diverse literature, as well as for identifying features of this exploratory analysis of a complex, cross-disciplinary research area (Munn et al., 2018). Identifying the Research Question. Some research questions outlined in the introduction were broader in scope and covered the range of challenges and interventions that can be encountered, and therefore it was not necessary to decide if one intervention was more effective than another, since the systematic review is more suitable for exploring a comprehensive overview of systematic review.

A systematic search was conducted in the five top-level electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), PsycINFO, and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), to include English and Chinese academic literature. The search window was extended from January 2005 to December 2024, and forward citation searching was conducted to identify key 2025 publications in press. The search strings used combined terms such as: (1) Population: “international student” OR “foreign student” OR “overseas student”; (2) Context: “China” OR “Chinese universities”; (3) Concepts: “challenge” OR “difficult” OR “adjustment” OR “experience” AND “support” OR “intervention” OR “service” OR “policy.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) were also used. Study Selection. Inclusion Criteria were: (a) empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) or systematic reviews; (b) studies that address international student populations of China's international students, undergraduate and postgraduate students at mainland Chinese HEIs; (c) clearly discuss challenges and/or institutional support structures; (d) published in English or Chinese.

Exclusion criteria were that there can be no opinion articles and no data, studies that were only on student mobility policy or the Chinese students' mobility policy and not with experiential data only, and studies which did not include Chinese students from abroad. The lead researcher screened titles and abstracts, while a second screening (20% random sample) achieved an inter-rater reliability of 94%. A full-text review procedure was performed for all potentially eligible studies. Charting the Data. Using Excel, a standardised data-charting form was created to extract key information from each study: author(s), year, publication type, research aims, methodology, sample characteristics, major findings related to challenges, and major findings associated with interventions/support. Collating, Summarising and Reporting the Results. The data extracted were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive methodology was first employed to ascertain common themes concerning issues and interventions. Such themes were then refined and arranged as subheadings, including them in a narrative framework that is presented as follows. The reporting adheres to the PRISMA-ScR checklist (Tricco et al., 2018) for transparency.

3. Results

Following a systematic search and screening, a total of 78 studies were selected for final inclusion. The articles obtained were mostly studies from empirical journals (n=52), with the rest from doctoral dissertations (n=18) and book chapters (n=8). From a spatial perspective, studies involved various universities including C9 League top scholars and provincial universities in various regions in China.

3.1. Thematic Analysis of Challenges

The identified challenges were synthesised into three overarching, interrelated themes.

3.1.1 Academic and pedagogical issues

This category had been the most documented. One of the key, almost universal problems is language ability.

The challenge of academic Chinese of Chinese-Medium Instruction (CMI) programmes is huge with learners struggling to understand lectures, textbooks, and engaging in seminars (Wang & Li, 2021). Students on some local faculty in the EMI programs report challenges relating to the English proficiency of local faculty and a scarcity of technical vocabulary (Wu, 2018). Pedagogical differences, in addition to language, create significant friction. International students, for example, would find it extremely difficult to pass the teacher-centred knowledge-transfer model the predominant form of education, which can only breed more frustration (Jin, 2022). They have often felt frustrated at no group work, and no critical feedback for critical thought, group tasks or process of learning based on information gained from the students (Jin, 2022).

The emphasis of rote memorisation for performance in high-stakes exams—especially at undergraduate level—stands in stark contrast to educational backgrounds that place great stress on ongoing assessment and analysis (Smith & Zhou, 2019). Research culture and supervision pose special challenges for postgraduates. In particular, students state difficulties related to hierarchical student-supervisor relationships, creating independent ideas for the research, and adapting to differing research methodologies (Li & Wang, 2020) and writing style conventions (Li & Wang, 2020).

3.1.2 Adapting to Sociocultural and Psychological Changes

Getting used to life in China has significant cultural separation and shock. There are also existing studies of challenges with daily norms, social etiquette, food and collective values versus individualistic values (Huang & Brown, 2016). One major sub-theme is social isolation and limited integration. Many international students speak of a sense of living in “bubbles,” with friendships limited to other internationals or co-nationals. Negative beliefs and challenges in developing authentic friendships with the Chinese among students stem from language barrier, perception of cultural distance and the absence of comprehensive opportunities for connection (Yu, 2017). Discrimination and stereotyping are reported, through micro-aggressions and curiosity to exclusion, typically associated with race or nationality (Ma & García, 2021). The combined pressures associated with these changes lead people to the experience of mental health problems like loneliness, anxiety, and depression and most of them are not willing to access (sometimes stigmatised) campus psychological services (Chen, 2023).

3.1.3. Administrative and Logistical Challenges

Students often face confusing, last-minute requirements for visa and residency permit renewals (Ding, 2020). Accommodation issues are widespread, with on-campus dormitories described as isolating from the wider campus community, and off-campus housing presenting legal and practical challenges. Access to information and digital integration is a modern challenge; navigating essential but complex Chinese apps (e.g., for payments, transportation, and course registration) without personalised guidance can lead to significant daily friction (Liu, 2022).

3.2. Thematic Analysis of Institutional Interventions

The literature outlines a variety of institutional responses and can be divided into four major strategic areas.

3.2.1. Academic and Language Support Programs

Almost all universities offer Chinese language courses (compulsory or optional), although the intensity and quality vary considerably. Academic bridging programs are gradually becoming more focused and academic-oriented, especially for CMI students, with a specific emphasis on discipline-specific language and academic skills (Zhang, 2021). Some institutions invest in faculty development for EMI, intercultural pedagogy, and teaching methodologies, such as training faculty members in interactive instruction and cross-cultural communication in the classroom (Zhao & Xu, 2020).

3.2.2. Orientation and Onboarding Services

The general standard model consists of a pre-semester general orientation, including registration, visas, and campus facilities. There is a growing trend towards a more comprehensive and staged approach to orientation extending into the first semester, ranging from cultural immersion to safety workshops and introductions to local community resources (Han, 2019).

3.2.3. Peer and Mentorship Networks

Peer buddy schemes that pair new international students with trained local or senior international students for informal, practical advice are considered highly valuable (Lee & Feng, 2022). Some universities have created more formal faculty advisor or mentorship structures for postgraduates to complement the primary supervisory relationship and to offer expanded academic and pastoral guidance.

3.2.4 Specialised Support Mechanisms and Social Engagement Programs

The creation of ISOs or other dedicated institutions is well and truly common. Yet their effectiveness derives largely from resources and intercultural competence among staff members (Wang, 2020). Universities sponsor community cultural exchange events (e.g., international cultural festivals), as well as helping student organisations and clubs and other organisations that foster integration in higher education. A few of these institutions have implemented integrated living-learning communities which cater for international and Chinese students and offer structured academic and social integration (Xie, 2023).

4. Discussion

This scoping review combines findings from two decades of studies that shed light on the persistence and the structural nature of the issues that international students face in China and the more dynamic and sometimes defensive context for institutional support. The research verifies that international students in China negotiate constantly with their

transition, not as a reflexive process of adjustment, in parallel with one lively albeit intense academic-cultural society.

4.1. Connected nature of Challenges

A critical observation is the inextricability between the issues. That means that academic language barriers directly contribute to social isolation socioculturally yet will also prevent smooth navigation of administration logistics logically. Such connections suggest that fragmented interventions a language class that ignores the pedagogical culture of schools, say, or a buddy program that is disconnected from academic support will often be ineffective. In order to give effective support, these synergies need to be recognised by an integrated and holistic approach.

4.2 Evolution from service-provision to ecosystem building.

An analysis of interventions suggests a tentative move from a service-provision model offering discrete services such as orientation and language classes towards an aspirational ecosystem model. The latter supports the creation of an all-inclusive campus environment achieved via curriculum internationalisation, faculty development, and meaningful intercultural contact (Leask, 2015). Although there is evidence of the ecosystem model, the literature maintains that the service-provision model prevails, and that international students are considered as a separate cohort with special needs, rather than as important agents in campus internationalisation.

4.3 Gaps in the Literature

The review also pinpointed several major shortcomings that need to be addressed in future research:

- Longitudinal and Outcome-Focused Studies: An important missing link is longitudinal investigations of the student experience and the long-term effects of interventions. Almost all studies are cross-sectional snapshots.
- Homogenisation of International Students: Research still tends to homogenise experiences by crucial variables such as region of origin, level of study discipline, or financial status (scholarship vs. self-funded).
- Neglect of Student Agency and Voice: There is a deficit perspective in the literature. Studies in the future should be conducted with the students by applying participatory methods, co-designing research with international students to gain insight into their agency, resilience, and desired forms of support.
- The Role of Digital Spaces: The pace of digitisation of Chinese campus life calls for careful analysis of how digital platforms act as constraints as well as facilitators of academic and social integration.

4.4. Theoretical Implications

The results are consistent with, and extend, a number of classic international student adaptation models. They emphasise the importance of models that more unequivocally consider the host institution's organisational culture and structure to be a dominant factor in the process of adaptation rather than regarding adaptation purely as an individual psychological process.

5. Conclusion

This scoping review offers an overview of challenges and support available to international students in Chinese higher education from 2005 to 2025. It reinforces that, despite ambitious attempts to open campuses for a rapidly expanding international population, many of these support systems contend with longstanding academic, cultural, and administrative disparities. Critical obstacles including academic-pedagogical dissonance, sociocultural isolation, and bureaucratic friction are systemic and intertwined. Institutional responses are more focused and, although they are broadening in scope, are often not transformative in nature; they are still segmented and operational. For this reason, the transformation from a host nation to a true global education leader who is inviting and inclusive requires a paradigm shift. Chinese universities are at a crossroads. The results of this analysis indicate that success in the future will not depend as much on extending additional services to the periphery as on reform of the core classroom pedagogy, the curriculum, the faculty mindset, and the campus culture to be intrinsically more inclusive and globally oriented. This is not simply a matter of welfare, but strategic necessity for the quality, the sustainability, and the global reputation of Chinese higher education.

6. Recommendations.

Based on the findings synthesised here, different stakeholders should be given the following recommendations: For University Administrators and Policymakers:

Instead of disparate services, establish cross-departmental task forces to develop coordinated support pathways from pre-arrival to alumni engagement. Universities should provide, access, and resource comprehensive training programs for faculty (CMI & EMI) in intercultural pedagogy, inclusive assessment, and supportive supervision practices. Furthermore, universities should set up frequent surveys that break data down by student nationality, level, and college to look at specific points of pain and to assess the effectiveness of interventions.

International student leadership should be invited into the designing, delivery, and assessment of orientation, mentorship, and cultural programs to keep them applicable and productive. Researchers should carry out multi-year longitudinal studies tracking cohorts of students and conduct comparative analyses across different types of Chinese universities (e.g., research-intensive vs. teaching-focused).

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