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A Decade Later: Cultural Capital, Institutional Responsiveness, and Chinese Students' Experiences in U.S. Education

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ABSTRACT

Chinese students have long pursued education in the United States at both secondary and postsecondary levels, yet questions remain regarding the adequacy of institutional support for their success. This study revisits a 2016 qualitative investigation of Chinese students in U.S. high schools and extends the examination through a 2025 case study of one Chinese undergraduate student. Drawing on cultural capital theory, the study examines how students' educational, familial, and linguistic resources intersect with the expectations and practices of U.S. educational institutions. Across the two periods, previously reported findings and contemporary student experiences reveal recurring challenges involving classroom participation, language, social belonging, and institutional support. Although students demonstrate considerable perseverance and adaptability, their experiences suggest that individual resilience does not necessarily reflect adequate institutional support. Rather, students continue to navigate educational environments in which their existing resources are not always fully recognized or supported. The study highlights the importance of moving beyond expectations of student adaptation toward more reciprocal and culturally responsive institutional practices.

Keywords: Chinese international students, cultural capital theory, institutional responsiveness, qualitative research, social belonging, U.S. education

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese international students represent one of the largest and fastest-growing populations in the U.S. education system and contribute significantly to the academic and cultural environments of both secondary and postsecondary institutions. Their attendance also benefits U.S. schools financially and supports institutional enrollment. As Ching et al. (2017) summarize, these benefits include financial contributions, an increased institutional profile among Chinese students, and opportunities for greater community involvement.

While these students often demonstrate strong academic preparation and achievement, research consistently documents the challenges they encounter in navigating U.S. educational environments (Liu, 2023; Ma, 2020; Myers et al., 2023; Stahl, 2016). These challenges include cultural adjustment, language barriers, classroom participation expectations, and social isolation, all of which can affect academic success, sense of belonging, and well-being. Although institutions have expanded support services for international students, many of these challenges persist (Liu, 2023; Ma, 2020; Yuan et al., 2023), suggesting that existing approaches may not fully address students' needs or recognize the resources they bring to their educational experiences.

Although research on Chinese international students has expanded, relatively little has centered on students' own voices and perspectives. As Cheung (2021) notes, "few of these studies originate from students who have lived through the experience of having left China to study abroad in the U.S. themselves" (p. 65). A closer examination of students' experiences is therefore needed to understand how they navigate U.S. educational settings and how institutions can better recognize and respond to their academic and social needs.

The present study builds on earlier research (Stahl, 2016) examining the experiences of 14 Chinese high school students and extends this work through a contemporary case study of one Chinese undergraduate student in 2025. Although the two samples differ in educational level and size, examining these distinct datasets offers an opportunity to consider continuities and differences in students' experiences across two time points. Of particular interest is the relationship between the substantial cultural, linguistic, familial, and academic capital students bring to U.S. educational settings and the extent to which institutions recognize and build upon these resources. Using a retrospective qualitative approach, this study examines patterns across an earlier secondary-school dataset and a contemporary higher education case study. By centering student perspectives, the research explores how students describe their academic and sociocultural adjustment, the challenges they encounter, and the institutional supports that shape their experiences. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of international student adjustment and inform more responsive institutional practices.

Research Question

How do Chinese students describe the relationship between the cultural capital they bring to U.S. educational settings and the institutional practices and supports that shape their academic and social adjustment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese Students Studying Abroad

Research on Chinese students studying in the United States has expanded significantly over the past two decades, with a substantial body of work examining student motivations, academic experiences, and adjustment challenges. However, much of this scholarship has focused on the college level, often prioritizing institutional perspectives over students lived experiences. This literature review builds on prior work (Stahl, 2016), which synthesized 165 studies across key thematic areas, by revisiting this work in light

of more recent scholarship and new empirical data. By integrating earlier findings with contemporary research and a more recent case study, this review examines both continuity and change in Chinese students' experiences. In doing so, it seeks not only to synthesize existing literature but also to identify continuing gaps between student expectations and educational realities, offering implications for more responsive and effective support structures. The literature is organized around three key themes: (1) push–pull motivations, (2) academic and cultural adjustment challenges, and (3) social integration.

Push–Pull Motivations

Research on Chinese students studying in the United States consistently identifies intertwined push–pull factors that shape their decision to pursue education abroad. Central among these is the perception that U.S. education provides greater access to higher education opportunities, particularly compared with the highly competitive and exam-driven Chinese system (Albrecht et al., 2012; Farrugia & Bhandari, 2013; Zhao et al., 2008). As noted in earlier work (Stahl, 2016), students and families often view U.S. institutions as both more accessible and of higher academic quality.

Beyond access, students are drawn by perceived differences between Chinese and American educational systems. Prior research emphasizes students' desire to develop skills such as critical thinking, communication, leadership, and problem-solving, which they associate with U.S. education and perceive as less emphasized in more rigid, exam-oriented environments (Chen, 2014; Henze & Zhu, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2006). These aspirations are often connected to students' longer-term goals, including global career opportunities and personal development.

Recent scholarship suggests that these motivations continue to shape students' decisions and experiences. In *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education*, Ma (2020) highlights the importance of academic opportunity alongside persistent uncertainty about outcomes, noting that students may be drawn to what they perceive as superior Western education while also experiencing anxiety about navigating unfamiliar academic and social norms. Similarly, Liu (2023) found that students seek to integrate perceived strengths of both educational systems, developing a global perspective while maintaining connections to future opportunities in China and the United States.

Structural pressures within China also influence decisions to study abroad. The Gaokao, a high-stakes national college entrance examination, remains an important factor for some students and families considering educational opportunities outside China. Family resources and access to social and cultural capital may also shape who is able to pursue education in the United States (Fischer, 2012; Foadi, 2006; Yang, 2007).

Although these push–pull factors help explain why Chinese students pursue education in the United States, they do not fully capture what happens once students arrive. The same features that make U.S. education appealing, such as greater independence, classroom participation, and flexibility, can also present challenges as students navigate unfamiliar educational and cultural expectations.

Academic and Cultural Adjustment Challenges

Prior research consistently identifies a set of academic and cultural challenges faced by Chinese students in the United States, suggesting that while access to educational opportunities may be expanded, students are not always adequately prepared to navigate them (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011; Wang, 2012). These challenges are typically framed across three overlapping domains: language proficiency, differences in educational expectations, and gaps in institutional support.

Language barriers remain among the most persistent and widely documented obstacles. Although many Chinese students begin studying English at an early age and demonstrate proficiency on the English portion of the Gaokao, research has long noted a disconnect between formal language preparation and the demands of everyday English communication once in the U.S. (Hegarty et al., 2014; Yeh & Inose, 2002; Stahl, 2016). More recent studies suggest that this gap continues to affect both their academic performance and social participation. For example, students often report that while they intend to improve their English

through interaction with American peers, social and cultural differences limit these opportunities, reinforcing a cycle of social isolation (Cheung, 2021). In some cases, institutional language supports are reported as insufficient, with students describing instruction as too basic or not helpful with the demands of conversational English and academic writing.

Beyond language, differences in educational systems and expectations contribute to adjustment difficulties. Chinese students frequently transition from highly structured, exam-oriented environments to U.S. classrooms that emphasize participation, critical thinking, and independent learning, which they are not accustomed to. While these differences are often cited as key motivations for studying abroad, they can also create initial academic uncertainty and stress. As Lee (2013) notes, language proficiency alone is insufficient; students must also adapt to new pedagogical norms and expectations in order to succeed academically. In U.S. schools, students are often graded on their participation in class, and they are usually ill equipped or not confident enough to do this, so their grades suffer.

These differences are also shaped by underlying cultural and philosophical traditions. Chinese education is often influenced by Confucian values emphasizing discipline, respect for authority, and the foundational role of memorization in learning (Neuby, 2012; Biggs, 1994). As a result, behaviors such as classroom silence—frequently interpreted in U.S. contexts as disengagement—may instead reflect culturally informed approaches to participation, including careful listening and concern about maintaining social harmony (Cheng, 2012; Liu, 2001). This challenges deficit-oriented interpretations of Chinese students' learning styles, as scholars argue it is increasingly outdated to position Western pedagogies as superior (Neuby, 2012).

A third, and often underexamined, dimension involves institutional support and educator preparedness. Research suggests that schools are not always equipped to meet the complex academic and cultural needs of international students. Studies of English Language Learners (ELLs) indicate that classroom teachers may lack clarity regarding their roles in supporting these students, limiting the effectiveness of instructional strategies (Yoon, 2008). Yoon also emphasized "positioning theory," which focused on how teachers' attitudes toward Chinese students can either support or limit opportunities for Chinese students in the classroom. Earlier work also highlights a tendency to prioritize linguistic support while overlooking broader sociocultural needs (Fitzgerald, 1995; Fu, 1995). Similarly, Yan and Berliner (2013) identify both personal and sociocultural stressors rooted in differing value systems and recommend more comprehensive support structures, including targeted orientation programs, academic support, and opportunities for social integration. Students also often need assistance with financial, immigration, and visa issues, which a dedicated Chinese student office would help.

Taken together, these findings suggest that adjustment challenges are not solely the result of individual student deficits but are also shaped by institutional factors. While Chinese students often arrive with strong academic foundations and high expectations, misalignment between prior preparation and the realities of U.S. schooling can create significant barriers to success. This underscores the importance of more holistic and responsive support systems that address not only language development but also cultural support and academic transition. These patterns provide an important context for understanding how students in the current study experienced and interpreted their own academic and social adjustment. While Chinese students often come to the United States with clear academic goals, research consistently shows that social integration presents a more complex and personal challenge.

Social Integration

Despite a strong desire to form connections with American peers, many students experience difficulty navigating social norms, cultural references, and informal communication patterns, which can limit their sense of belonging.

A key factor shaping these experiences is cultural capital. Cultural capital theory provides a useful lens for examining how students bring valuable resources that enable mobility while simultaneously encountering barriers in navigating unfamiliar social and institutional norms.

Chinese students frequently report feeling excluded from social interactions due to unfamiliarity with shared cultural knowledge, humor, and conversational styles. As a result, participation in social situations is not simply a matter of willingness, but of access to unspoken social cues that invite inclusion. Earlier findings (Stahl, 2016) suggest that students often interpret successful integration not as full assimilation, but as being acknowledged, included, and invited into social spaces by their American peers and teachers. They just wish to be invited into the conversation.

At the same time, research points to a process of both exclusion and self-segregation. In a review of Ma (2020), Liu (2023) highlights how some students experience forms of neo-racism that contribute to their marginalization within American peer groups. In response, students may gravitate toward co-national networks, where shared language and cultural understanding provide a sense of comfort and belonging. This is not a matter of preference, but often a strategy for navigating social and cultural barriers.

Importantly, students' efforts to build social connections are closely tied to their academic and linguistic experiences. Limited opportunities for meaningful interaction with American peers can reinforce language barriers, which in turn further restrict social engagement. This reciprocal relationship suggests that social integration is not a separate dimension of the student experience, but one that is deeply interconnected with academic adjustment and institutional context.

Taken together, these findings highlight that social integration is not solely dependent on individual student initiative but is shaped by broader cultural and structural dynamics within schools. While Chinese students consistently express a desire for connection, their experiences suggest that inclusion often depends on the actions of others, particularly peers and educators, who play a critical role in creating or limiting opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in cultural capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), which provides a lens for understanding how students navigate educational systems that value particular forms of knowledge, behavior, and interaction. From this perspective, Chinese students who pursue education in the United States bring significant forms of capital that support their educational mobility, including strong academic preparation, family support, educational experiences, and linguistic resources. However, these forms of capital do not always translate across contexts, particularly when students enter educational environments structured by different norms, expectations, and definitions of academic success.

Cultural capital, as originally conceptualized by Bourdieu, refers to the nonfinancial resources that shape an individual's ability to navigate and succeed within a particular social field. These resources include dispositions, language practices, educational experiences, and forms of cultural knowledge (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Importantly, the value of cultural capital is not inherent; rather, it depends on the context in which it is recognized and rewarded. What is valued in one educational setting may be overlooked or misinterpreted in another. For international students, this distinction is particularly important because the knowledge, skills, and educational practices developed in their home countries may not always align with the expectations of their host institutions.

To further examine this dynamic, this study draws on the related concepts of field, habitus, and linguistic capital. Field refers to the structured social environment within which particular forms of capital are privileged or valued, in this case, U.S. educational settings. Habitus describes the internalized dispositions shaped by prior cultural and educational experiences, including approaches to learning, participation, and relationships with authority. When students enter a new educational field, misalignments may emerge between their existing habitus and the expectations of the host environment. For example, practices such as classroom silence or deference to teachers, which may reflect prior educational experiences and understandings of appropriate student behavior, can be interpreted differently in U.S. classrooms, where verbal participation and self-advocacy are often emphasized. These differences should not be understood as characteristics shared by all Chinese students, but as potential differences in educational expectations and experiences that shape how individual students navigate unfamiliar settings.

Similarly, linguistic capital, including the ability to communicate effectively in both academic and informal settings, plays an important role in shaping academic participation and social acceptance. Even when students possess substantial formal English instruction or academic language skills, differences in conversational expectations, classroom discourse, and informal communication can create barriers to full participation. Thus, language adjustment involves more than proficiency; it also involves navigating the implicit linguistic and social expectations of the educational environment.

The cultural capital framework shifts the focus away from individual student deficits and toward the relationship between the resources students bring and the educational systems they enter. It highlights how challenges experienced by international students may reflect not an absence of capital, but a mismatch between the forms of capital they possess and those recognized and rewarded within U.S. institutions. This perspective also raises questions about institutional responsiveness: whether educational environments recognize students' existing knowledge and experiences, provide meaningful opportunities for participation, and adapt practices to support their academic and social integration. Rather than placing the responsibility for adjustment entirely on students, cultural capital theory provides a way to examine the reciprocal relationship between student adaptation and institutional expectations.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Data Sources

This study used a retrospective qualitative approach to examine the educational experiences of Chinese students studying in the United States across two distinct periods. The study draws on findings from an earlier qualitative study conducted in 2016, which included interviews with 14 Chinese high school students, and a contemporary case study conducted in 2025 involving one Chinese undergraduate student.

Participants

The 14 participants in the 2016 study were all 18-year-old Chinese students enrolled in U.S. high schools. Participants attended schools in Western New York and Florida, including all-boys, all-girls, and coeducational settings. At the time of the study, their length of residence in the United States ranged from one to four years. Students described several motivations for pursuing high school education in the United States, including perceived educational quality, opportunities for admission to U.S. colleges, greater academic freedom, and expanded personal and career opportunities. Some also cited a desire to experience a different educational environment and escape the pressures of China's examination-driven system.

Additional background information collected in the 2016 study provided insight into participants' family educational and socioeconomic contexts. In only three of the 14 families, neither parent had attended college, while five parents held advanced degrees. Family occupations included private business ownership, professional positions, and managerial roles. In several families, parents operated businesses together. International exposure was also relatively common: only four sets of parents had never visited the United States before their child enrolled in a U.S. high school. Although these characteristics do not represent a comprehensive measure of family cultural or economic capital, they provide context for understanding the educational and familial resources many participants brought to their U.S. educational experiences.

The 2025 case study participant, “Ivy” (pseudonym), was a 19-year-old Chinese undergraduate student majoring in mathematics education who completed one year of study in the United States before returning to China. She had no prior international study experience. Her English-language preparation began in middle school. To prepare for studying in the United States, she participated in a Zoom interview the year before her arrival. Ivy later reflected that she had memorized her responses and attempted to appear confident, but recognized that her conversational English skills needed further development. In response, she enrolled in an intensive English course in China, attending early morning classes to strengthen her language skills before coming to the United States.

In fall 2025, Ivy provided detailed written responses to eight open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on her academic, cultural, and social experiences in the United States. Questions addressed her initial impressions of U.S. college life, adjustment to academic expectations and teaching styles, cultural differences, social connections, access to campus resources, changes in perspective and future plans, advice for other international students, and supports she felt were missing from her experience.

Following the written responses, multiple Zoom interviews were conducted to clarify and expand on key points. Interview notes were prepared from these conversations and considered alongside Ivy's written responses during analysis. The researcher acknowledges her dual role as instructor and investigator in the study.

Ethical Considerations

Approval for the 2025 case study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university where the research was conducted. The approved study involved one undergraduate student from China who had completed one year of study in the United States and participated in the professor's Human Learning, Development and Motivation course. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of a pseudonym and appropriate data management procedures.

The researcher acknowledges her dual role as instructor and investigator. Although Ivy had returned to China following her year of study in the United States, care was taken to protect her identity and maintain the confidentiality of her responses. The earlier 2016 data collection also followed IRB-approved procedures. In accordance with the original IRB protocol, the 2016 interview data were destroyed following completion of that study. Consequently, the present examination draws on the previously reported findings and themes rather than the original interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

The 2025 written responses and notes from the follow-up Zoom interviews were reviewed by the researcher to identify recurring ideas and patterns related to Ivy's academic, cultural, and social experiences. The researcher made analytic notes documenting initial interpretations of the responses and identified emerging themes within the case study material. These themes were then considered in relation to the findings and themes reported in the 2016 study.

Because the original 2016 interview data were no longer available, the two sources were not subjected to a combined coding process. Instead, the analysis examined areas of continuity and divergence between the previously reported 2016 findings and Ivy's 2025 experiences. Cultural capital theory provided the interpretive framework for considering how students' prior educational experiences, linguistic resources, family backgrounds, and cultural knowledge intersect with institutional expectations and practices. This approach allowed the researcher to consider how the earlier findings and the contemporary case illuminate questions of academic adjustment, social belonging, and institutional responsiveness in U.S. educational settings.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Cultural Capital and Perseverance

Chinese students in this study brought forms of cultural capital rooted in family educational backgrounds, early educational socialization, and a deeply internalized value placed on academic success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Stahl, 2016; Chen, 2014). Participants' family backgrounds, including parental educational attainment, professional experiences, and international exposure, provided important context for understanding the resources and expectations that shaped their educational aspirations and approaches to challenges.

This capital extended beyond material and educational resources to include habitus in the form of dispositions such as perseverance, independence, and self-discipline, which enabled students to navigate

unfamiliar academic and social environments. For example, Ivy described actively seeking support despite initial difficulties: "These gaps encouraged me to take initiative… I reached out to professors…and communicated more with my peers…[which] enhanced my ability to solve problems independently." Similarly, Joe framed discomfort as a pathway to growth: "I feel uncomfortable at first because those are the things that will definitely bring me improvement" (Stahl, 2016).

Notably, students often minimized or downplayed challenges, including experiences of exclusion or discrimination. For instance, Joe described dismissing a derogatory comment during a basketball game by "laughing it off." This pattern suggests that resilience functioned as a disposition associated with habitus, allowing students to persist while potentially obscuring the depth of their challenges. As a result, some difficulties remained less visible and required deeper analysis to fully interpret.

Theme 2: Linguistic Capital and Classroom Participation

A major challenge for students was limited linguistic capital, particularly in spoken English and classroom discussion. While many had studied English for years, applying it in real-time academic and social contexts was challenging. Students regularly expressed anxiety about speaking in class, especially when participation was graded. Ivy shared: "In class discussion, I often worried that I couldn't express my ideas accurately or quickly enough in English…so in the first month I tried to speak as little as possible."

This hesitation aligns with research on "face" and fear of embarrassment (Nyamupangedengu, 2014), as well as cultural norms emphasizing careful, correct responses over spontaneous participation. Speaking in class became both a challenge and a desired skill, representing a valued form of capital in U.S. classrooms in which many students initially lacked proficiency. Joe described this contrast: "The freedom of speaking up…in class anytime you have something you want to tell the teacher…you just raise your hand…back home…it's very limited." Thus, linguistic capital was not only a barrier but also a motivator, highlighting how students actively worked to acquire this form of capital as part of their broader process of adjustment.

Theme 3: Social Belonging and Isolation

Students consistently expressed a strong desire for social belonging, particularly a desire to be accepted and treated similarly to their American peers. Many reported difficulty forming friendships due to language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliar social norms. Ivy explained: "There seems to be a kind of subconscious group among students of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds…I sometimes felt left out of these circles, which reinforced my sense of isolation." This reflects the concept of homophily (Ma, 2020), where individuals tend to gravitate toward others that are similar to them, often leaving international students on the margins.

Students repeatedly emphasized a simple but significant need: to be invited into conversations and social spaces. While institutions provided opportunities for involvement, such as clubs and events, these were often structured around pre-existing groups, making entry more challenging for international students. Targeted peer inclusion efforts appeared to significantly improve students' sense of belonging.

Importantly, findings suggest that social integration is less about willingness and more about access and invitation. As Sophia noted, "We always want to communicate and be friends…we are just too shy maybe" (Stahl, 2016). This highlights that students' social isolation was not due to lack of interest, but rather limited opportunities for meaningful inclusion.

Theme 4: Institutional Supports and Its Limits

While students expressed appreciation for teachers, programs, and institutional resources, their experiences revealed a misalignment between available supports and their actual needs. Participants valued supportive teachers and mentors, ESL/ELL programs, and international student centers; however, these supports often did not extend to the practical dimensions of both academic and social adjustment.

Students described gaps in areas such as academic writing support, guidance for navigating daily life, and opportunities for meaningful social integration. As Ivy explained, "While the school offered some

lectures and workshops, most were theoretical and lacked practical, hands-on support for daily life and social integration," which slowed her integration into campus life.

Notably, participants rarely criticized institutions directly, despite describing persistent challenges. This pattern may reflect cultural norms emphasizing gratitude and perseverance, suggesting that institutional gaps may be under-reported rather than absent. Taken together, these findings indicate that while formal supports are present, they are not always experienced as accessible, practical, or sufficient for fully supporting students in integration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study examined Chinese students' experiences in U.S. educational settings through two distinct sources: qualitative data collected from high school students in 2016 and a case study of an undergraduate student in 2025. Considered together, the previously reported 2016 findings and Ivy's 2025 experiences raise important questions about how students' cultural and linguistic resources intersect with institutional expectations and supports. The accounts suggest that students' ability to navigate academic and social challenges should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of effective institutional support. Rather, students may draw on dispositions such as perseverance, independence, and adaptability when institutional supports do not fully address their needs.

In the 2016 study, participants described motivations for studying in the United States that reflected both push and pull factors. These included dissatisfaction with aspects of the examination-driven Chinese educational system, particularly the Gaokao, and a desire for what they perceived as a more holistic educational experience that included creativity, extracurricular opportunities, and personal growth. These perspectives align with prior research indicating that Chinese students and their families may view U.S. institutions as offering broader educational and developmental opportunities (Stahl, 2016).

A related tension appeared in the experiences described by participants in 2016 and in Ivy's 2025 account: expectations about studying in the United States did not always align with the realities students encountered. Students described anticipating greater freedom and opportunities for self-expression while also navigating challenges related to language, classroom participation, and social integration. Although the two sources reflect different students, educational settings, and periods, both offer insight into the importance of preparing international students for the expectations they will encounter and providing support that responds to their needs after arrival.

Classroom participation emerged as an important area of adjustment in the 2016 study and in Ivy's 2025 account. In 2016, participants described speaking and participating in class as unfamiliar experiences, explaining that student voices were more limited in their prior educational settings. Although they initially felt apprehensive, they pushed themselves to participate and appreciated teachers' encouragement. Joe described the greater freedom to speak up in U.S. classrooms as a contrast with his prior educational experience. Ivy's 2025 account provided a more detailed perspective on this challenge, as she described hesitating to participate because she worried about expressing her ideas accurately and quickly enough in English. Together, these accounts highlight the importance of understanding how prior educational experiences and language-related confidence shape students' participation in U.S. classrooms.

Language also emerged as an important challenge. Although students had studied English extensively, some described difficulty with real-time communication and academic discourse. Ivy's account, in particular, illustrates the distinction between formal English preparation and the ability to communicate comfortably in everyday and academic interactions. These experiences raise questions about whether language supports adequately address the range of communication demands students encounter. They also suggest that educators should be cautious about allowing language proficiency to overshadow students' knowledge, abilities, and contributions.

Social integration presented another area of complexity. The previously reported 2016 findings and Ivy's 2025 experiences offer perspectives on the challenges of forming relationships and developing a sense

of belonging in U.S. educational settings. Language, cultural differences, and confidence could complicate social interactions. The accounts also point to the importance of seemingly small opportunities for connection, such as being invited into conversations or included in group work. These experiences suggest that social integration is not solely a reflection of individual student effort; educators and peers also play a role in creating environments where students feel welcomed and included.

An important consideration across these accounts is the role of resilience. Participants demonstrated dispositions such as perseverance, independence, and adaptability when navigating unfamiliar academic and social contexts. These dispositions may be understood in relation to habitus, reflecting ways of approaching challenges that are shaped by prior educational and family experiences. The cultural capital and habitus participants brought to their educational experiences may also have influenced how they navigated and interpreted those experiences. In the 2016 study, for example, participants generally described their experiences positively, even as they recounted challenges involving language, social integration, and discrimination. Their ability to persevere and make the most of their opportunities may have contributed to this positive framing, potentially making some unmet needs less visible. Resilience, however, should not be understood as a substitute for institutional support or as a form of cultural capital in itself. Students' ability to adapt may help them manage difficult circumstances, but it can also make opportunities for institutional improvement less apparent. When students successfully navigate challenges on their own, institutions may overlook opportunities to improve the supports and practices available to them.

The accounts also invite consideration of how students communicate their experiences. Some students emphasized positive aspects of studying in the United States while also describing challenges involving isolation, discrimination, and unmet expectations. These perspectives should not be interpreted as evidence that students' difficulties are insignificant simply because they also express gratitude or appreciation. Rather, they reinforce the importance of attending to the complexity of students' experiences and creating opportunities for them to communicate concerns and seek support.

Taken together, the previously reported findings from 2016 and Ivy's 2025 case point to an important tension: students bring educational experiences, linguistic resources, family backgrounds, and personal dispositions that can support their adjustment, yet those resources are not always fully recognized or supported within U.S. educational settings. Their ability to navigate unfamiliar environments should not shift the responsibility for successful adjustment entirely onto them. Instead, institutions have a responsibility to recognize the resources students bring and consider how their practices can support meaningful academic participation, social belonging, and equitable opportunities for success. They also need to understand that their cultural capital and habitus helped make their experiences appear more positive than they actually were.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Educators and Institutions

The findings have implications for how educators and institutions understand and support international students. Rather than locating successful adjustment primarily within students' ability to adapt, institutions should consider how their own practices recognize students' existing resources and respond to their academic and social needs. Three areas warrant particular attention.

Reconceptualizing classroom participation. Educators should avoid equating verbal spontaneity with engagement or understanding. Participants in the 2016 study and Ivy's 2025 account described the challenges of contributing to classroom discussions while navigating unfamiliar expectations and language demands. Providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding, including structured small-group activities, written responses, preparation time before whole-class discussions, and low-stakes opportunities to speak, may create more equitable opportunities for participation. Clear expectations and

varied assessment practices can also help ensure that language-related hesitation does not overshadow students' knowledge and academic abilities.

Moving from cultural awareness to cultural responsiveness. Recognizing cultural holidays and traditions can contribute to an inclusive environment, but meaningful responsiveness requires attention to the educational experiences, communication practices, and expectations students bring with them. Educators should learn about students' prior educational experiences without assuming that all students from a particular country share the same perspectives or needs. Language support should likewise extend beyond general English instruction to address the practical demands students encounter, including academic writing, classroom discourse, discipline-specific language, and everyday communication. Ivy's experience suggests that the availability of a resource does not necessarily mean that it addresses the needs students identify.

Shifting from student adaptation to reciprocal adaptation. Students benefit from supportive relationships with faculty, peers, advisors, and international student staff. However, meaningful inclusion cannot depend solely on students initiating contact or independently locating resources. Institutions can create more intentional opportunities for connection through peer partnerships, facilitated study groups, inclusive classroom practices, and practical orientation activities that help students develop relationships beyond their existing social networks. Research on international students' sense of belonging similarly highlights the importance of culturally empathetic advising and support from institutional agents, including peers, faculty, and mentors (Myers et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2023). These efforts reflect a reciprocal approach in which students are supported in navigating a new educational environment while institutions also examine and adapt their own practices.

Future Research

This study offers a retrospective examination of previously reported findings from 14 Chinese high school students in 2016 and a contemporary case study of one Chinese undergraduate student in 2025. The distinct samples, educational settings, and sources of data limit direct comparison and do not support broad conclusions about changes in institutional practices over time. In addition, the original 2016 interview transcripts were destroyed in accordance with the original IRB protocol; therefore, the present examination relied on previously reported findings rather than a new analysis of the original interviews. The 2025 case provides an in-depth perspective on one student's experiences but cannot represent the range of experiences among Chinese or other international students.

Future research could build on these findings through studies involving larger and more diverse groups of international students across secondary and postsecondary educational settings. Examining students at different stages of their educational journeys may provide insight into how prior educational experiences shape expectations, classroom participation, language development, and social belonging as students’ transition between educational systems. Research that includes students from varied socioeconomic, educational, and linguistic backgrounds would also help clarify how different forms of cultural and linguistic capital are recognized and valued within U.S. institutions.

Further research should also examine institutional practices and the perspectives of educators, advisors, and student-support personnel. Studies could investigate how participation is assessed, how language services are designed and experienced, and whether opportunities for social connection lead to meaningful relationships and belonging. Including the perspectives of both students and institutional representatives could help identify where available supports align with students' reported needs and where gaps remain.

Finally, longitudinal research following international students across multiple stages of their educational experiences could provide a deeper understanding of how expectations, academic confidence, language use, and belonging develop over time. Such research could also examine whether institutional practices change in response to students' experiences and recommendations. Continued attention to both student agency and institutional responsibility is needed to understand how educational environments can

recognize the resources international students bring and create conditions in which those resources can be fully used and valued.

Conclusion

This study revisited research conducted in 2016 on Chinese students attending U.S. high schools, alongside a contemporary case study of a Chinese college student. Although the two studies involved different educational settings, participants, and sources of data, their findings point to recurring challenges involving classroom participation, language, social belonging, and institutional support. Considered together, these accounts suggest that U.S. educational settings continue to place considerable responsibility on Chinese students to navigate unfamiliar expectations and practices, highlighting the need for more responsive institutional approaches.

At its core, this study highlights the resources students bring to their educational experiences, including cultural and linguistic capital, family educational backgrounds, and dispositions shaped by prior experiences. These resources, along with perseverance and adaptability, can help students navigate academic, linguistic, and social challenges. However, students' ability to adapt should not be mistaken for evidence that institutional supports are sufficient. Focusing primarily on individual success risks obscuring the responsibility of educators and institutions to create more equitable and responsive educational environments. These students arrive with ambition, determination, and hope. The responsibility lies with educators and institutions to ensure that these qualities are supported and nurtured, rather than tested in isolation.

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