

Cultural Heritage and Collective Resilience: Chinese International Doctoral Students' Experiences in a U.S. EdD Program

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ABSTRACT

Supportive academic environments and mentor relationships are critical for helping historically underrepresented doctoral students, such as Chinese international students (CIS), to overcome barriers. CIS resilience during unprecedented times relates to cultural heritage, beliefs, and social and cultural supports. This qualitative single case study sought to gain insights into how 104 out of 1 CIS in an Ed.D. cohort at a Midwestern university navigated personal, social, and academic stressors during the global pandemic. Through a survey and semi-structured interviews, we explored the students' support systems and how their cultural backgrounds influenced their approaches to resilience throughout their two-year doctoral journey in the host country. Findings indicate that CIS utilized collectivistic coping strategies, such as peer networks, as well as cultural heritage and institutional supports, such as faculty mentorship and the cohort model. To enhance the experience of CIS, integrating cultural, social, and institutional resources, and proactive individual and collective coping strategies are critical.

KEYWORDS

Chinese international students (CIS), doctoral education, student resilience, cultural heritage, collectivistic coping, faculty mentorship, cohort model, higher education support systems

Teaching during a global pandemic prompted educators to use diverse resources, especially in online learning. The pandemic also brought socio-emotional stressors that impacted all involved (students, teachers, administrators, and families) (Jones et al., 2023; Slapac et al., 2021). Higher education institutions tried to stay on track with technological needs and with student and faculty support services. Counseling departments provided online support and trauma-informed resources for faculty, students, and staff. Student success depended more on mitigating factors, socio-emotional supports, access to technology, and other resources, including faculty support.

During the pandemic, it is important to know that Asian Americans often experienced harsher racial discrimination, xenophobia, and anti-Asian hate crimes (Gover et al., 2020). Chinese international students (CIS) were no exception to these unfortunate events. Kim et al. (2023) indicated that Asian international students in the United States faced multiple layers of difficulties, like individual, community/school, and public arena level challenges. However, some students coped with the stressors well enough to complete their degree programs. Kokotsaki (2023) highlighted how resilience and diverse coping strategies, including peer networks and cultural supports, empower doctoral students to

overcome adversities such as isolation and the pressures of academic milestones. Additionally, Collier and Blanchard (2024) emphasized the importance of supportive academic environments and mentor relationships, which are crucial for helping historically underrepresented doctoral students, like CIS, overcome academic barriers. Social and cultural supports were also found to be critical during the pandemic. For example, studies have shown the resilience of CIS and the importance of social support and cultural heritage in their adjustment (Cao et al., 2021; Liu & Dong, 2019). Building on Mian and Changming's (2020) conclusion that Chinese cultural values supported CIS coping with pandemic-related stress, Xu et al. (2021) further demonstrated that interpersonal support from faculty and classmates also played a vital role during the early stages of the U.S. quarantine. The rationale for our study was to use a qualitative case study framework (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1995; Yin, 2003) to gather insights from CIS in an Ed.D. program at a Midwestern university regarding academic and personal challenges, as well as to understand the support systems available to them throughout their two-year doctoral journey in the host country. Examining these perspectives is essential for identifying areas for improvement and enhancing the overall experience for future students positively.



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Background

Challenges of Chinese International Students

Chinese international students (CIS) in higher education in Western countries have experienced multiple layers of challenges, including language barriers and academic pressure (Yan & Berliner, 2009), as well as acculturative stress and social isolation (Yan & Berliner, 2011), alongside discrimination, financial, and visa-related issues (Cao et al., 2021), with broader patterns of these challenges also highlighted by Zhang-Wu (2018). Cao and colleagues (2021) reported that competency-related challenges, including language barriers, academic writing, and self-regulation, are most prevalent difficulties among CIS studying in Belgian universities. Specifically, Zhang-Wu (2018) identified two key aspects of language barriers that CIS experience: adapting to an authentic English-speaking environment and dealing with the perception of linguistic incompetency from native English speakers.

Cao et al. (2021) also indicated that different instructional practices and utilizing academic resources are challenging for CIS. Adjusting to student-centered instructional practices in U.S. classrooms is known to be a challenge for Chinese students, due to the characteristics of Chinese education being teacher-centered, content-based, and test-driven, which are different in U.S. education (Huang, 2012; Will, 2016). An added challenge is the lack of knowledge about the available academic resources, as CIS adjust to different instructional practices when they have limited access to or knowledge about academic resources (Cao et al., 2021). Many CIS experience pressure to be successful in academics from their parents and families (Will, 2016). Although the pressure often motivates CIS to work harder, the high expectations for academic success may lead to extensive academic and personal stress (Cao et al., 2021; Yan & Berliner, 2009).

Another challenge is building social networks. CIS may find it difficult to communicate with and build companionships with colleagues and supervisors. Contributing factors may include language barriers and cultural distances, such as different styles of humor and joking (Cao et al., 2021). Also, CIS have reported discrimination against their race, nationality, and language, and felt that they were not taken seriously by domestic peers (Will, 2016).

During the pandemic, Asian Americans also experienced harsher racial discrimination, xenophobia, and anti-Asian hate crimes (Gover et al., 2020). According to the reports by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, anti-Asian hate crimes increased dramatically in 2020 and 2021, while overall hate crimes dropped in 2020 (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, 2021). Government policies during the pandemic, including travel restrictions, also contributed to the significant amount of stress for Asian Americans (Gover et al., 2020). These difficulties had a detrimental impact on the mental health of Chinese individuals in the United States, and Chinese international graduate students were no exception. Zhang and Sustarsic (2022) reported that the pandemic amplified stressors for Chinese international doctoral students tied to academic disruption, funding uncertainties, and anti-Chinese rhetoric, leading students to rely primarily on emotion-focused coping strategies.

Supports and Resources for Chinese International Students

Some students coped with the stressors well enough to complete their degree programs, despite the abovementioned difficulties; studies have shown the resilience of CIS and the importance of social support and cultural heritage in their adjustments (Cao et al., 2021; Liu & Dong, 2019). Cao et al. (2021) reported that CIS in Belgium employed diverse coping strategies to address competency-related challenges and emphasized the importance of social support. Liu and Dong (2019) found that pride in Chinese culture and a sense of patriotism are perspectives that CIS carry with them throughout their academic journeys. Similarly, CIS most often turn to co-national friends in host countries for social support and to cope with academic stress (Cao et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2018). Social and cultural supports were also found to be critical during the pandemic. Mian and Changming (2020) reported that Chinese cultural beliefs played a significant role in helping CIS cope with stress and navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Xu et al. (2021) found that despite safety concerns and heightened stress, CIS received unexpected support from faculty and classmates during initial quarantine in the United States.

Collectivist Coping Behaviors

As the understanding of multiculturalism deepens, scholars have proposed alternative frameworks to the Western, individualistic stress and coping paradigm (Kuo, 2013). For example, Aldwin (2007) introduced the sociocultural model of coping, positing that individuals' social contexts shape the stress-coping process. Aldwin's (2007) model suggests that individuals may favor certain coping strategies and resources based on their cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, collectivistic cultures, which heavily influence CIS, are likely to shape the selection and preferences of particular coping strategies and behaviors. Kuo (2013) defined collective coping behaviors as "multifaceted stress responses shaped and enhanced by collectivistic norms, values, and tendencies" (p. 377). Further, Kuo (2013) suggested several collective coping behaviors:

- (a) coping strategies grounded in the values of forbearance, fatalism, familism, and honoring authority figures; (b) interpersonally based coping methods through a reliance on ingroup interdependence, such as seeking family support and social support from coethnic members; (c) culturally shaped emotional and cognitive coping strategies, such as acceptance, reframing, detachment, avoidance, and focusing on the positive; and (d) coping behaviors stemming from beliefs and practices of culturally specific religion, spirituality, and ritual (p. 377).

Mian and Changming (2020) studied a large sample of CIS during COVID-19. They reported that identification with Chinese cultural beliefs predicted greater use of active coping and emotional self-regulation, along with lower negative affect. These results reinforce the connection between collectivist cultural orientations and the coping patterns described by Kuo (2013). Given the importance of Chinese cultural heritage for CIS, it is likely that they utilize collectivistic coping strategies to manage stressors. Cao et al. (2021) reported that CIS in Belgium employed forbearance coping, minimizing concerns to avoid burdening others, to address academic stressors.

Doctoral Cohort Model

Schools of education must provide increased support for Ed.D. students as they navigate the challenges of their programs (West et al., 2011). Therefore, the cohort model for doctoral studies (Lei et al., 2011; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) was used as the framework to develop a community for our Chinese Ed.D. cohort. Interactions with faculty, advisors, and classmates within a cohort model can “foster connectivity and increase social integration, sense of belonging, and community” (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012, p. 202), which in turn can positively impact persistence and retention (Berry, 2017). This is true for both in-person and online doctoral cohort settings (Berry, 2017).

Developing a sense of community within a doctoral cohort promotes engagement through interactions with faculty and peers (Rogers-Shaw & Carr-Chellman, 2018), ultimately leading to successful outcomes. However, new research is needed to further explore the doctoral cohort model (Bista & Cox, 2014), particularly in assessing student needs in relation to the actions of their advisors during doctoral studies (Burns & Gillespie, 2018).

Aims and Research Questions

This qualitative single case study (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) sought to gain insights into how a group of fourteen CIS in an Ed.D. cohort at a Midwestern university in the United States navigated social and academic stressors during the pandemic and how their cultural backgrounds influenced their approaches to resilience during this unprecedented time. The qualitative approach offered a way to gain deeper understanding (Stake, 1995) of the phenomena under study. The qualitative research approach can help researchers delve into individuals' perceptions, experiences, behaviors, and emotions, alongside examining organizational processes, cultural trends, and interactions across societies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The purpose of this study is to examine the academic and socio-emotional challenges experienced by Chinese international graduate students while studying in the host country, as well as the supports they access within and beyond that context to navigate these challenges. The study further explores how Chinese cultural heritage informs students' resilience, coping strategies, and adjustment processes. By analyzing these interconnected dimensions, the research seeks to deepen understanding of the factors that foster persistence, well-being, and academic success among CIS in U.S. higher education.

Specifically, the study answers these three guiding research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What academic and socio-emotional challenges do Chinese international doctoral students encounter while studying in the host country?

RQ2: What academic and socio-emotional supports do Chinese international doctoral students access within and beyond the host country, and how do these supports help them navigate challenges?

RQ3: How does Chinese cultural heritage influence students' resilience, coping strategies, and adjustment processes as they navigate academic and socio-emotional challenges and supports in the host country?

Method

Contextual Background and Site

Of the 14 graduate students enrolled in the U.S.-based three-year doctoral program in Inquiry in Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning, 10 agreed to participate in the study. This program was part of an innovative international partnership between an American university and a Chinese university. The cohort structure involved completing one year of the program in China, followed by two years in the United States as the host country. All students were supported by a team of six U.S.-based faculty mentors, who were responsible for chairing and serving on their qualifying examinations, comprehensive examinations, and dissertation committees. The first author was also a member of the faculty mentor team and had already developed a strong rapport with the students by the time of the study which was conducted in 2021. The students collaborated in groups of three to four on their co-authored dissertations.

Participants

The average age of the 10 participants was 29.7 years. Based on the survey demographic data, three respondents identified as single, four were married or in a relationship, and three were divorced. In terms of travel experience, six students had either never traveled abroad or had stayed outside their home country for less than one month, while four had studied abroad for at least one semester. Of those four, two had studied in Belgium, and two had studied in Germany. Regarding their prior experience with the United States, six students reported that they had never been to the U.S. before the program, one had visited for less than a month, and two had stayed for three months. Regarding language proficiency, seven respondents spoke Mandarin and English, two also spoke intermediate-level Korean, and one spoke Mandarin, English, and French. The average self-reported comfort level with English communication was 3.4 out of 5. At the time of the survey, the average duration of respondents' stay in the U.S. was 2 years 2.6 months (26.6 months). Notably, at least two students had earned their Master's degrees in countries outside of China. Additionally, some students had backgrounds in fields unrelated to education studied prior to enrolling in the Ed.D. cohort, including disciplines such as tourism management, opera, and linguistics. All students either graduated from the Ed.D. program or were nearing graduation at the time of the study in 2021.

Data Collection and Analysis

After securing institutional ethical clearance and obtaining signed consent from the participants, we asked the ten students to complete a two-part online survey. The first part consisted of open-ended questions, while the second part included demographic multiple-choice questions. The primary purpose of the survey was to gain students' perspectives on their academic and social challenges, as well as the supports and coping strategies they utilized to navigate academic hurdles and success while studying in the United States as part of the Ed.D. program during the pandemic. Additionally, the survey aimed to explore the students' experiences with their dissertation process, including any challenges or changes they faced and the strategies they employed to overcome them. Participants were also asked to describe any support they received and share other experiences related to their learning, academic achievements, and social connections.

After reviewing the survey responses and becoming familiar with the data, the research team decided to triangulate the survey findings with the interview data, as is done in qualitative studies to strengthen the analysis and findings (Patton, 1990; Roulston, 2010). Triangulation traditionally involves “noting patterns, themes, making contrasts, (and) comparisons” (Miles et al., 2020, p. 117) to help define and formulate inferences and to process and arrive at a trustworthy analysis. An interview protocol was developed, consisting of 20 questions, to explore the survey responses in greater depth and obtain richer insights (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Participants were asked to provide examples of academic and professional challenges, stressors, takeaways, and surprises as international students and to share examples of the supports and coping strategies they used in relation to culture, language, wellness, and other personal factors.

Five out of the 10 students agreed to participate in a follow-up semi-structured individual 50–60-minute Zoom interview. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and facilitate coding. Data analysis involved descriptive analysis for the open-ended survey responses and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for both survey and interview data. This process enabled the identification of similarities and differences across data sources, which informed the refinement of themes and subthemes through a deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021).

Findings

The analysis revealed two overarching themes—*academic and socio-emotional challenges in the host country* and *academic and socio-emotional supports within and beyond the host country*—that together addressed the three research questions. The first theme captured students’ experiences with pandemic-related, linguistic, academic, and motivational challenges, answering RQ1. The second theme highlighted the supports students drew upon, including faculty, peers, family, and new learning experiences, addressing RQ2. Finally, RQ3 was woven throughout both themes, as Chinese cultural heritage shaped how students perceived challenges, sought support, and developed resilience. Collectively, these findings illustrate that students’ coping and adjustment were culturally grounded and contextually influenced. Our collaborative efforts to present these findings align with Redlon and Saraydarian’s (2022) sophisticated description of the way they “focus on the methods by which we could bring a situation or idea as fully as possible in all its complexity to the reader” (p. 167). In telling the story in the data (Heller, 2022), we approached qualitative narrative writing carefully to analyze, understand, and describe patterns, concepts, and insights.

Academic and Socio-Emotional Challenges in the Host Country

Research Question 1 (RQ1) was answered by this first overarching theme: academic and socio-emotional challenges in the host country. The four subthemes (pandemic-related disruptions, academic learning differences, language and writing barriers, and motivation struggles) describe specific dimensions of challenges. Together, they illustrate how academic demands, cultural adjustment, and emotional strain intersected, shaping the students’ overall experiences of resilience and adaptation.

Challenges related to the pandemic in the host country.

The COVID-19 pandemic produced health worries and isolation, while impinging on the students’ academic and personal goals. As acceptance of the pandemic restrictions set in, the group worked to understand and overcome the challenges they faced coping with the pandemic within another culture, though not without its tensions. One participant noted that differing opinions and practices regarding pandemic policies, such as mask-wearing, led to some strain within the cohort. These differences highlighted the challenges of navigating shared spaces and maintaining cohesion in a diverse group, underscoring the complexities of their social dynamics during such a stressful period. The group appeared to navigate these challenges by fostering open communication and gradually accepting diverse viewpoints within the cohort. Due to the isolation related to the pandemic, students felt that they missed academic opportunities such as in-person interactions, school visits, and opportunities to practice English, especially speaking skills, as one student, for example, stated in the survey: “Because I can’t go to campus face to face for classes, and I can’t meet teachers face to face for research activities, I lost a lot of learning opportunities.”

Challenges related to academic experiences.

Throughout their time in the United States, participants reflected on cultural differences they encountered during their acculturation period, particularly regarding academic practices and personal preferences. Several CIS described feeling discomfort with the student-centered approaches common in American classrooms, where active participation, open expression of opinions, and critical thinking were strongly encouraged. These expectations contrasted sharply with the teacher-centered practices that had characterized their prior educational experiences in China. Such differences not only challenged their instructional practices but also required them to adapt to new expectations for participation and interaction in the classroom. From the survey, one participant shared their perspective on observing collaborative learning in the United States, noting that it was a significant departure from their previous experiences.

Our Chinese people do not get used to collaborative learning. What we did since our childhood is independent study. While after join in this program, what the instructors emphasis is group learning. This would be the biggest academic challenges I have during this period of study. I have to say, after some American public school tour we made in the first semester of this program, I feel much grateful about Chinese public education system. Personally speaking, I prefer Chinese education system. Chinese elementary schools are more inclined to teach students rules and require obedience to the rules, but from the few American elementary schools I visited, it seems that they pay more attention to respecting the children’s personal wishes, not to interfere, and to let them play freely.

Cultural contrasts were also evident in the academic learning process and motivation. An interviewee’s comparison of Chinese and U.S. educational systems highlights some key differences. Chinese education values guided, task-oriented learning, while the U.S. system encourages personal responsibility and independent thinking which can be both liberating and challenging, per one student’s statement in the interview:

So yeah, in China. Uhm, because I didn’t have a lot of academic challenges, I have to deal with other things but



learning is kind of different. It's kind of the thing that we don't that much of strict rules that you have to do how to how to motivate yourself and research is kind of your own journey, like how to how to maybe motivate it and find your own things to do. And it's different from that I used to, how I used to have a lot of tasks, but those tasks are more specific like you have to do this and how to do that now in the US, especially last year, I have to, I have to motivate myself to find my own things to do and that's different.

Challenges related to academic writing and language barriers.

Several students felt that fluency in English and strong academic writing skills were crucial for success in the program, but most struggled with both. One participant highlighted the difficulty with academic writing, expressing that they often relied on what they called "Chinese logic." They worried that their professors might not grasp the flow of their ideas, which added to their anxiety about written communication. These challenges extended beyond academics; language barriers also manifested as cross-cultural challenges, particularly in interactions with American friends. This limited their ability to fully engage socially and form meaningful connections—underscoring the broader impact of language proficiency on their overall experience, as reflected in one survey response, for example:

I was looking forward to communicating with more native speakers so as to understand American culture and improve my oral English. However, due to the pandemic, I did not dare to meet and communicate with unfamiliar people face to face.

Students expressed a strong desire for more "language training," indicating that their academic and personal challenges included navigating cross-cultural communication. This encompassed regular practice in reading, writing, speaking, and listening across various settings. They recognized that improving their language skills was essential not only for academic success but also for fostering social connections and feeling more integrated into their new environment. Addressing these areas would greatly enhance their overall experience and ease the transition into both academic and everyday life.

Challenges related to motivation.

The stress associated with the pandemic significantly impacted the students' motivation, with some struggling to maintain their enthusiasm and focus throughout the last two years of the program in the host country, according to one response in the survey, for example:

Because I stayed indoors almost every day, my motivation to study is not as strong as before the pandemic. The main reason is that I stay at home for a long time, people always easy to feel dull, not as energetic as before.

Factors such as uncertainty, isolation, and increased academic pressures contributed to feelings of burnout and disengagement. Students reported feeling increasingly lonely and stressed due to the rise of social media hate against Asians, which further exacerbated their overall stress levels. This negative online environment contributed to feelings of isolation and anxiety, making it even more challenging to engage with their peers and adapt to their new surroundings. Additionally, pandemic-related isolation profoundly affected participants, as they expressed unmet desires to interact in

person with American students and engage in conversations to improve their English and academic language skills. These challenges impacted students socially and emotionally, as participants also shared their lack of confidence, high anxiety for their safety, and financial fears of not having enough money or the lack of job opportunities during this time. Isolation further intensified some participants' fears, including concerns about the pandemic itself and threat of gun violence in their urban environment. These anxieties heightened their desire for safety and stability. Additionally, the need to adapt to a diverse array of races, cultures, and individuals in the United States led to natural comparisons with their homeland, where they reported feeling safer and more at ease. This contrast underscored the emotional strain of navigating a new environment, as they grappled with both the challenges of adaptation and the longing for the familiarity and security of home, as one student responded in the survey:

As a Chinese student, the learning habits I formed since I was a child still have an impact on my current study. These habits make me hold a rigorous and serious attitude when I study, but at the same time it also brings some pressure to myself.

Academic and Socio-Emotional Supports in the Host Country and Beyond

Research Question 2 was addressed through the second overarching theme: *academic and socio-emotional supports in the host country and beyond*. The three subthemes developed through analysis (faculty/peer/family support networks; the host academic environment; and new experiential learning) highlight protective factors that fostered persistence and well-being. They show how institutional, interpersonal, and experiential supports helped students cope with both academic and emotional pressures described in RQ1.

The value of faculty, peers/friends/family, and social network supports.

The CIS indicated that faculty, peers/friends, family and their broader social networks were invaluable supports for both academic learning and socio-emotional coping during the pandemic and throughout their doctoral program. Faculty offered essential guidance and mentorship, while peers and friends offered camaraderie and collaboration, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation. For example, faculty provided crucial academic support through regular meetings for advising and dissertation assistance. They also facilitated access to webinars and conference opportunities, which enhanced students' research skills and professional networks. Additionally, faculty organized social gatherings that fostered community and connection. All the Chinese students emphasized their appreciation for the constant academic support and guidance provided by their faculty mentor team, as one student stated in the survey, for example:

Even in the form of online courses, professors provided me with a lot of learning resources. At the same time, professors also provided me with valuable opportunities to cooperate with them for research, and I gained a lot of academic help and guidance in the process of working with them.

Students also discussed actively working to address challenges once the reality of the pandemic set in. For example, one student noted in the survey: "My professor has helped with my academic learning and care about my life here, [along with] mentors and colleagues." This sentiment highlights the significant role that faculty and peers played in not only supporting academic progress but also

in fostering a sense of community and well-being during their challenging journey. All participants also noted the personal, humanizing faculty efforts during the pandemic, expressing deep appreciation for the continuous support they received throughout the program. One student shared in the survey: "Professors gave us lots of help in our living, such as inviting us to the parties at their homes, giving us rides and gift cards to shop in the grocery stores, caring for our living conditions." Shopping for food was difficult and often limited to online options, so any assistance was greatly appreciated. The CIS also recalled acts of kindness and generosity from their faculty team throughout the pandemic in the survey: "Our professors are very kind and caring. During the pandemic, professors sent us small gifts and tasty food on major festivals, which moved us very much." This thoughtful gesture not only brightened their spirits but also reinforced the sense of community and support that faculty provided during such a challenging time.

Another student highlighted the mentor team's generosity and socio-emotional support, stating in the survey: "At the beginning of the pandemic, supplies were very scarce, and professors told us in online meetings that students who had difficulties with supplies could turn to them for help." This openness and willingness to assist showcases the faculty's commitment to the well-being of their students, fostering a supportive environment during a time of uncertainty and need. Students also expressed their appreciation for the emotional and financial support from their own families and friends in China, as well as the support they received from their home institution. Additionally, they experienced kindness and support from their cohort group. One student recalls in the survey: "Some of my classmates held a small party, serving some homemade dishes, really made me feel moved and blessed." While dynamics within the cohort were not always smooth (some disagreements did arise), this sense of community among peers was vital for maintaining morale and fostering resilience during their doctoral journey. This sense of solidarity contributed significantly to their overall resilience during the pandemic.

Value of the academic environment, teaching, and learning in the host culture.

Our study participants appreciated the American academic environment, where diverse opinions and perspectives were openly discussed and embraced. They valued the collaborative and student-centered approaches modeled and encouraged by both the faculty team and K-12 teachers during school visits. This emphasis on active engagement and critical thinking allowed them to feel more involved in their learning and helped them adapt to new educational practices, fostering a greater sense of belonging and academic growth. The aspects of the host culture that contributed to students' success in the program included collaboration, creativity, reflection, and encouraging learning environments that utilized ongoing feedback. Throughout their classes, the Chinese graduate students gained increased confidence in sharing their ideas and speaking up, as one student stated in the interview:

After coming to the United States, I found that many American students are willing to take the initiative to express their opinions. At first, I didn't dare to express my opinion loudly in front of many people. Maybe I was afraid of making mistakes or not being more brilliant, and I was also worried about how others would think of me. But then I gradually took the initiative to speak up in class and express my opinions, and became more confident.

The collaborative aspect of the program, modeled by the faculty team and integrated throughout their doctoral courses, played a significant role in fostering confidence among students, providing opportunities to practice collaboration and cooperation to better understand their value within a team. One student described in the interview the benefit of this collaborative focus as "enlightening," noting that it transformed their perspective on teamwork and the importance of diverse viewpoints in collaborative problem-solving:

Oh yeah, this is collaborative learning and teaching. It's really new to me because in China we have a classroom and just one professor teaches and they never invite other professors into our classroom. But in the United States I really see... sometimes there are two professors in our classroom and they are collaborative. They collaborate together to work and to teach. So from this experience I really could get different perspectives from these two professors, and sometimes I could see that these two professors discuss with each other about maybe one question or sometimes they communicate with each other about their ideas in the classroom. And yeah, that has enlightened me a lot. I think I love that and these professors really encourage us to work in a team and they give us a lot of opportunities to collaborate.

A focus on collaboration and cooperation was also evident during school visits, where classroom teaching strategies emphasized co-teaching and collaborative learning. One Chinese student summarized the school's teaching and learning practices as a "team sport." They elaborated in the interview: "It's kind of a team sport that you're in the same team and not only you are learning from the books, you're still you're also learning from each other, and there are so much to learn from each other." This insight highlights the powerful impact of these school visits on their understanding of collaborative education, reinforcing the value of shared learning experiences in their academic journey.

Another student mentioned in the interview the benefits of the professors' instructional approaches which fostered respect for different opinions and viewed mistakes as opportunities for learning:

I like teachers instructing approaches here. Students are free to express opinions freely and teachers do not criticize students correct or incorrect but discussing together. I consider this as a part of the U.S culture. This takeaway benefits my professional learning.

Students connected with one another through various activities, including peer reviews, professional presentations, and as dissertation co-authors. One student reflected during the interview on their experiences, stating:

Through three years study, I know the importance of collaboration. Although we sometimes we would meet conflict and disagreement, the collaboration is still important for our future work. It is very necessary to learn how to collaborate with others before officially entering the work position. And the ability to collaborate can also be cultivated. This is the ideological change that I received from the influence of American learning culture during my study in the United States.

Other students appreciated the opportunity to learn and practice different research methodologies, particularly qualitative research, which contrasted with their heritage culture that primarily focused on quantitative approaches. For example, one student highlighted this dichotomy in the interview:

Wow, I think it's the academic environment, I really love the researching and academic environment here. Because it is so



different from China. In China people really like the quantitative research, they really like it...for example, my researchers in the United States like the qualitative part, we could talk deeply and we could take a long time to chat with each other in interviews. I think it's, I can't say it isn't accepted in China, but most of professors, they really like the quantitative one. But for me, I think the qualitative research is very good because it's a deep interpretation of a person or an environment right? I think this is different about the research environment. United States has a better and tolerant environment for any research orientations and methods. And it gave a safer place or more space...

Students highly valued the development of new skills, such as self-reflection, and the opportunities for professional growth provided during the program. These opportunities included active engagement in various professional activities, such as conference presentations, as well as working closely with faculty members as graduate research assistants and /or co-researchers. For example, one of the participants described in the survey her engagement in an online conference:

Even though we were not able to take classes face-to-face, the professors still gave us a lot of help online. The professor led us to participate in many online conferences. In fact, online conferences are more convenient for us to attend than in-person conferences. Professors often share with us online learning resources, which are very helpful to us.

Growth, self-care, and the value of heritage culture.

The CIS indicated that they greatly appreciated the emotional and financial support from their families and friends in China, along with the backing received from their home institution. During interviews, they discussed how their experiences in the United States fostered greater independence, with many embracing the opportunity to learn new skills, such as driving and cooking. When asked about the most surprising aspects of transitioning to the United States, participants noted the diversity in culture, and remarked on "the way that American educators cultivate their students," describing it as "less hierarchical." One participant expressed interest in John Dewey's educational theories, mentioning their desire to observe American classrooms to see how "activities" aligned with Dewey's principles were implemented. However, students also noted a desire for more opportunities to observe K–12 classrooms. In terms of self-care, one student shared that they used a meditation app, went for walks, or visited the recreation center to swim when it reopened. Others found joy in online shopping, hiking, regular walks, listening to music, watching favorite TV shows, and engaging in other relaxing activities. This emphasis on self-care highlighted the importance of maintaining well-being during their academic journey, especially during stressful times, as stated by one of the students in the interview:

And sometimes I try to encourage myself. Sometimes I talk to myself: "OK, everything will be alright. Hope that things will go smoothly. So keep going on. Don't be upset, so don't be depressed. I will have a good result". So I need encouragement from myself, my friends or my family.

Self-care and motivation were particularly evident in students' discussions about their goals after graduation. One student emphasized this in the interview saying: "Yeah, but I think most important is my personal motivation and my personal effort." Additionally, some participants expressed a desire for more professional career guidance for graduate students, recognizing the

need for support in navigating their future paths. These activities provided a framework of ongoing support for the cohort and served as numerous touchpoints for maintaining connection during turbulent times. The combination of personal motivation, self-care practices, and structured support from faculty and peers created a resilient community that helped students navigate the challenges of their academic journey while preparing for their professional futures.

Participants learned to appreciate their cultural values even more during their study program. They emphasized the values of perseverance, resilience, strong work ethic, and problem-solving skills. These qualities became evident as they navigated academic challenges, allowing them to pursue their strengths in the face of difficulties. Many students reflected on how their cultural background instilled in them a determination to overcome obstacles, reinforcing their commitment to succeed in their doctoral studies while also enriching their personal growth throughout the experience. One student articulated this mindset well in the survey:

As for me, I have been accustomed to the study mode of high pressure since childhood. Therefore, when faced with academic challenges, I will adjust myself as soon as possible and try to find solutions. In addition, I will also search for more learning resources on academic websites or journals and books to expand my knowledge reserve. Even in the face of academic success, I will tell myself not to be proud and keep on learning with great concentration, and I still have a long way to go.

This perspective highlights how their cultural values not only shaped their approach to learning but also fueled their ongoing pursuit of knowledge and improvement.

Taken together, the findings reveal that Chinese international graduate students' experiences in the host country were shaped by a complex interplay between academic and socio-emotional challenges and the supports available within and beyond the university context. The first overarching theme captured the difficulties students faced in adapting to new academic expectations, linguistic and cultural barriers, and motivational struggles, particularly during the pandemic. The second overarching theme illustrated the range of supports that fostered resilience—relationships with faculty, peers, and family; engagement with the host culture's academic and social environment; and the transformative impact of new experiences. Across both themes, Chinese cultural heritage emerged as a guiding influence that shaped how students interpreted, responded to, and managed these experiences. Cultural values such as perseverance, interdependence, and respect for authority informed students' coping strategies and adjustment processes, demonstrating that resilience was culturally embedded rather than individually constructed. These interconnected findings collectively address the three research questions and set the stage for the discussion of how cultural identity, support systems, and contextual factors interact to promote persistence and well-being among Chinese international graduate students in U.S. higher education.

Discussion

Our findings reveal that the students faced challenges such as isolation, stress, and financial burdens, similar to previous studies (Cao et al., 2021; Zhang-Wu, 2018). However, they were able to overcome these obstacles through a combination of strong social and academic support systems, along with cultural virtues such as resiliency and a solid work ethic. These findings show the resilience

of CIS, even during the pandemic, and emphasize the importance of the interplay between host and heritage cultures. Consistent with Kokotsaki's (2023) study, this research found that CIS students employed a variety of coping mechanisms, such as leveraging social networks, to manage challenges. As Mian et al. (2020) reported, our findings also highlight the role of Chinese values, such as perseverance, resilience, strong work ethic, and problem-solving skills, in helping CIS to overcome challenges. The concept of collective coping, as suggested by Kuo (2013), helps explain the significant role these heritage cultural values play in fostering resilience among CIS. Collective coping fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity, which is particularly critical in stressful situations. In this study, CIS relied on peer networks through shared experiences and mutual understanding. This collective coping likely helped alleviate feelings of isolation, supported by collaborative learning and the overall support from the program. In contrast to the findings of Cao et al. (2021), who concluded that the "heritage culture, instead of the host academic context, . . . strongly affected Chinese students' behavioral features in class and their responses to academic stressors" (p. 242), our data suggest that our CIS relied on both their host and heritage cultures for the academic and social supports, as well as for coping strategies. The academic and socio-emotional challenges related to differences in the educational system, language, or culture were initially hard to adjust to. However, these challenges were ultimately embraced by the CIS as positive learning experiences and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Despite the difficulties encountered during their time in the host country, all participants successfully completed the program and graduated. Our findings also underscore the value of multiple layers of support – particularly from the academic program and faculty, which aligns with Cooper et al. (2023), who highlighted the importance of co-designed, community-driven strategies for health and well-being. The program provided both formal and informal opportunities for students to connect with peers, faculty, the university, and the broader community. This happened intentionally through the institution's cohort model framework (Lei et al., 2011; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), which fostered intercommunication and the development of social and professional connections, helping to build a sense of community (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The institutional support embedded within the cohort model promoted success, persistence, and retention overall (Berry, 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this research is that it does not capture the perspectives of all participants, as some voices were not represented in this study. Therefore, the authors exercise caution in generalizing the findings to the cohort as a whole. Additionally, potential misunderstandings may have arisen since all data collection was conducted in English, and some participants had intermediate-level English proficiency. This case study focused specifically on CIS students within a single geographic and institutional context. Future research should also explore resilience among international doctoral students from diverse backgrounds across multiple institutions to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that promote resilience.

In the future, a more nuanced approach within the program to deliberately articulate, communicate, and address cultural assets, barriers, supports, and differences could help facilitate acculturation early on. This proactive focus would better support cross-cultural

understanding during times of crisis. Aldwin's (2007) sociocultural model of coping suggests an individual's social context shapes the stress-coping process. In intercultural settings, it is beneficial for CIS to understand and reflect on the different stress management and coping strategies they experience within themselves, their cohort, and the larger cultural setting. For example, collectivist coping strategies play a significant role in this dynamic. The cohort model provides an organizational framework that intentionally fosters connections and cross-cultural understanding. Therefore, further research in this area is warranted to explore how such frameworks can enhance coping and acculturation among CIS.

Conclusion

This study explored the unique challenges faced by CIS during the COVID-19 pandemic in a three-year Ed.D. program focused on Inquiry in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at a Midwest university in the United States. The findings reveal that despite experiencing significant socio-emotional stressors—including isolation, increased academic pressures, and language barriers—CIS students demonstrated resilience through the integration of both host and heritage cultural values. They employed a combination of individual and collective coping strategies, such as self-regulation and peer support within cultural networks, while also benefiting from institutional support provided by the faculty and the cohort model.

The cohort model can be a powerful system for promoting multiple layers of support. By grouping students into structured cohorts, institutions can foster a sense of community, shared identity, and mutual support. For international students, the cohort model can create a stable peer network that offers consistent opportunities for collective coping. As cohort members navigate their programs together, they can mitigate feelings of isolation and create a collaborative environment for addressing and overcoming academic and cultural challenges.

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