

Cultural Capital Deficit and Identity Resistance: Undergraduate Chinese Migration Students in the US

Yunshu Cao

English literature and linguistic, Shue Yan University, Hong Kong, 999077, China

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Chinese undergraduate students in the United States, aiming to explore the specific signs of their cultural capital shortages, the strategies they use to cope with these issues, and how the relationship between these factors affects their cultural adaptation. It uses survey questionnaires and literature review methods, selecting 33 Chinese undergraduates from Purdue University as research subjects. The study examines how cultural capital deficits manifest in academic and social settings, along with identity resistance strategies such as cultural isolation, positive reconstruction, and mixed identity. The research is grounded in Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and identity resistance. It centers on two key areas: academic settings and social interactions. The study initially finds that Chinese international students, because their embodied cultural capital (i.e., notably Confucian values) doesn't align with the dominant cultural norms of American higher education (which emphasize critical thinking and active class participation), experience a significant cultural capital deficit. In response, they employ various resistance strategies, including passive avoidance (i.e., relying on the Chinese social circle and WeChat), active cultural reconfiguration (i.e., engaging in Chinese cultural associations to assert cultural identity), and mixed identity negotiation (i.e., accepting American values selectively while maintaining core Chinese cultural aspects).

KEYWORDS

Cultural capital deficit; Identity resistance; Mixed identity negotiation; Chinese undergraduate students in the U.S

1 Introduction

International educational exchanges have become increasingly frequent due to the development of globalization. A large number of Chinese undergraduate students travel to the United States to pursue their studies, hoping to achieve academic growth and personal development in a cross-cultural environment. As Li (2019) notes, China and the United States have reached a certain degree of economic and strategic interdependence, which has expanded intellectual exchanges and increased bilateral cooperation between scientists and researchers, including student training ^[1](Li et al., 2019, p. 4). However, there are profound differences between China and the United States in terms of cultural traditions, educational models, and values. These differences directly affect the daily study and social interaction of international students. Lai (2023) supports that the difficulties in adapting to the new environment may impact the academic success and overall well-being of international students, including social and cultural issues, as well as the academic challenges they may face in the new educational environment ^[2](Lai, Wang & Ou, 2023, p. 1). Specifically, the indigenous cultural capital carried by Chinese international students often experiences a depreciation within the academic and social contexts of the United States, resulting in a kind of "cultural capital deficit". This deficit causes difficulties for the students in scenarios including classroom participation, academic writing, and social interaction. To address these challenges, the students often resort to various forms of identity resistance to maintain their cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Although previous studies have focused on the issue of cultural adaptation among international students ^[3](Oramas, Gringarten, & Mitchell, 2018), there has been insufficient exploration of the intrinsic relationship between cultural capital deficit and identity resistance, and particularly a lack of in-depth analysis of the subjectivity of non-Western students. This study focuses on American undergraduate Chinese international students, examining their specific manifestations of cultural capital deficit, identity resistance strategies, and the impact of both on cultural adaptation.

2 Literature review

The theoretical background of this study is rooted in the theory of cultural capital, identity research, and transnational migration theory, as well as the existing research results on Chinese students in American higher education. These three elements jointly form the core support of the analytical framework of this study. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital offers a crucial perspective for understanding resource inequality in cross-cultural contexts.

Bourdieu used the term "cultural fields" to explain how capital works. The value of cultural capital is not fixed but depends on the "field," which refers to the power structure and rules within a specific social space. He believed that taste could be linked to a person's social status. Cultural capital is primarily acquired through a person's initial learning and is subtly influenced by their surrounding environment ^[4](Huang, 2019, p. 51). In a cross-cultural context, it can cause conflicts in domain rules. The educational norms familiar to Chinese international students (i.e., the teacher as the authoritative figure and a focus on knowledge memorization) differ significantly from those in the United States (i.e., equal dialogue between teachers and students, emphasizing innovation, and questioning). This mismatch can diminish or

even erase the positive effects of their original cultural capital (i.e., test-taking abilities) in the new setting. Heng (2018) notes that students face difficulties with teaching methods that emphasize group cooperation and classroom participation. Specifically, they are not accustomed to being asked to think critically and challenge the teacher's viewpoints^[5] (Heng, 2018, p. 6).

This "field dependence" also causes another form of cultural capital deficit, which appears as symbolic violence. Bourdieu (1979) describes symbolic power as the dominant class, based on economic and political capital, attempting to legitimize its rule through symbolic production (such as speeches and writings) or through conservative ideologists who serve the interests of the ruling segment^[6] (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 5). The mainstream culture in the United States enacts "symbolic violence" against non-Western cultures, implicitly devaluing them through hidden rules, which can easily lead international students to believe their cultural capital is inadequate. Bourdieu's theories clarify that the core of "deficit" is not that international students lack cultural capital, but that their original capital has been diminished or excluded in the new environment. Additionally, it links "deficit" with "resistance." When their original capital is denied, the identity resistance of international students essentially seeks to revalue their cultural capital in the new context.

Identity resistance involves proactive efforts by minority or marginalized groups to defend their own identities when faced with oppression, stereotypes, or cultural dominance from mainstream society. Resistance occurs when an identity refuses to accept the content presented through communication. These resistance points or moments can develop into larger social reactions, moving beyond isolated exchanges and becoming part of organized and constructive efforts that influence societal thought patterns^[7] (Duveen, 2013). Mainstream society often labels minority groups with oversimplified tags. Resistance, however, challenges and deconstructs these labels through actions or words, reclaiming the right to define one's identity. With increasing globalization, immigrant groups no longer simply adapt in a two-way process but instead create identities that go beyond national borders. As Vorobeva (2023) explains, immigrants take action, make decisions, expand their consciousness, and shape their identities within social networks, linking them to two or more societies at once^[8] (Vorobeva & Jauhiainen, 2023, p. 4). From this point of view, the primary motivation for international students' resistance comes from their rejection of the negative labels imposed by mainstream culture. This resistance can lead to the formation of new identities, such as mixed or transnational identities, and reshape the understanding of "cultural adaptation." Identity studies and transnational migration theories provide the theoretical frameworks for analyzing the subjective actions of international students.

Research on Chinese international students in the United States offers an empirical reference within a specific context for this study. The number and scale of Chinese international students in American higher education are dominant. In recent years, the number of international students has risen sharply, with Chinese students making up the largest group. The region's growing economy, large population, and the emphasis on education in China—traditional factors encouraging families to send their children to study in the U.S.—all play key roles^[9] (Wang, 2016, p.3).

This research primarily examines Chinese international students in the U. S. from three perspectives: cultural adaptation, academic challenges, and social integration. Tung (2016) notes that Asian students face greater challenges in adapting to life in American universities than their European counterparts. Among Asian groups, Chinese students face even greater obstacles during adaptation^[10] (Tung, 2016, p. 2). They may struggle with classroom participation because of unfamiliarity with U. S. classroom interaction norms, such as the focus on critical thinking and active engagement. Furthermore, in social interactions, they may experience a sense of alienation when communicating with American classmates due to cultural differences, such as understanding humor and slang. Although existing studies have analyzed international students in U.S. higher education, there has been limited research on the active identity resistance behaviors Chinese students use when facing issues like a lack of cultural capital and the mechanisms behind these behaviors.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study employs a combined approach of questionnaire surveys and literature review, aiming to systematically investigate the phenomenon of cultural capital deficit and identity resistance among Chinese undergraduate students in the United States. The questionnaire serves as the primary data collection tool, focusing on capturing participants' actual experiences and behavioral tendencies. Its design is strictly aligned with the key dimensions of the research topic. Approximately 30 participants from Purdue University in the United States will be purposively sampled, representing different academic years, lengths of stay in the U.S., and fields of study to ensure diversity and to better understand how various factors influence cultural capital deficiency and resistance strategies.

3.2 Procedure

The study uses a Google Forms questionnaire to gather data across four sections. The personal information section collects data such as students' year, duration in the U.S., and field of study, serving as a basis for analyzing differences among groups. The cultural capital deficit section examines impacts related to academic, social, workplace scenarios, and

educational background, providing a comprehensive view of how cultural capital gaps manifest. The identity resistance section includes questions about social media preferences, willingness to promote Chinese culture, and value system choices, to explore different forms of resistance. The final section examines how deficits in cultural capital impact belonging, evaluates resistance methods, and explores the tension between adapting to cultural norms and preserving self-identity. This creates a framework to analyze the connection between cultural capital deficit and identity resistance.

3.3 Materiel

The questionnaire is anonymous, mostly featuring closed-ended questions to maintain objectivity and facilitate statistical analysis. Clear instructions and confidentiality commitments help alleviate participants' concerns and enhance the authenticity of their responses.

The literature review complements the questionnaire by clarifying the theoretical concepts of cultural capital deficit and identity resistance and providing a foundation for questionnaire design. It also aids in interpreting survey data within a broader academic context. Comparing findings with existing research helps confirm the originality and broader relevance of the results, strengthening the study's theoretical depth and persuasiveness. In the process, both classical theories and recent studies will be considered to support a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of Chinese students' cross-cultural experiences in the U.S.

4 Findings and discussion

This research questionnaire primarily encompasses three dimensions: the manifestations and impacts of cultural capital deficit within academic and social contexts, its interconnections with identity resistance strategies, and the persistence of one's cultural identity alongside the formation of a hybrid identity. Based on the questionnaire responses, cultural capital deficit emerges as a particularly salient issue in academic settings. In Figure 1, when queried about the difficulty of engaging in critical thinking and articulating viewpoints in class, a substantial 65% of respondents selected "relatively difficult" or "extremely difficult" (Figure 1). Furthermore, Figure 2 shows that over half (54.5%) of the participants indicated inadequate preparedness to meet the requirements of American academic conventions, such as citation formats and logical structures, during the process of academic writing (Figure 2).

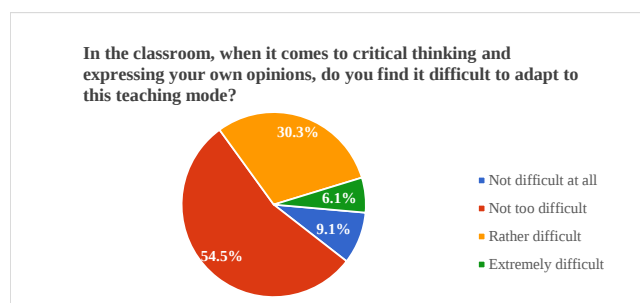


Figure 1

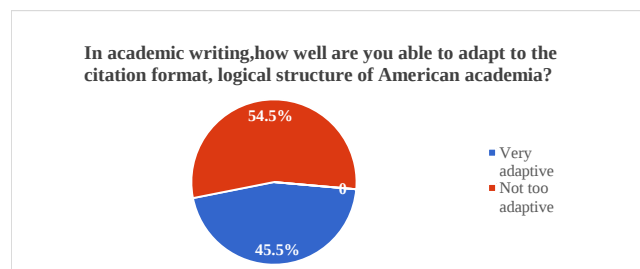


Figure 2

This finding reveals that Chinese undergraduate international students face substantial challenges in adapting to the academic culture and its associated capital. The cultural capital accumulated through China's long-standing exam-oriented education system struggles to exert efficacy within the American academic context, which places a premium on critical thinking, thereby giving rise to a capital deficit. Due to Sino-U.S. cultural and educational disparities, Chinese international students may encounter conflicting expectations during their transition to American classrooms, often confronting unfamiliar pedagogical approaches and learning modalities ^[11] (Ching et al., 2017, p. 5). This deficit has impinged upon international students' classroom participation and academic performance, with potential ramifications for their academic achievements and self-assurance. As noted by Abdusamatov et al. (2024), when immigrant students endeavor to adapt to a multicultural environment distinct from their own, even if they achieve a degree of proficiency in

mastering educational content, they may remain unable to dispel the sense of external stigma stemming from language barriers or other discrepancies ^[12](p. 11). Moreover, it is plausible to conjecture that the existence of this academic cultural capital imbalance may place international students at a relative disadvantage in academic competition and precipitate self-doubt regarding their academic capabilities.

Beyond the academic sphere, social interactions present additional challenges: difficulties in communicating with American peers and unfamiliarity with social norms are prevalent among Chinese students. Specifically, Figure 3 indicates that 69.7% of respondents reported occasional communication barriers with American classmates due to cultural differences (Table 3), while in Figure 4, 84.8% experienced mild to significant discomfort when participating in U.S. campus social activities, stemming from a lack of familiarity with prevailing norms (Figure 4).

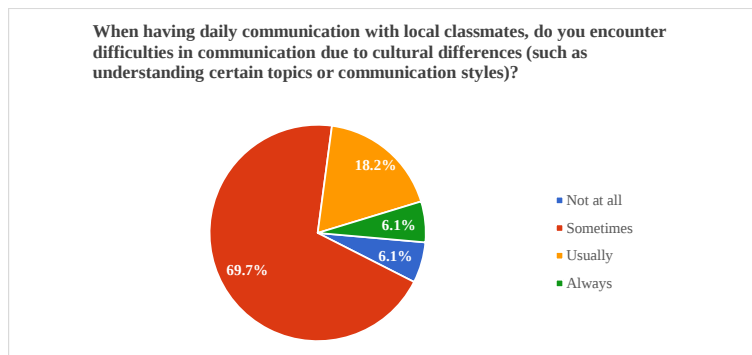


Figure 3

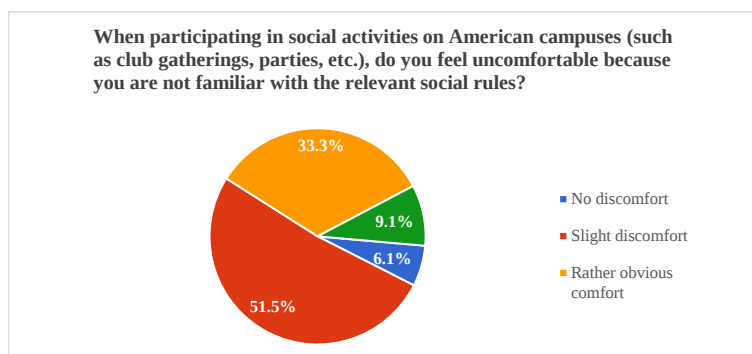


Figure 4

Figure 5 describes whether Chinese international students tend to build friendships with compatriots or Americans. Meanwhile, in terms of identity resistance strategies, approximately 58% of the students tend to establish friendships mainly with Chinese international students and have less in-depth interactions with their American classmates (Figure 5). Figure 6 demonstrates the social platforms used by Chinese international students in the U.S. Nearly half of the students use Chinese social media more frequently and use local American social media less (Figure 6).

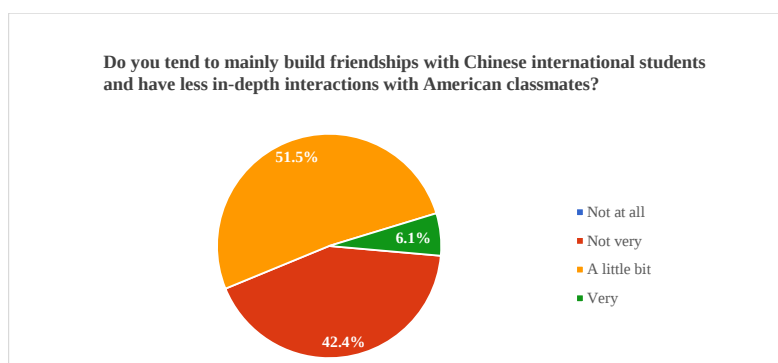


Figure 5

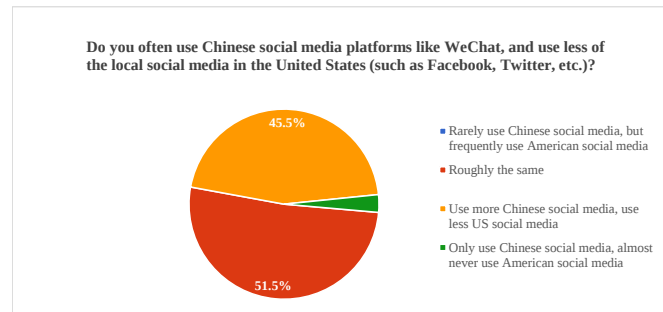


Figure 6

This result highlights that Chinese undergraduate international students also confront a deficit in social cultural capital, as their inherent sociocultural habits and knowledge systems prove incompatible in interactions with American peers. The resistance strategies they employ are predominantly passive, characterized by reinforcing bonds with compatriots and relying on familiar Chinese social media platforms to minimize engagement with mainstream American sociocultural contexts. Although some students are keen on forming friendships with people from different backgrounds, others are not interested in this. They find it difficult to resist the appeal, comfort, and ease of interacting with their fellow countrymen ^[13] (Spencer-Oatey, 2017, p. 15). While such passive resistance may, to a certain extent, afford international students a sense of psychological security and cultural belonging, it risks exacerbating cultural isolation in the long term, thereby impeding their genuine integration into American society.

The findings of Figure 7 reveal that when navigating the tension between American and Chinese values, 75.8% of respondents opted for a stance of “selectively embracing American values while preserving significant traditional Chinese cultural values” (Figure 7). According to Figure 8, regarding whether Chinese international students have managed to strike a balance between adapting to American culture and maintaining their Chinese identity. Additionally, 72.7% of Chinese undergraduate students in the U.S. perceived themselves as having achieved a favorable balance between adapting to American culture and upholding their Chinese cultural identity (Figure 8).

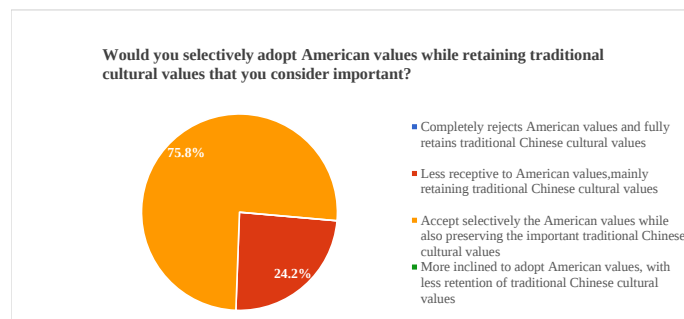


Figure 7

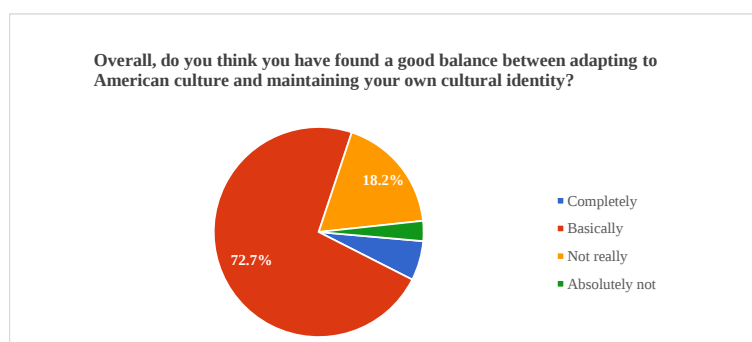


Figure 8

This finding indicates that the majority of Chinese undergraduate international students, when confronted with cultural shock in the United States, can maintain their cultural identity while, to a certain extent, endeavoring to accommodate American culture, thereby forging a blended identity. As noted by Li (2025), Chinese international students, upon returning to China, not only reinforced their robust sense of Chinese identity but also cultivated a deliberate international perspective^[14] (p. 11). This phenomenon mirrors the attitudes adopted by international students amid the process of cultural adaptation: rather than uncritically embracing American culture in its entirety, they strive to strike a

balance between the two cultural systems and address issues of cultural capital deficit and conflicts through the construction of a hybrid identity. Such a dynamic underscores the positive impacts of overseas study programs in enhancing national identity, facilitating cross-cultural understanding, and fostering the formation of a shared cultural consciousness.

5 Conclusion

This study examined 33 Chinese undergraduate students enrolled at Purdue University in the United States. Utilizing a combination of questionnaire surveys and literature review, it investigated the phenomenon of cultural capital deficit, identity resistance strategies, and their interrelationship throughout the cross-cultural adaptation process. The findings indicate that the cultural capital deficit among Chinese students primarily manifests in two dimensions: academic and social. To address this deficit, international students adopted both passive and active identity resistance strategies. Nevertheless, most respondents opted for a mixed identity strategy, asserting that they achieved a balance between cultural adaptation and the preservation of their cultural identity. Overall, the identity resistance demonstrated by Chinese international students should not be regarded as a straightforward confrontation with mainstream culture. Rather, it represents a process of actively pursuing cultural legitimacy within the prevailing power structure. This process not only alleviates the pressures of marginalization brought about by cultural capital deficit but also enables the re-establishment of cultural identity in the interplay between two cultures. These findings offer a novel perspective for understanding the subjectivity of non-Western international students and provide empirical evidence to inform the development of cross-cultural support policies at universities. Nevertheless, this study is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, the sample lacks sufficient representativeness, as all research participants were drawn exclusively from Purdue University, and the sample size was limited (33 individuals). Consequently, the study does not encompass international students from a variety of American universities or professional fields, which may hinder its ability to reflect the overall characteristics of the broader international student population. Additionally, the research methodology is also constrained. While the quantitative approach based on questionnaire surveys facilitates the identification of behavioral tendencies, it does not allow for an in-depth exploration of the psychological motivations and dynamic changes underlying identity resistance among international students. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size and incorporating longitudinal tracking and in-depth interviews to examine differences among international student groups from various universities and with different durations of residence in the United States. Furthermore, future studies should consider the long-term effects of interactions between Chinese and American cultures within the context of globalization on the construction of international students' identities.

References

- [1] Li, W., Zhao, S., Lu, Z., Yu, W., & Li, X. (2019). Student migration: Evidence from Chinese students in the US and China. *International Migration*, 57(3), 334-353.
- [2] Lai, H., Wang, D., & Ou, X. (2023). Cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students in the United States: Acculturation strategies, sociocultural, psychological, and academic adaptation. *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 924561.
- [3] Oramas, J. E., Gringarten, H., & Mitchell, L. (2018). Chinese students in US universities: A qualitative study of cross-cultural learning experiences, transition, and adaptation. *Journal of International & Interdisciplinary Business Research (2014-2019)*, 5(1), 21-40.
- [4] Huang, X. (2019). Understanding Bourdieu-cultural capital and habitus. *Rev. Eur. Stud.*, 11, 45.
- [5] Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in higher education*, 43(1), 22-36.
- [6] Bourdieu, P. (1979). Symbolic power. *Critique of anthropology*, 4(13-14), 77-85.
- [7] Duveen, G. (2013). 12 Representations, identities, resistance. *Development as a social process*, 182.
- [8] Vorobeva, E., & Jauhiainen, J. S. (2023). Transnationalism and belonging: national identity negotiations and their outcomes. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(13), 3389-3408.
- [9] Wang, M. (2016). The impact of cultural values on Chinese students in American higher education. *Qualitative Report*, 21(4).
- [10] Tung, M. L. (2016). The Roots of the Challenge: Undergraduate Chinese Students Adjusting to American College Life. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 5(3), 121-130.
- [11] Ching, Y., Renes, S. L., McMurrow, S., Simpson, J., & Strange, A. T. (2017). Challenges facing Chinese international students studying in the United States. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 12(8), 473-482.
- [12] Abdusamatov, K., Babajanova, D., Egamberdiev, D., Xodjiyev, Y., Tukhtaev, U., Yusupov, N., & Shoislomova, S. (2024). Challenges faced by migrant students in education: a comprehensive analysis of legal, psychological, and economic barriers. *Qubahan Academic Journal*, 4(4), 330-360.
- [13] Spencer-Oatey, H., Dauber, D., Jing, J., & Lifei, W. (2017). Chinese students' social integration into the university community: Hearing the students' voices. *Higher Education*, 74(5), 739-756.
- [14] Li, M. (2025). Linguistic, Sociocultural, and Hybrid Identity Development: A Literature Review of International Students' Experiences in China. *Human Resources, Education and Public Policy*, 1(1), 1-20.