

## **Introduction**

With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing into 2022, most people now recognize that together with its threat to physical health the pandemic has brought serious threat to our mental health as well. Lockdown and quarantine disrupt people's original life and plunge them into endless feeling of insecurity and isolation as the end of the pandemic looms uncertain. Lots of people develop mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and many are losing sleep due to the excessive pressure. While our society now notices this problem and starts taking efforts, there is still a neglected group that requires special attention when trying to handle the mental health threat of the pandemic: Asian international students. While all people suffer from great social upheavals, it is always the minority groups that suffer the most, since they possess fewer social resources and are in disadvantageous social status that could further exacerbate their suffering. Asian international students suffered from social discrimination long before the pandemic, but the outbreak of the pandemic has further reinforced the discrimination that they experience. It is argued in this paper that Asian international students, far away from their families and increasingly being isolated, are at higher risk of developing mental health problems. The paper starts by reviewing the extent research on the issue, then analyzes illustrate the different cultural and social factors contributing to the risk, and finally propose suggestions to help improve the mental health of Asian international students.

## **Literature Review**

While research about people's mental health amid the current pandemic abounds, there is little specifically on international students, and rare on Asian international students.

Researchers did notice the vulnerability of international students to mental illness amid COVID-19. For example, Chen, Li, Wu, and Tong (2020) highlighted the significance to pay more attention to the mental health of international students, suggesting that international students are not only have difficulty to access public resources, but also find it difficult to have their needs addressed by their schools or the host countries. They briefly touched upon the specific hardship of Asian international students who are either “scapegoated for spreading the virus or be attacked” for their different pandemic reaction due to cultural differences (Chen, 2020, p.54). Lai et al. (2020) identified similar challenges for international students through comparing the different experiences of international students who went back to their home countries (returnees) and who stayed at the host countries (stayer), concluding that stayers suffered from higher stresses due to the lack of social support and that the pandemic could exacerbate their stresses. However, their research did not focus precisely on Asian international students and there was little analysis from a cultural perspective.

The importance of a cultural analysis in addressing the current topic is self-evident. Humphrey and Forbes-Mewett (2021) conducted research to study the mental health of international students during the pandemic. Their research, albeit conducted in Australia, is of special relevance to the current research topic since they identified that cultural differences had a role in forging the experiences of international student during the pandemic and thereby impacted their mental health (Humphrey and Forbes-Mewett, 2021). For example, the difference between the collective culture of China rendered Chinese international students rather difficult to adapt into the individualistic culture of Australia amid the pandemic (Humphrey and Forbes-Mewett, 2021). The current research, on the basis of extant research,

seeks to focus specifically on Asian Chinese students in the U.S. Given the huge cultural differences between Asian countries and the U.S., it is reasonable to assume that Asian international students have rather different pandemic experiences compared with native students. Their experience is further added by functioning social factors that are either pandemic-specific or race-specific. This paper intends to identify both the cultural and social factors and their interplay in forging impact on the mental health of Asian international students and to figure out specific ways to help this minority group.

### **Factors Building the Vulnerability**

To begin with, it must be acknowledged that mental illness is a serious problem among Asian international students. Statistics abound on the mental health of international students, but little specifically on Asian international students. A 2019 statistic discovered that about half of the total 490 international students investigated “met the clinical standards for depression, and one-fourth had moderate to severe anxiety” (Zhang, 2021). Despite the lack of statistics, many reports did highlight the issue facing Asian international students. Exemplarily, Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis’s (2008) research suggested that compared with European international students, Asian international students faced larger stress and “scored significantly higher on the anxiety measure” (p.250). And Hahm and Hsu (2021) stressed the very vulnerability of Asian international students to mental illness who face social stigma and discrimination amid the current pandemic.

A cultural perspective in the very first place suggests that the difference between the individualist American culture and the collective Chinese culture renders Asian international students vulnerable in the face of the pandemic, thereby increasing their likelihood of

developing mental illness. Hofstede (2011) identified a total of six cultural dimensions including power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence, among which individualism is defined as “the degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups” (p.11). According to this model, major Asian countries, such as China, South Korea, and Japan all exhibit lower level of individualism as compared with the U.S. (See **Table 1**). Historically, all these three countries are under the impact of Confucianism that stresses a family-centered collectivism. In the contemporary world, it is stressed more in terms of mutual relationship and assistance, which manifests in the current pandemic is the community-based mutual help as seen in China. Doubtlessly, mutual help and connections provide both solid material support and stable mental support to individuals going through the crisis.

	U.S.	China	South Korea	Japan
Individualism Score	91	20	18	46

**Table 1** Individualism of Countries In Comparison

(Source from: Hofstede Insight: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/japan,the-usa/>)

For Asian international students, the pandemic increasingly isolates them, increases their feeling of loneliness and helplessness, and gives rise to serious mental illness such as anxiety and depression. They on the one hand are thousands of miles away from their families. Even though contact could be kept through online communications, the feeling of loneliness is still strong due to the physical distance. Closure of campus could deteriorate the situation as it cuts students from their teachers and classmates, from whom they might have been acquiring

the least minimum of support. On the other hand, they struggle to adapt to the American individualistic culture. They might find it difficult to acquire either material or spiritual support from surrounding people. Language and cultural differences have important role in their hardship. They might find it difficult to resort to the right institutions for health information and are thereby under greater pressure as to how to protect themselves from the virus. The health system in the U.S. is different from that of their home countries. They also have difficult in accessing needed medical treatment.

More important, the different pandemic-reacting actions due to the cultural difference could put Asian international students at a loss as well. The research of Maaravi et al. (2021) discovered that culture plays a role in the spread of the pandemic and that “The more individualistic participants were, the higher the chances they would not adhere to epidemic prevention measures” (p.37). Asian international students might not be able to understand the Americans’ resistance to wear masks. Such different in cognition towards the role of face masks could result in serious conflicts between the two groups. According to Lai et al. (2021), while East Asian students proactively engaged in countermeasures, Western students in the U.K. were unwilling to learn from East Asian students and to wear facemasks. In contrast, Chinese international students wearing facemasks there were increasingly stigmatized and suffering from xenophobia due to their active pandemic-preventing measures like wearing facemask (Lai et al., 2021). In short words, wearing a facemask could convince native students that those international students are different from them and further isolate Asian international students. Under huge social pressure, both from the pandemic and from

the surrounding environment, the risk of Asian international students to develop mental health problems is high.

The pandemic exacerbates the long-entrenched racism and xenophobia in the U.S. and deteriorates the situations of Asian international students. Particularly, when the pandemic firstly emerged, a lot of people viewed as a Chinese virus and blamed China for its spreading. Chinese international students thereby suffer from lots of discrimination, segregation, and even violence in the U.S (Hahm and Hsu, 2021). Notably, Chinese international students are not the mere victims to stigmatization and racial prejudice. Students from other Asian countries are the victims too. Research has revealed that people's existing stereotypes and beliefs about Asians played the major role in their stigmatizing Asians during the pandemic (Grabmeier, 2020). The fact about the origin of the virus does not really matter. Some people pour their anger onto all Asians alike because they have long stereotyped Asians. Statistics identified 3,800 racist incidents in 2020 against Asians, including violence towards older Asian Americans (Yam, 2021). As such, what Asian international students must strive to cope with is not only the pandemic of COVID-19, but also the pandemic of racism. Mental health problems do not emerge out of nowhere, but originate from individuals' interaction and communication with the surrounding environment. For Asian international students, a hostile and isolated environment with which they can never feel a feeling of belonging renders them huge spiritual pressure which in turn gives rise to a variety of mental health issues.

### **Recommended Actions and Conclusion**

The above analysis highlights the very vulnerability of Asian international students to mental illness due to the cultural and societal factors they are facing at present and therefore

the need for the public to take actions to better protect them. It must be noted that efforts to fight the pandemic must be conducted together with efforts to improve people's mental health, which makes the measures of pandemic prevention and control more effective.

Government and schools could consider the following as a way to better help Asian international students:

Firstly, campuses should strive to create a more inclusive environment through establishing programs or seminars that educate and inform students of the truth about the pandemic and that work on correcting their notions about race;

Secondly, school administrators should specifically consider the settlement of Asian international students during campus lockdown to ensure that they are not cut off from people they know, and offer more opportunities of social interaction to Asian international students through organizing online communication programs;

Lastly, the government should increase publicizing efforts to educate the public to form the right cognition about the pandemic, either its origin or prevention, so as to steer them away from stigmatizing Asians.

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