

Exploring Health Concerns among Chinese International Graduate Students in Manila Post-COVID-19: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: This study investigated the health concerns of Chinese international graduate students in Manila after the COVID-19 pandemic by looking into (1) the health concerns of Chinese international students upon returning to face-to-face classes post-COVID-19 in Manila; (2) the approaches employed by Chinese international students to manage their health concerns during their stay in the Philippines post-COVID-19 pandemic; and (3) the desired assistance of the students from the university or the Chinese government when face-to-face study returned in Manila. This involved 12 Chinese international students studying in the doctoral program at St. Paul University Manila, who have been traveling in and out of the Philippines since the beginning of their academic program in the College of Education. They willingly participated in an online survey featuring three open-ended questions focusing on (1) health concerns upon resuming face-to-face classes post-COVID-19 in Manila; (2) strategies utilized to address health concerns during their stay in the Philippines post-pandemic; and (3) the assistance they hoped to receive from the university or the Chinese government upon the return to face-to-face study in Manila. Participant's responses were collected and subjected to thematic analysis. The discussion was conducted by examining the themes identified and connecting them with the theories guiding the study. The study revealed four themes under 'health concerns of Chinese international students upon returning to face-to-face classes post-COVID-19 in Manila'; three under 'approaches employed by Chinese international students to manage their health concerns during their stay in the Philippines post-COVID-19 pandemic'; and three under 'desired assistance from the university or the Chinese government when face-to-face study returned'.

Keywords: Health concerns, Chinese international graduate students, Post-COVID-19, St. Paul University Manila

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected higher education globally, prompting significant changes in academic delivery and student life. Among the most impacted are international students, who often face unique challenges adjusting to new environments, cultures, and health systems. Chinese international students, in particular, constitute a substantial portion of the global student population and have encountered distinct hurdles amidst the pandemic. The pandemic also brought about confusion and conflicting perceptions among students, even among those shaped by the health sciences (Bantugan, 2023a; Bantugan, 2023b), that is likely to influence attitudes when classes returned to onsite delivery.

As face-to-face classes gradually resumed after the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese international students in Manila found themselves navigating a myriad of health concerns. Spending extended periods away from their home country, they encountered unfamiliar healthcare systems, cultural differences, and heightened anxieties related to their well-being. These circumstances necessitate a thorough investigation into the specific health challenges faced by this demographic and the strategies employed to manage them.

This study holds significant importance for multiple reasons. Firstly, it is crucial to understand the health concerns of Chinese international students in Manila post-COVID-19 to ensure their well-being and academic success. Identifying their primary health worries enables institutions to develop targeted support systems and interventions to address these issues effectively. Secondly, examining how these students manage their health concerns while in the Philippines provides insights into their resilience and coping mechanisms, informing the development of tailored health promotion programs and services. Lastly, exploring the desired types of assistance from both the university and the Chinese government upon the resumption of face-to-face classes offers guidance for policymakers and educational institutions. By aligning support services with students' specific needs and preferences, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment conducive to academic success and personal well-being. Overall, this study aims to illuminate the nuanced health challenges of Chinese international students in Manila post-COVID-19 and provide actionable recommendations for enhancing their overall health and academic experience.

Health Concerns of Chinese International Students Post-COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected international students' health and well-being globally, with studies highlighting increased mental and physical health challenges exacerbated by factors such as fear of contagion, frustration, and limited access to resources (Wang et al., 2020; Di Malta et al., 2022). Chinese international students, in particular, have faced heightened grievances, experiencing elevated levels of depression and anxiety due to sudden transitions to remote learning and challenges with daily activities like purchasing food (Esses & Hamilton, 2021; Chi & Becker et al., 2020). Accessing healthcare services, language barriers, and cultural differences have further compounded health anxieties among this demographic during the pandemic (Zhao, Kong, & Nam, 2024). As face-to-face classes resumed in Manila post-COVID-19, Chinese international students encountered transition challenges, including readjusting to in-person social interactions, managing academic workload pressures, and navigating concerns about virus transmission and safety precautions (Munir, 2022; Greenhalgh et al., 2021).

Coping Strategies and Health Management Among Chinese International Students. Chinese international students in the Philippines employ various coping mechanisms to address health concerns, drawing on cultural practices and modern strategies (Jin & Acharya, 2021). Cultural coping involves adhering to traditional dietary guidelines, engaging in familiar physical activities, and seeking advice from elders or family members who have lived abroad. Additionally, students actively seek medical resources, consulting local healthcare professionals and utilizing technology for remote consultations (Cannon et al., 2021). They also form support networks within the local community and prioritize self-care through healthy habits and stress management (Morgan, 2021). Adaptation strategies to navigate unfamiliar healthcare systems and cultural differences include understanding local systems, seeking support, learning the language, and following local laws (Zhu et al., 2023). Social support networks and community resources, including university services and online platforms, play a vital role in promoting student health and resilience by providing mental health support and facilitating information sharing (Zhu et al., 2023).

Support Systems and Assistance Desired by International Students. Upon the return of face-to-face classes, international students seek various forms of assistance from their universities, including academic support to adapt to classroom demands, cultural integration assistance, practical help with living arrangements, and mental health support to manage the transition (Norman et al., 2023). Similarly, their preferences for

support services and resources to address health-related needs are comprehensive, encompassing access to healthcare facilities for prompt medical attention, participation in health education and prevention programs, and seeking mental health support during stressful periods (Wiedermann et al., 2023). Moreover, they value having a support network of peers and mentors for emotional support and advice. Regarding assistance from the Chinese government or consulate in Manila post-epidemic, students face various challenges and expect comprehensive support systems to promote their overall well-being and development (Park et al., 2020). They appreciate friendly signals on student visas, updated visa and employment policies, simplified application processes, scholarship aid, and financial assistance to ease their burdens (Moscaritolo et al., 2022). A strategic plan at the national level would be a crucial guarantee for foreign students' well-being and success (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

II. Study Framework

Integrating Ecological Systems Theory (EST), Health Belief Model (HBM), and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the health concerns, coping strategies, and support needs of Chinese international students in Manila post-COVID-19.

EST. Developed by Bronfenbrenner in 1974, EST elucidates the intricate interactions between individuals and their environments, shaping development over time. According to EST, multiple interconnected systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, collectively influence individuals' growth and responses (Cherry, 2023). In the context of this study, the microsystem encompasses the immediate environments of Chinese international students in Manila, including their university, peers, and local community, which significantly impact their health concerns, coping mechanisms, and access to support services. The mesosystem highlights interactions between these microsystem components, elucidating how the university environment intersects with cultural norms and healthcare systems, shaping students' perceptions of health risks and available resources. Moreover, the exosystem incorporates broader external influences like government policies and cultural attitudes towards health, influencing students' experiences and coping strategies while studying in Manila. EST, by emphasizing the intricate interplay between individuals and their environments, provides a strategic framework for addressing health challenges and designing effective interventions and support systems tailored to the needs of Chinese international students.

HBM. The HBM, proposed by Rosenstock in 1960, underscores that the perception of a health threat is shaped by general health values, specific beliefs about vulnerability to the threat, and beliefs about its consequences (Mckellar & Silence, 2020). This model is pivotal in investigating the health challenges faced by Chinese students in Manila post-COVID-19 and their coping strategies. In this context, the HBM enables a deep understanding of students' beliefs, attitudes, and motivations regarding health issues, guiding targeted health education and support efforts. By applying the HBM, the study can analyze students' perceptions of COVID-19 risk, explore their psychological and practical challenges, and uncover their coping strategies. For Chinese international students, beliefs about the severity of COVID-19, susceptibility in Manila, and the effectiveness of coping strategies influence health concerns and behaviors. Furthermore, perceived barriers such as language, healthcare system unfamiliarity, and cultural differences may impede students from seeking support or adopting preventive measures, underscoring the importance of addressing these barriers for their well-being and academic success.

TMCP. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping model posits that individuals engage in a primary appraisal process to assess the degree of threat posed by a stressful event to their well-being. This model emphasizes the dynamic nature of stress and coping, highlighting individuals' appraisal of stressors and their efforts to manage them. For Chinese international students in Manila, the return to face-to-face classes amid the ongoing pandemic may induce stress due to concerns about health risks, academic performance, and

social adjustment (Sawang&Oei, 2010). Coping strategies, categorized into problem-focused coping (e.g., seeking information about local healthcare services) and emotion-focused coping (e.g., seeking social support from peers), are crucial in mitigating stressors and promoting resilience (Stanisławski, 2019). The availability of social support from various sources influences students' coping effectiveness and overall well-being, underscoring the importance of a supportive environment for managing stressors effectively (Gol and Cook, 2004).

III. Statement of the Problem

This study investigated the health concerns of Chinese international students in Manila after the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done by looking into (1) the health concerns of Chinese international students upon returning to face-to-face classes post-COVID-19 in Manila; (2) the approaches employed by Chinese international students to manage their health concerns during their stay in the Philippines post-COVID-19 pandemic; and (3) the desired assistance of the students from the university or the Chinese government when face-to-face study returned in Manila.

IV. Methodology

This research involved 12 Chinese international students studying in the doctoral program at St. Paul University Manila, who have been traveling in and out of the Philippines since the beginning of their academic program in the College of Education. They willingly participated in an online survey featuring three open-ended questions focusing on (1) health concerns upon resuming face-to-face classes post-COVID-19 in Manila; (2) strategies utilized to address health concerns during their stay in the Philippines post-pandemic; and (3) the assistance they hoped to receive from the university or the Chinese government upon the return to face-to-face study in Manila. Participant's responses were collected and subjected to thematic analysis. The discussion was conducted by examining the themes identified and connecting them with the theories guiding the study.

IV. Results

Health concerns of Chinese international students upon returning to face-to-face classes post-COVID-19 in Manila

Concerns about Novel Coronavirus Infection. Participants expressed concern about the risk of novel coronavirus re-infection, despite vaccination efforts, highlighting uncertainties surrounding immunity post-recovery and exposure to new variants. A participant voiced worry, citing, "I am worried about the re-infection of the novel coronavirus...new outbreak points could emerge at any time." This apprehension stems from uncertainties regarding immunity and exposure to new variants prevalent in different regions, as another participant mentioned, "I am worried that although the pandemic has passed, the virus still exists...I will be infected with COVID-19 while studying abroad." Moreover, anxieties persist regarding cyclic outbreaks and low vaccination rates, with a third participant stressing, "I am worried about this, especially in the context of repeated outbreaks in the Philippines and low vaccination rates." Despite concerns, participants noted the importance of complying with local epidemic prevention measures to mitigate risks. Another participant highlighted, "I will pay more attention to the local epidemic situation...to minimize the risk of infection."

Aggravation of Mental Health Stress. Participants expressed significant apprehension about the aggravation of mental health stress, citing uncertainties surrounding academic pursuits, future aspirations, and changes in living environments. One participant described the psychological strain resulting from long-term isolation and online learning, stating, "The aggravation of mental health stress, long-term isolation, and online learning have put pressure on my psych(e)." Additionally, another participant pointed out concerns about

physical discomfort due to changes in the environment, such as jet lag and climate, noting, "Due to changes in jet lag, diet, climate, etc., I may experience physical discomfort, fatigue, insomnia, and other problems." This stress is further compounded by communication disparities in unfamiliar environments, as a third participant mentioned, "People who are infected with the novel coronavirus and are unfamiliar with their lives in the Philippines are worried about poor communication and difficulties in seeking medical treatment." One student emphasized the anxiety induced by uncertainty about academic and personal futures amidst the pandemic. Similarly, someone voiced concerns about the exacerbation of mental health stress due to uncertainties surrounding the pandemic's impact.

Adjustment in Living Habits and Health Implications. Participants expressed significant apprehension about the adjustment of living habits and potential health implications resulting from epidemic restrictions. One participant highlighted concerns about reduced exercise and irregular diet, noting, "(The) amount of (my) exercise is reduced and my diet (has become) irregular, which may affect my health." Similarly, another participant emphasized the importance of precautions such as wearing masks and avoiding crowded places to minimize health risks, stating, "Wear masks when going out, do not go to crowded places, reduce dining outside or pack and eat at home, basically cooking at home and reduce the use of public transportation and take taxis with fewer people in contact." Additionally, a third participant outlined strategies for maintaining a healthy lifestyle in the Philippines, including regular exercise, a balanced diet, and adherence to local COVID-19 guidelines. Someone echoed worries about disruptions to normal routines and the development of chronic diseases. Furthermore, one underscored the importance of maintaining healthy habits despite pandemic challenges, stating, "Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is essential for managing stress and promoting overall well-being, but the challenges posed by the pandemic have made it difficult to maintain healthy habits."

Access to Timely and Effective Medical Treatment. Participants worried about access to timely and effective medical treatment while studying abroad in the Philippines, particularly in the event of health emergencies or COVID-19 infection. One voiced concern about the difficulty of obtaining timely treatment abroad, stating, "I am also worried that it may be difficult to obtain timely and effective medical treatment when I encounter health emergencies abroad." Similarly, another student was anxious about unfamiliar healthcare systems and the potential challenges of navigating hospitals in the Philippines, stating, "After being infected, I will not be able to receive timely and effective treatment because I am not familiar with the hospitals in the Philippines." Additionally, another participant noted the need for information and policies on healthcare services from both the university and the Chinese government to better prepare for emergencies, stating, "When face-to-face studies resume, I hope to receive information and policies from St. Paul University and the Chinese government on safely returning to campus, with information and support on managing health and welfare and how to obtain necessary medical services." These concerns emphasize the multifaceted nature of health-related worries for Chinese international students post-COVID-19, encompassing fears of virus transmission, mental health stress, lifestyle adjustments, and access to healthcare resources.

Approaches employed by Chinese international students to manage their health concerns during their stay in the Philippines post-COVID-19 pandemic

Proactive Health Measures. Post-COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese students staying in the Philippines must prioritize proactive health measures to safeguard their well-being. This involves maintaining personal hygiene and adhering to local health guidelines, as emphasized by one student who mentioned, "I got multiple vaccines once I arrived in the Philippines...Try not to go to crowded places...Disinfect promptly after coming home from outings.... The apartment I rented has good swimming facilities and I keep swimming every day to strengthen my body... I take enough protein every day to strengthen my body." Another student highlighted the importance of closely following local epidemic situations and adhering to government regulations, stating, "I

have been closely following the local epidemic situation and strictly abide by the epidemic prevention regulations and guidelines of the Philippine government. This includes basic protective measures such as wearing a mask, frequent hand-washing, social distancing, and regular participation in local nucleic acid testing to ensure that your health is monitored." Participants in the study underscored the significance of proactive health measures such as vaccination, personal hygiene practices, and adherence to regulations to mitigate health risks while studying abroad, reflecting their awareness and commitment to health management amidst the challenges of residing in a foreign country.

Adaptation to Local Environment. Adapting to the local environment is essential for international students residing in the Philippines post-COVID-19, encompassing cultural integration, climate adjustment, and health management strategies. This involves immersing oneself in Filipino culture, trying local cuisine, and establishing a social network within the community. As one student mentioned, "I actively adapt to the Philippine diet and climate, trying local food while avoiding overloading my stomach with overly greasy or spicy foods. I also adjust my dress and rest according to the local climate conditions to prevent heat stroke or cold." Additionally, prioritizing health and well-being is crucial, with students managing their health concerns through regular exercise, a balanced diet, and adherence to COVID-19 guidelines. Participants also emphasized the importance of lifestyle adjustments such as adequate rest and reduced screen time to promote overall well-being. These efforts highlight students' resilience and flexibility in navigating new cultural and environmental contexts, contributing to a fulfilling international student experience in the Philippines.

Accessing Medical Assistance and Resources. Accessing medical assistance and resources is vital for international students staying in the Philippines post-COVID-19 pandemic, with familiarizing oneself with the local healthcare system being crucial. One of the Chinese international students asserted, "When face-to-face studies, I hope to receive information and policies from the university and the Chinese government on safely returning to campus, with information and support on managing health and welfare and how to obtain necessary medical services. For example, I have taken out foreign insurance." Additionally, participants stressed the importance of seeking medical assistance and accessing resources such as pharmacies, hospitals, and online consultation platforms. They also highlighted the significance of familiarizing themselves with local medical resources and emergency contacts to seek timely assistance in case of health emergencies. Furthermore, they discussed utilizing online consultation platforms for medical advice and guidance, particularly considering the risks associated with face-to-face medical consultations. This theme underscores the importance of resourcefulness and preparedness in navigating healthcare systems while studying abroad, as expressed by one student who mentioned, "I tried to understand the relevant information of the Chinese Embassy and ask for help from the embassy if necessary."

Desired assistance from the university or the Chinese government when face-to-face study returned

Academic Assistance and Support. Many participants in the study expressed their desire for academic assistance and support from both the government and their respective educational institutions upon transitioning back to face-to-face studies. They emphasized the importance of having sufficient resources and time to fulfill their academic research commitments. One said: "I hope that my school will give me enough teaching resources (e.g., online platform, teaching materials) to support me in applying POA to my teaching." For international students, the emphasis lies on the internationalization of courses and the availability of comprehensive online resources. Another highlighted this need, stating, "It is hoped that the education department can provide necessary academic support for international students, such as online teaching resources, course counseling, technical support, etc., to ensure that international students can successfully complete their studies during their overseas study." One recurring theme in the responses regarding desired assistance from the

university and the Chinese government upon the return of face-to-face study is academic support and facilitation. Participants expressed a desire for assistance in handling academic matters such as certification of academic degrees, access to teaching resources, and support for research endeavors. For example, one participant hopes that the university can assist in handling materials needed for academic degree certification, stating, "I hope the school can assist in handling the materials needed for the certification of academic degrees." Moreover, participants pointed out the importance of academic resources and support from their institutions to aid in their academic pursuits. This theme underscores the significance of academic assistance in ensuring the successful completion of studies and achieving academic goals amidst the challenges of studying abroad.

Recognition and Certification. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the departure timeline for foreign students from China remains uncertain. Consequently, some international students expressed concerns regarding the certification of their foreign academic qualifications post-graduation. They advocated for the Chinese government and educational institutions to provide necessary services and assistance in two key aspects: firstly, by issuing a detailed list of certification requirements and recognizing foreign academic credentials. One participant voiced this need and said, "I hope that the school can assist in handling the materials needed for the certification of academic degrees and Chinese college uniforms". Similarly, another emphasized the importance of timely certification from the Chinese government for the degrees they have earned and said, "I hope that the Chinese government can timely certify the degree I have obtained". Additionally, a third participant suggested that China should streamline the certification process or establish a fast-track channel for students returning from areas affected by the pandemic. She proposed, "Fast graduation certification channel, and simplify unnecessary processes", which requires implementing a fast-track graduation certification channel and simplifying unnecessary procedures. Another prominent theme revolves around the recognition and certification of academic qualifications by the Chinese government. Participants expressed a desire for timely certification of their degrees obtained abroad and recognition of their learning experiences. They emphasized the importance of government recognition in facilitating career opportunities and professional advancement upon their return to China. This theme underscores the significance of official recognition and certification in validating academic achievements and ensuring career prospects for returning students.

Health and Safety Support. Due to the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the domestic epidemic and concerns about the virus, students returning from overseas studies hope for comprehensive support from both the government and their university. One participant disclosed the need for access to epidemic prevention materials, stating, "I hope that the school can provide adequate epidemic prevention materials, such as masks, disinfectants, etc. I hope that the school can... inform (students) the relevant information about the epidemic, including the development of the epidemic, prevention and control measures, curriculum arrangement, etc." Furthermore, another student revealed the importance of addressing the mental health challenges faced by international students in light of the pandemic. They urged the Chinese government to prioritize the mental well-being of international students by offering essential psychological counseling services and assistance resources, expressing, "We hope that the Chinese government can pay attention to the mental health problems of international students, provide necessary psychological counseling services and psychological assistance resources, and help international students cope with the pressure and challenges they may face." Participants also underscored the importance of health and safety support from both the university and the Chinese government, emphasizing various aspects such as epidemic prevention materials, mental health services, and financial assistance. This theme shows the importance of comprehensive health and safety support in fostering a conducive learning environment for international students amidst the ongoing pandemic.

The discussion on academic assistance and support stems from a continued concern over COVID-19, among other factors. While the desire for academic support is not directly related to the pandemic itself, the challenges posed by COVID-19 have likely exacerbated the need for such assistance. The disruption caused by

the pandemic, including shifts to remote learning, travel restrictions, and changes in academic schedules, may have heightened students' anxieties about academic progress and the completion of their studies. Therefore, the emphasis on academic support can be seen as a response to the ongoing uncertainties and challenges brought about by the pandemic, reflecting a broader concern over academic continuity and success in the face of unprecedented circumstances.

Similarly, the theme of recognition and certification of academic qualifications also reflects underlying concerns shaped by the pandemic. While the desire for timely certification and recognition is not directly linked to COVID-19, the uncertainties surrounding international travel, changes in immigration policies, and disruptions to academic processes may have heightened students' concerns about the recognition of their qualifications upon their return to China. Therefore, the emphasis on government recognition can be interpreted as a response to the uncertainties and challenges posed by the pandemic, highlighting a continued concern over the impact of COVID-19 on academic and professional prospects.

Furthermore, the theme of health and safety support directly stems from concerns over COVID-19. The pandemic has significantly altered the landscape of higher education, necessitating proactive measures to ensure the health and safety of students. The desire for epidemic prevention materials, mental health services, and financial assistance reflects a heightened awareness of health risks and the need for comprehensive support mechanisms to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on students' well-being. Therefore, the emphasis on health and safety support can be attributed to a continued concern over COVID-19 and its implications for the academic and personal lives of students studying abroad.

V. Discussion

Academic Assistance and Support. In the context of EST, individuals seeking academic assistance and support interact within various layers of their environment. At the microsystem level, interactions occur directly with immediate environments like universities and governments, where individuals express desires for teaching resources, degree certification assistance, and recognition of academic qualifications. These interactions extend to the mesosystem, where individuals engage with institutions and broader societal influences, emphasizing the interconnectedness between universities, government policies, and academic success facilitation. External factors in the exosystem, such as government regulations on degree certification, impact individuals' experiences of academic support, while cultural norms and societal values within the macrosystem shape expectations for assistance, emphasizing the importance of official recognition and certification of academic achievements.

Health and Safety Support. In the context of EST, individuals' health management behaviors and attitudes are shaped by interactions within their microsystem, including personal hygiene practices and access to medical resources. These interactions extend to the mesosystem, where engagements with healthcare providers, educational institutions, and governments influence access to health and safety support. External factors in the exosystem, such as government policies and healthcare infrastructure, impact individuals' access to health resources, while broader cultural beliefs and societal norms within the macrosystem influence attitudes towards health behaviors and coping strategies, as evidenced by participants' emphasis on proactive health measures and adaptation to local environments.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. Participants' discussions reflect Stress Appraisal as they express concerns about COVID-19 infection, mental health stress, and disruptions to living habits, influencing coping strategies and resource-seeking behaviors. Coping Strategies encompass seeking academic assistance, adopting proactive health measures, and accessing medical resources, with effectiveness influenced by

individuals' stress appraisal. Outcome Evaluation is evident as individuals assess coping efforts' effectiveness in managing stressors and achieving desired outcomes, emphasizing the importance of academic support, health management, and resource access for well-being and academic success.

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