

Addressing the Career Readiness Challenges of Chinese International Students in U.S. Universities: A Culturally Informed Review

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Abstract: Chinese international students (CISs) have been the largest group of international students in the United States (U.S.) for many years. However, there has been a decline in CIS enrollment over the past two academic years. Little attention has been devoted to supporting CISs in navigating the current job markets in China and the U.S. following the COVID-19 pandemic and international tensions. This review emphasizes the need for support to help CISs prepare for their careers in the current fast-paced job market and examines the cultural barriers affecting their career paths. Additionally, the review presents the practical implications and future research prospects of CIS career readiness for career service and higher education professionals.

Introduction

Chinese international students (CISs) constitute the largest segment of the international student population in the United States (U.S.). In the 2022–2023 academic year, 1,057,188 international students enrolled in the U.S., with 289,526 of these students being from China (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2023). Despite their substantial presence, however, recent years have witnessed a concerning decline in CIS enrollment, with a 0.2% decrease from the previous year (IIE, 2023). This marks the second consecutive year of such a decline, attributed to the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising international tensions.

Despite being the largest group of international students in the U.S. for many years (IIE, 2023), thorough analysis and comprehensive studies on the career readiness of CISs are limited (Mills & Stefaniak, 2020). This underscores the need for more targeted research to identify best practices to support this population (Balin et al., 2016). This review first explores the history of career readiness and the challenges encountered by CISs in U.S. universities. It then examines the

unique cultural barriers impacting their career readiness. By providing insights into the specific experiences of CISs, this review emphasizes the practical implications and future research directions for career service and higher education professionals. The ultimate goal of this review is to bridge the gap between the needs of CISs and the existing career readiness support systems in U.S. universities, thereby contributing to their development and successful integration into the global job market.

History of Career Readiness

The concept of career readiness has a rich history and involves considerations of various elements that help individuals make well-informed career decisions, such as matching readiness, knowledge, skills, interests, and values (Hays, 2017). This concept originated in the mid-20th century when Donald E. Super introduced the idea of vocational maturity (Super, 1955). Super's work laid the foundation for understanding how individuals progress through different stages of career development, emphasizing the importance of self-concept and adaptability. Later, Super (1992) and Savickas (1997) expanded the concept of career

development to include adaptability, which enhances individuals' readiness to handle both expected and unexpected aspects of career selection and participation (Savickas, 1997; Super et al., 1992).

At present, career readiness goes beyond simple decision-making; it includes an individual's emotional and social abilities to handle societal changes and maintain balance in their surroundings (Hou et al., 2012). It covers not only mental preparation for a career but also the emotional and social skills needed to navigate a professional journey (Hays, 2017). In today's dynamic work landscape, individuals need to be well-prepared to handle career shifts, adjust to new situations, and remain effective and resilient amid evolving challenges. Thus, career readiness is a constantly evolving concept that reflects the changing needs and expectations of the modern workforce.

Culturally Informed Impacts on CIS Career Readiness

Cultural values have a critical impact on the educational and career choices of CISs. While Western culture emphasizes individualism, CISs are influenced by a culture that values collectivism (Yang et al., 2002). For instance, Fan et al. (2014) compared the relationships among family intrusiveness, family orientation, and career decision-making difficulties (CDMDs) among Hong Kong and U.S. college students. The findings revealed that while family intrusiveness contributed to CDMDs in both cultural settings, the mediating effect of family orientation was significant only in the Hong Kong sample. This indicates that in collectivistic cultures such as Hong Kong, family orientation plays a vital role in mediating the effects of family intrusiveness on career readiness (Fan et al., 2014).

In China, parents substantially influence their children's education and career choices. Zhao (2022) suggested that this involvement stems from the parents' own educational and professional backgrounds, which shape their

expectations and aspirations for their children. This active parental participation often pressures students to pursue fields of study that are commonly perceived as prestigious or lucrative, disregarding their interests and abilities. Additionally, many CISs are financially supported by their parents while studying abroad. Upon returning to their native country, they may struggle to find stable employment and continue to depend on their elderly parents, which contradicts the traditional Chinese belief of Confucianism (Xu, 2006). Influenced by Confucianism, many Chinese people prioritize their reputation and care more about others' opinions of them than their own feelings (Xu, 2006).

Chinese parents commonly steer their children toward degrees and careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, which agrees with the statistic indicating that 55% of international students in the U.S. pursued STEM majors in the 2022–2023 academic year (IIE, 2023). This preference is deeply rooted in cultural norms and the belief that STEM professions offer more stable and higher-paying job prospects (Rezayat & Sheu, 2019; Xu & Zhan, 2022). The Chinese education system reinforces this trend through policies and practices that favor STEM subjects (Zhong et al., 2022), further aligning parental expectations with societal and economic realities.

However, traditional gender role attitudes in China have substantially contributed to the creation of gender gaps in career plans and career perception (Li & Zhao, 2023). Qing (2020) highlighted the economic impact of these gender biases in China, demonstrating that traditional gender role attitudes have a strong negative effect on the earnings of females. In contrast, males' incomes are not considerably affected. Zhang et al. (2021) also found that females in China are considered to lack toughness and stamina, which are qualities deemed necessary for success in STEM and sales occupations. This perception has led to a significant gender disparity in employment

preferences, with more than 60% of recruiters favoring male applicants for roles in STEM, sales, and financial/business industries (Zhang et al., 2021). Despite the general encouragement toward STEM fields, females are often perceived as less suited for these roles owing to stereotypes about their abilities. Consequently, market realities and cultural biases frequently undermine their confidence and interest.

Unique Challenges Presented by the Transnational Identity of CISs

It is essential to recognize the impact of transnational identity on the career readiness of CISs. Jin and Wang (2022) identified three identity clusters among CISs: Homestayors, Wayfarers, and Navigators. Each cluster encounters unique challenges. For instance, Homestayors potentially face limited cultural adaptation, Wayfarers grapple with re-acclimation barriers, and Navigators leverage their bicultural competence for strategic advantage (Jin & Wang, 2022). Moreover, CISs experienced "double stigmatization" during the COVID-19 pandemic, encountering discrimination both in the U.S. and upon returning to China (Jin & Wang, 2022). In the U.S., stigmatization was associated with the pandemic and political rhetoric, while in China, it was fueled by anti-Western sentiment and nationalism (Jin & Wang, 2022). The following sections explore these challenges in detail.

Challenges in the Host Country

Upon completing their studies, some CISs seek career opportunities in the U.S. to obtain better financial prospects, access superior research facilities, fulfill family expectations, enjoy improved living and working conditions, and experience a more liberal political atmosphere (Lin & Flores, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2010). However, Li et al. (2017) highlighted that CISs encounter significant challenges when securing jobs in the U.S. owing to language barriers, cultural differences, and difficulties in adjusting to Western academic and social environments, which hinder their integration and job readiness.

These obstacles often lead to social isolation and deteriorate academic performance, making it challenging for them to compete in the U.S. job market (Li et al., 2017).

One of the major hurdles faced by CISs residing in the U.S. is visa issues. CISs who are neither citizens nor immigrants are required to obtain a work permit. This may involve applying for curricular practical training or optional practical training (OPT) and navigating complicated legal requirements, such as applying for an H-1B work visa, within a restricted time frame (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Although CISs are eligible to apply for jobs in the U.S., most positions are only open to U.S. citizens or permanent residents (Ching et al., 2017). Moreover, CISs participating in OPT are allowed a maximum of 90 days of unemployment for non-STEM majors and 150 days for STEM majors, beginning from the approved OPT start date. If CISs exceed these limits, they violate their F-1 status and may be required to depart from the U.S. (Yan & Berliner, 2010).

These visa restrictions also result in fewer internships and career opportunities in the U.S. and a greater reliance on social support services from the government (Yan & Berliner, 2010). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented academic challenges for international students owing to travel restrictions, complex policies, and the shift to online learning (Balin & Mbodj, 2022). These challenges have significantly hindered the ability of international students to participate in internships and gain practical work experience, which is essential for their career readiness.

The escalating competition and mounting uncertainty highlight the need for strategic planning to address employability concerns for CISs. In some cases, U.S. hiring companies may not consider the internship experiences of CISs in China owing to difficulties in conducting thorough background checks. This oversight further complicates the efforts of CISs to establish careers in the U.S. Moreover, there

exists a remarkable gap between supply and demand, which presents a challenge for CISs in understanding job market conditions in the host country and directly impacts their self-confidence and career readiness (Xu & Zhan, 2022). Consequently, CISs cannot effectively advocate for themselves, leaving them powerless and vulnerable in U.S. politics (Ching et al., 2017).

Challenges in the Native Country

Re-entry challenges can be acute for international students owing to sociopolitical differences between the host country and their home country, which can elicit inappropriate responses upon their return (Matic & Russell, 2019). Jin et al. (2024) highlighted the psychological distress experienced by returnees owing to sociopolitical changes in China and the pressure to conform to traditional values. The high prevalence of depression among returnees (47.9%, moderately severe) underscores the mental-health challenges faced during their adjustments (Jin et al., 2024).

In China, highly skilled and experienced CISs returning from abroad are referred to as “Hai Gui” (海归), a term metaphorically likening them to sea turtles (Hao & Welch, 2012; Xu, 2006). In the 1990s, “Hai Gui,” considered as national treasures, were treated with uncommon respect and emerged as strong job candidates in the Chinese job market (Hao & Welch, 2012; Xu, 2006). In the new millennium, many CISs decided to return to China after graduation owing to a history of temporary employment and higher salaries (Xu, 2006).

However, the current labor market in China has become increasingly competitive for “Hai Gui” (Hao & Welch, 2012). Long-term unemployed returnees are often referred to as “Hai Dai” (海待), a metaphorical term likening them to seaweed, highlighting their struggles (Hao & Welch, 2012; Xu, 2006). According to the Ministry of Education of China, the number of “Hai Gui” in 2019 was 580,030. Although there is no official data beyond 2019, CHISA (Chinese Study Abroad) estimated that this

number would reach 1,139,000 by 2022. Furthermore, college graduates in China face heightened anxiety and stress owing to a severe mismatch between their skills and the available job opportunities, making it challenging for them to secure employment in their fields of study (Wang & Wang, 2024). In conclusion, merely having an international degree is no longer a guarantee of success in China's highly competitive job market (Singh, 2020). Students and their families are concerned about the value of college education, which is often quantified by successful job placement after graduation (Balin et al., 2016).

A few emerging concepts in the current Chinese labor market make re-entry more challenging. The first is an age-based career script (Horta & Li, 2024). Career scripts refer to collective interpretive schemes that encode sequences of actions within a career, representing steps of commonly successful careers in a particular institutional setting (Laudel et al., 2019). In China, these career scripts are heavily influenced by age-based norms and institutional policies, often dictating the timeline for academic success and career milestones (Li & Horta, 2023).

Age discrimination in the Chinese job market, particularly in academia, is evident in the explicit upper-age limits set for academic recruitment and research grant applications (Horta & Li, 2024). For example, candidates for lectureships and assistant professorships must be under 35 years old, while associate professorships have an upper limit of 45 years (Horta & Li, 2024; Li & Horta, 2023). These age-based criteria create significant pressure on Ph.D. students to achieve career milestones early, leading to increased age-related anxiety and stress (Horta & Li, 2024). In addition, in a society based on “guanxi” (关系), which refers to the close and essential network of social and work relationships in Chinese culture, Cheung and Xu (2015) identified several factors that discourage top Chinese international academics from returning to China. These factors include

cultural shock at work, political issues, widespread misconduct in science, and restrictions on research in social science (Cheung & Xu, 2015).

Another concept is “involution” (内卷). In the Chinese context, “involution” emphasizes intense competition and overwork (Li et al., 2021). This phenomenon may complicate CIS' career readiness in China because it sharply contrasts with the work culture in the U.S., which prioritizes work–life balance. In China, particularly in the tech industry, the work environment is characterized by high-pressure demands and long working hours. A notorious 9–9–6 schedule mandates employees to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, showing unwavering dedication (Li, 2019; Li et al., 2021). This societal pressure to succeed in their careers can create an additional obstacle for CISs.

Moreover, the “lying flat” (躺平) phenomenon has become a revealing subculture among Chinese youth (Su, 2023). This movement first emerged as a response to the economic slowdown and social challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Brossard, 2022). “Lying flat” is characterized by a refusal to engage in “involution,” manifested in behaviors such as not seeking high-pressure jobs, avoiding the purchase of houses or cars, and rejecting traditional milestones such as marriage and children (Su, 2023). This mindset may significantly affect the career readiness of returnees to China, indicating a retreat from the competitive job market and a reluctance to adhere to societal norms.

Practical Implications

Career service professionals and educators can incorporate culturally informed practices to better prepare CISs for career readiness. These practices can be initiated during orientation and continue throughout students' academic journeys, leveraging support from various campus resources and addressing the specific needs of CISs. When CISs first arrive in the U.S., new student orientations serve as the initial

introduction to the academic environment. It is crucial to integrate the Office of International Students, career center, and counseling center into a cohesive program to address CIS' specific needs during relocation.

Consider an enhanced orientation program where the first week includes a series of workshops designed explicitly for CISs. One workshop might introduce career services available on campus and focus on educating students about the importance of early career planning and U.S. workplace culture, including expectations around punctuality, teamwork, and professional communication. Another session could address academic and cultural adjustments, explaining the differences between the educational and cultural systems in China and the U.S. and providing tips for academic success. A separate session could be dedicated to mental health, discussing common challenges such as anxiety and depression and introducing the counseling services available on campus. Finally, a workshop on visa regulations and employment options could provide crucial information on maintaining legal status and exploring career opportunities. In summary, early exposure to these resources can encourage CISs to exploit the available support services and foster a proactive approach to career readiness.

During individual career counseling sessions with CISs, the initial focus could be on their transnational identity. Career professionals can help CISs understand and leverage this duality in their career readiness. For example, CISs might struggle with balancing the high expectations of their family back home with their personal career aspirations in the U.S. Career professionals could engage in conversations that explore these dynamics, asking about their goals and concerns. Emphasizing the importance of aligning career readiness with personal values and interests while respecting cultural and familial expectations could prepare CISs for making informed career decisions. This approach avoids

the assumption that all CISs have the same career goals and instead focuses on individualized support that considers both collectivist and individualist values.

In addition, it is essential to acknowledge that the needs of undergraduates, master's, and Ph.D. students are unique and hence require customized support systems. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, career services should offer specialized programs for each academic level. Undergraduates may benefit from training to cultivate foundational career skills, workshops informing them about career exploration opportunities, and assistance with securing internships. Master's students need guidance on advanced career planning, industry-specific knowledge, and professional networking opportunities. Meanwhile, Ph.D. students require targeted guidance on academic or industry careers, postdoctoral opportunities, and research-related activities. Tailoring support for these varying levels ensures that each group receives relevant and valuable guidance customized to their needs.

Higher educational institutions could expand their support offerings to include more group activities, peer support, and workshops focused on career preparation. Hosting panels with employers may provide valuable insights into their hiring preferences. Furthermore, international alums working in global locations could offer practical advice and act as role models for current students. For example, a panel discussion featuring alums employed in the U.S., China, and other countries could provide diverse perspectives on navigating career challenges and leveraging transnational identities in the job market. These sessions can offer practical advice and foster community and support among CISs.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This review explores the unique career challenges of CISs and the necessary support structures to enhance their career readiness. CISs encounter significant obstacles, such as

cultural and language barriers, visa complications, and high parental expectations. These challenges vary across educational levels, necessitating tailored support for undergraduates, master's, and Ph.D. students. Integrating career services and counseling into orientation programs can help address these needs comprehensively. Focusing on transnational identity and conducting specialized workshops are crucial for effectively helping CISs navigate their academic and professional journeys.

Nevertheless, this review has its limitations as it primarily draws from existing literature and theoretical frameworks, which may not fully capture all the nuanced experiences of CISs across different institutions and regions. Future research should involve empirical studies that gather data directly from CISs to gain a better understanding of their specific needs and challenges. Additionally, developing professional training programs is essential to educate career professionals regarding culturally informed practices and the creation of specialized curricula in career counseling education that address the unique aspects of supporting international students. Extending research to include diverse international student populations will provide a more comprehensive understanding of global career challenges and inform more effective support strategies.

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