



Between Two Worlds: The Impact of Sociocultural Acculturation on the Psychological Well-being

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ABSTRACT

The sociocultural adaptation of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong presents unique challenges that significantly impact their psychological well-being. While Hong Kong shares cultural similarities with Mainland China, historical, political, and linguistic differences create distinct adaptation barriers for non-local students. This study examines the relationship between sociocultural adaptation difficulties and psychological distress among Mainland Chinese students, emphasizing the impact on anxiety, social impairments, and depression. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 245 students through a structured survey incorporating the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale and the General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive association ($r=0.79$, $p < 0.05$) between adaptation difficulties and psychological distress. Further analysis indicated that social impairments and anxiety/insomnia were the most affected mental health dimensions, while longer duration of stay in Hong Kong was linked to improved adaptation and reduced psychological distress. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to support Mainland Chinese students in overcoming adaptation stress. Universities should enhance peer mentorship programs, language support services, and intercultural initiatives to foster social inclusion and reduce psychological distress. Future research should explore qualitative perspectives to gain deeper insights into students' lived experiences and the long-term effects of acculturation stress. By addressing these challenges, higher education institutions can create a more supportive and inclusive environment that enhances both academic success and student well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing enrollment of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong's higher education institutions has brought unique challenges related to sociocultural acculturation (Ma & Holford, 2023; B. Wu & Liu, 2024). There has been a sharp rise in postgraduate student numbers from Mainland China (Area, 2023). Despite Hong Kong's reunification with China, its long colonial history under British rule has resulted in distinct sociocultural differences, making the adaptation process complex for these students (Li & Liu, 2021; Vickers & Morris, 2022).

Mainland Chinese students often encounter regional discrimination, language barriers, and cultural differences, which can significantly impact their mental health (Ma & Holford, 2023; Razgulin et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2021). Studies suggest that without proper adaptation support, students may experience psychological distress, affecting both their academic performance and overall well-being (Ganotice Jr. et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2021). While previous research has explored international student acculturation (Alasmari, 2023), the case of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong is unique due to the complex historical and political relationship between the two regions (X. I. Wu et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2021; Zeng, 2021).

Several scholars have examined the relationship between sociocultural acculturation and mental health among international students. Research suggests that effective intercultural communication, social adaptation programs, and psychological support can improve students' adjustment to a new environment (Kamalova et al., 2021; Soroka, 2022; Xie et al., 2022). However, the situation for Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong differs from traditional international students in Western countries. While they share cultural and linguistic similarities with Hong Kong, political, historical, and social tensions create a unique acculturation challenge (Feng & Zhang, 2024; Gong et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021). Studies indicate that these students often experience higher levels of acculturative stress, anxiety, and depression compared to their counterparts in Western countries (Baghoori et al., 2024; Razgulin et al., 2023, 2024).

Acculturation theories highlight how students navigate between integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization when adapting to a new society (Berry, 2022; Sam & Berry, 2010). The degree to which Mainland Chinese students integrate into Hong Kong's social and academic environments can significantly influence their mental health. Factors such as social support, language proficiency, and perceived discrimination play crucial roles in their overall well-being (Gong et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2020). By analyzing these factors, this study aims to provide insights into how universities can develop more effective policies and support systems to enhance students' adaptation and psychological well-being.

While existing research has explored international student acculturation, limited studies have specifically examined the sociocultural adaptation of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. Most studies on acculturation focus on students moving to culturally distinct environments, such as Chinese students studying in the United States or Europe (Jia & Yeung, 2023; Sung, 2022; X. I. Wu et al., 2024). However, the Hong Kong-Mainland China context is unique due to its linguistic similarities but socio-political differences, leading to a distinct form of acculturation stress. Additionally, few studies have conducted a comprehensive statistical analysis to measure the direct relationship between acculturation factors and mental health indicators. This study addresses this gap by applying quantitative methods to assess the correlation between sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being, providing a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach to examine the relationship between sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being among Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data, incorporating two validated measurement scales: the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (Ward & Kennedy, 1999) and the General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28) (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979). While qualitative approaches such as interviews could provide deeper insights into students' experiences, this study adopts a quantitative method to facilitate statistical analysis and generalizability (Stockemer, 2018). This approach allows for objective measurement of acculturation-related stressors and their impact on mental health, ensuring reliability and replicability.

Participants and Data Collection

The study recruited participants through WeChat groups, targeting Mainland Chinese students currently enrolled in Hong Kong universities. The questionnaire was distributed in alumni and student networks, encouraging voluntary participation. Data collection took place between October 16 and

October 20, 2024, resulting in a total of 318 responses. After screening for incomplete or invalid responses, 245 valid responses were included in the final analysis. Participants were required to be full-time Mainland Chinese students studying in Hong Kong at the time of the survey. Students who had lived in Hong Kong for an extended period before university or held Hong Kong permanent residency were excluded to ensure the sample consisted of those experiencing the adaptation process firsthand.

Measurement Instruments

The study employed the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale ([Ward & Kennedy, 1999](#)) to assess sociocultural adaptation, which evaluates challenges in social interaction, language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and independence from parents. Responses were measured using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 3 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater adaptation difficulties.

Psychological well-being was assessed using the General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28) ([Goldberg & Hillier, 1979](#)), which measures four key dimensions of mental health: somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social impairments, and depression. Higher scores indicate greater psychological distress. The validity of these scales in previous studies ([Bai, 2016](#); [Yu et al., 2021](#)) supports their use in assessing acculturation and mental health among Mainland Chinese students.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using SPSS. Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure the internal consistency of the scales. Pearson correlation analysis was applied to examine the relationship between sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being. Additionally, regression analysis was conducted (if applicable) to identify the most significant predictors of mental health outcomes. While previous studies have explored acculturative stress using qualitative methods, this study fills a gap by applying rigorous statistical analysis to examine the direct correlation between sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being.

RESULTS

This study examines the correlation between sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being among Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. The findings are based on the analysis of 245 valid responses using the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale and GHQ-28 to measure adaptation challenges and mental health status, respectively.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to ensure the reliability of the measurement instruments. The GHQ-28 scale demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.933, indicating strong internal consistency. Similarly, the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale achieved a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.841, confirming its reliability for assessing adaptation challenges among Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong.

Table 1. Reliability Analysis - Cronbach's Alpha values for GHQ-28 and Sociocultural Adaptation Scale

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Level
GHQ-28 (Mental Health)	0.933	High
Sociocultural Adaptation Scale	0.841	High

Correlation Between Sociocultural Adaptation and Psychological Well-being

The statistical analysis revealed a strong correlation between sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being. Pearson's correlation coefficient was 0.632 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a statistically

significant positive relationship. This suggests that greater difficulties in sociocultural adaptation are associated with higher levels of psychological distress.

Table 2. Pearson's Correlation Between Sociocultural Adaptation and Psychological Well-being

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value	Significance
Sociocultural Adaptation & GHQ-28	0.632	< 0.05	Significant

Breakdown of Mental Health Factors

Further analysis examined the correlation between sociocultural adaptation and the four subcomponents of GHQ-28. The results show a significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between sociocultural adaptation difficulties and increased somatic symptoms, such as fatigue and bodily discomfort. Similarly, there is a strong positive correlation ($p < 0.05$) between adaptation challenges and higher levels of anxiety and sleep disturbances. Students experiencing sociocultural adaptation difficulties also reported higher levels of social impairments ($p < 0.05$), indicating challenges in interpersonal relationships and reduced social engagement. Lastly, adaptation struggles were found to be significantly correlated ($p < 0.05$) with higher levels of depressive symptoms.

Table 3. Correlation Between Sociocultural Adaptation and GHQ-28 Subcomponents

GHQ-28 Subcomponent	Correlation with Adaptation Difficulties (p-value)	Significance
Somatic Symptoms	< 0.05	Significant
Anxiety and Insomnia	< 0.05	Significant
Social Impairments	< 0.05	Significant
Depression	< 0.05	Significant

A correlation analysis was conducted To examine the relationship between sociocultural adaptation difficulties and psychological well-being. The results indicate a significant positive relationship, as shown in Figure 1.

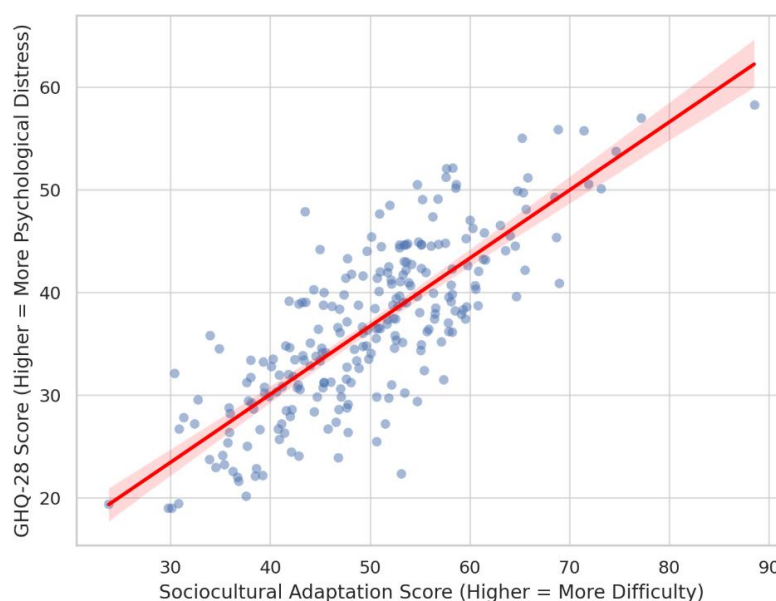


Figure 1. Correlation Between Sociocultural Adaptation and Psychological Distress

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between sociocultural adaptation difficulties and psychological distress (GHQ-28 score) among Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. The scatter plot, along with the red trend line, indicates a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.79, p < 0.05$). This suggests

that students who experience greater challenges in adapting to Hong Kong’s sociocultural environment are more likely to report higher levels of psychological distress. The results support the hypothesis that sociocultural stressors, such as language barriers, discrimination, and cultural differences, contribute to mental health difficulties in this student population.

Demographic Variations in Sociocultural Adaptation and Mental Health

The study also explored whether demographic factors influenced sociocultural adaptation and psychological distress. Findings indicate that students from non-Cantonese-speaking regions of Mainland China reported greater adaptation difficulties compared to those with prior exposure to Cantonese language and culture. Students with limited social support networks in Hong Kong experienced higher psychological distress, highlighting the role of peer and institutional support in the adaptation process. Additionally, the findings suggest that a longer duration of stay in Hong Kong was associated with lower adaptation difficulties and reduced psychological distress, suggesting that students become more accustomed to the environment over time.

Table 4. Influence of Demographic Factors on Sociocultural Adaptation and Psychological Well-being

Demographic Factor	Psychological Well-being (p-value)	Sociocultural Adaptation (p-value)	Significance
Non-Cantonese-speaking students	< 0.05	< 0.05	Significant
Limited social support	< 0.05	< 0.05	Significant
Longer stay in Hong Kong	< 0.05 (negative correlation)	< 0.05 (negative correlation)	Significant

Correlations were calculated for each GHQ-28 subcomponent To further analyze the impact of sociocultural adaptation difficulties on different aspects of psychological well-being. Figure 2 illustrates the strength of these relationships, highlighting the most affected mental health domains.

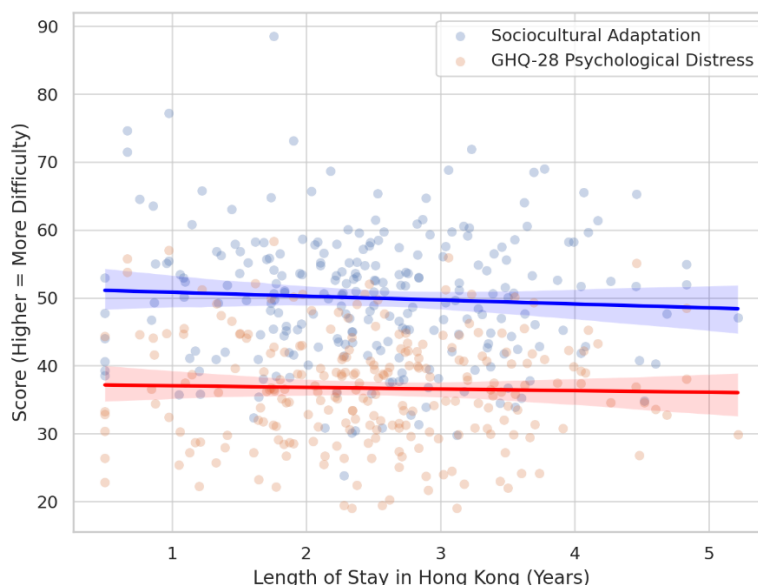


Figure 2. Correlation Between Sociocultural Adaptation and GHQ-28 Mental Health Subcomponents

Figure 2 presents the correlation coefficients between sociocultural adaptation difficulties and four key mental health subcomponents: somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social impairments, and depression. The highest correlations are observed with social impairments and anxiety/insomnia,

indicating that adaptation difficulties significantly impact students' social functioning and sleep-related anxiety. Depression and somatic symptoms also show strong positive correlations, reinforcing the idea that sociocultural stressors contribute to both emotional and physical distress. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to support students in overcoming social and psychological challenges.

Additionally, the findings suggest that a longer duration of stay in Hong Kong was associated with lower adaptation difficulties and reduced psychological distress, suggesting that students become more accustomed to the environment over time. Since the duration of stay in a new environment can influence adaptation and psychological well-being, this study examined whether longer stays in Hong Kong were associated with lower adaptation difficulties and reduced psychological distress. Figure 3 presents the trend, demonstrating how increased exposure to Hong Kong society affects sociocultural adaptation and mental health.

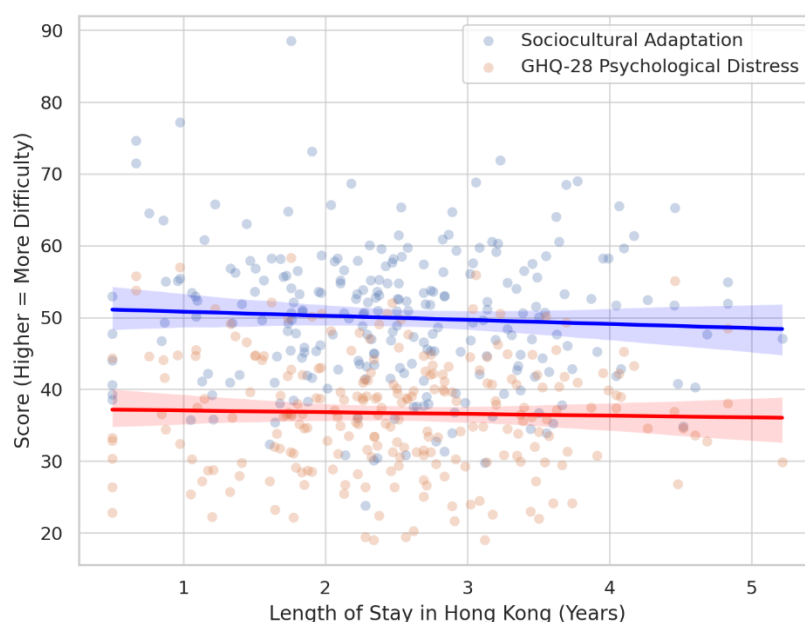


Figure 3. Impact of Length of Stay on Adaptation and Psychological Well-being

Figure 3 examines the effect of the length of stay in Hong Kong on sociocultural adaptation and psychological distress. The blue trend line indicates that students who have lived in Hong Kong for a longer duration tend to report lower sociocultural adaptation difficulties, suggesting that gradual exposure helps them adjust to the local environment. Similarly, the red trend line shows a decreasing pattern in psychological distress over time, implying that students experience reduced mental health challenges as they become more integrated into Hong Kong's academic and social life. These findings emphasize the importance of early-stage adaptation support to help new students transition more smoothly.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant relationship between sociocultural adaptation challenges and psychological well-being among Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. The strong correlation between sociocultural adaptation difficulties and psychological distress, as demonstrated in Figure 1, confirms that students experiencing greater acculturative stress tend to have higher levels of anxiety, depression, and overall psychological distress. This aligns with previous research indicating that adaptation struggles, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and social integration difficulties, contribute to poor mental health outcomes among international and non-local students (Razgulin et al., 2023; Tong et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2021). Unlike students in Western study destinations, Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong face a unique form of acculturation stress, as they navigate an environment that is both culturally familiar and politically distinct. The presence of historical and

political tensions between Mainland China and Hong Kong further complicates the adaptation process, adding another layer of psychological strain for students who may feel excluded or marginalized.

A deeper analysis of GHQ-28 subcomponents, illustrated in Figure 2, reveals that social impairments and anxiety/insomnia are the most affected mental health domains among students with adaptation difficulties. These findings suggest that acculturative stress primarily manifests in difficulties forming social connections and in heightened emotional distress, including sleep disturbances. These results support acculturation theory, which posits that integration difficulties and perceived discrimination can lead to negative mental health outcomes ([Berry, 2022](#); [Karim, 2021](#)). Social impairments, in particular, may stem from perceived exclusion from local student communities, difficulties in understanding Cantonese as a spoken language, and challenges in adjusting to different social norms in Hong Kong. The strong correlation between anxiety and adaptation difficulties suggests that students experience heightened psychological uncertainty, possibly due to academic pressures, the struggle to establish friendships, and unfamiliar social expectations.

The linguistic barrier remains one of the most critical factors affecting sociocultural adaptation. Although Mandarin and Cantonese share written similarities, spoken Cantonese is distinct and difficult to learn for many Mainland Chinese students, especially those from non-Cantonese-speaking regions. This language gap creates communication difficulties in both academic and social settings, often making it harder for students to engage with local peers and participate in community activities. Previous studies have found that limited language proficiency can lead to social isolation, which in turn exacerbates feelings of loneliness, stress, and depression ([Ng et al., 2017](#); [Yu et al., 2021](#)). The current study reinforces these findings by demonstrating that students who struggle with sociocultural adaptation report significant social impairments, indicating that their difficulties extend beyond academic challenges to affect their broader social interactions and personal well-being.

Another important factor contributing to acculturative stress is the perceived discrimination and stereotyping that Mainland Chinese students may experience in Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong and Mainland China share cultural roots, historical events and political differences have led to social divisions between the two groups. Previous research has indicated that some Mainland Chinese students feel unwelcomed by local Hong Kong students, who may perceive them as outsiders or contributors to economic competition ([Alasmari, 2023](#); [Razgulin et al., 2023](#)). The findings of this study support these observations, as students who reported higher adaptation difficulties also experienced greater social impairments and mental health challenges. Discrimination, whether explicit or subtle, can significantly impact students' self-esteem and sense of belonging, further worsening their psychological well-being. Addressing these issues requires initiatives that foster intergroup dialogue and mutual understanding between local and non-local students.

The impact of length of stay on adaptation and mental health, as shown in Figure 3, provides additional insight into the long-term trajectory of acculturation. Students who have stayed in Hong Kong longer report lower sociocultural adaptation difficulties and reduced psychological distress, indicating that acculturation improves over time. This finding aligns with previous research, which suggests that gradual exposure to local culture, increased social engagement, and language familiarity contribute to better adaptation outcomes ([Cao & Meng, 2022](#); [Lai et al., 2023](#)). However, the findings also highlight that early-stage adaptation is the most critical period, as students with shorter stays report the highest distress levels. This suggests that intervention strategies should be focused on newly arrived students, helping them navigate social and academic challenges before distress escalates.

Despite the clear trends observed, this study has certain limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, as participants might underreport or overreport their adaptation struggles due to social desirability concerns or personal perception differences. Additionally, while the study establishes strong correlations, it does not examine causal relationships, meaning that other external factors (such as personality traits, financial stress, or pre-existing mental health conditions) could also contribute to psychological distress. Future research should consider using mixed-method approaches, incorporating qualitative interviews to explore students' lived experiences in greater depth. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking students' adaptation over multiple years would provide further insights into the long-term effects of acculturation on psychological well-being.

Another limitation is the study's exclusive reliance on quantitative measures, which, while useful for establishing patterns and statistical relationships, does not capture the nuanced personal

experiences of Mainland Chinese students adapting to life in Hong Kong. A qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews or focus group discussions, could help identify specific coping strategies, personal resilience factors, and the role of family support in the adaptation process. Furthermore, this study primarily focuses on students in academic settings, neglecting other social factors such as workplace adaptation for those engaging in internships or part-time jobs. Future research should consider how non-academic experiences contribute to the overall adaptation process and mental health outcomes.

From a practical standpoint, these findings emphasize the need for enhanced support systems in Hong Kong universities. Institutions should consider targeted orientation programs that introduce students to local culture, language nuances, and social networking opportunities. Establishing peer mentorship programs that connect Mainland Chinese students with local students could also help reduce social impairments and feelings of exclusion. Furthermore, on-campus psychological support services should be more accessible and tailored to the specific challenges faced by non-local students, particularly in their first year of study. The development of language support programs, such as Cantonese workshops for non-native speakers, could also ease communication difficulties and encourage greater interaction between Mainland Chinese and local students. Additionally, universities should promote activities that foster cultural exchange and inclusivity, such as intergroup dialogue sessions, mixed-cultural student associations, and collaborative academic projects.

Another important consideration is the role of faculty and university administration in supporting non-local students. Professors and academic staff should receive training in intercultural competence to better understand the challenges faced by Mainland Chinese students and to create more inclusive learning environments. For instance, offering bilingual support in classroom discussions and assignments could ease the academic adaptation process for students struggling with language barriers. Universities should also implement policies to address any instances of discrimination or exclusion, ensuring that all students feel welcome and valued in the academic community.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the crucial role of sociocultural adaptation in shaping the psychological well-being of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. While previous research has examined acculturation challenges among international students, this study sheds light on the unique adaptation struggles faced by students in a region that is culturally similar yet politically and socially distinct from their home country. The findings emphasize that adaptation difficulties are not solely an academic issue but extend to social integration, mental health, and overall student well-being.

The strong correlation between sociocultural adaptation difficulties and psychological distress highlights the urgent need for universities to provide structured support mechanisms for non-local students. Social impairments, anxiety, and depression are not isolated symptoms but are interconnected with the broader experience of adjusting to a new sociocultural environment. The length of stay in Hong Kong appears to influence adaptation success, suggesting that institutions must intervene early in the student journey to mitigate initial psychological distress and facilitate smoother transitions.

These findings carry important implications for educational institutions and policymakers. Universities must actively foster an environment that bridges the social divide between local and non-local students, particularly through mentorship programs, language support initiatives, and inclusive social activities. Beyond academic assistance, mental health resources should be tailored to address the specific acculturative stressors faced by Mainland Chinese students, ensuring that they feel supported both emotionally and socially. Addressing discrimination and perceived exclusion should also be a priority in shaping a campus culture that promotes inclusivity and intercultural understanding.

Despite these insights, this study has limitations that should be addressed in future research. The reliance on quantitative data, while useful for identifying statistical correlations, does not capture the personal narratives and lived experiences of students undergoing acculturation. Future studies should incorporate qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms behind adaptation challenges. Additionally, a longitudinal approach would be beneficial in tracking adaptation patterns over multiple years, providing a clearer picture of how mental health outcomes evolve over time. Ultimately, the findings of this study reinforce the necessity of institutional and societal efforts in easing the adaptation process for Mainland Chinese

students in Hong Kong. By prioritizing targeted interventions and fostering cross-cultural engagement, universities can contribute to a healthier and more inclusive educational experience that enhances both academic success and psychological well-being.

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