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Parent-Child Communication and Psychological Well-being: Exploring the Experiences of First-Year Chinese International Students at a UK University.

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Abstract

First-year Chinese international students (CIS) face significant mental health challenges due to acculturative stress, language barriers, and academic pressures. Despite rapid growth in the UK, research on parent-child communication and its impact on their mental health is limited and mostly quantitative, thus necessitating qualitative inquiry to capture nuanced experiences and cultural influences during university transition. Using semi-structured interviews with ten first-year Chinese students at a leading UK university, reflexive thematic analysis identified three themes: *Unfavourable Conversations, Supportive Interactions, and Communication Cadence.* Findings underscore the benefits of emotional/practical support and appropriate communication schedules while highlighting the harm of maladaptive parental practices, providing insights for future research and initiatives to enhance student well-being.

Keywords: *International Students, Parent-Child Communication, University Transition, Support, Well-being, Qualitative Research.*

Introduction

Global higher education enrolment exceeded 256 million in 2022 (UNESCO, 2024), with many students facing mental health challenges during university transition (Gebregergis et al., 2020). Chinese International Students (CIS) in the UK are particularly vulnerable due to, among other aspects, language barriers and academic stress (Holliman et al., 2023; Huang & Gove, 2015). CIS have grown by 40% since 2017 to 151,000 in 2021/22 (HESA, 2023), amid rising student mental health issues (e.g., Hymas, 2022). Parental support through parent-child communication (PCC) is a key mitigator (Ma, 2021); but factors influencing CIS's PCC experiences remain underexplored. While studies have addressed communication frequency (i.e., how often contact is made between parent[s] and the student) and content (Hofer & Moore, 2011; Fletcher et al., 2023), few use qualitative methods with first-year CIS samples. As such, this is problematic as quantitative approaches are usually insufficient for capturing nuanced experiences and cultural influences during university transition. This study therefore fills that gap by exploring PCC's influence on CIS well-being, offering insights for enhancing parental support through effective communication.

Challenges of (Chinese) International Students

The transition to university often triggers stress, depression, and loneliness (Gebregergis et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2020). First-year students frequently experience heightened psychological distress and reduced well-being compared to pre-university periods (Conley et al., 2018). In Australia, 84% of students reported psychological distress, far exceeding the general population's 29% (Stallman, 2010), while 13% and 18% experienced depressive and anxiety symptoms respectively (Larcombe et al., 2014). One-third of Canadian first-year students reported similar symptoms, increasing after six months (Adams et al., 2021). In the UK, 60% of new students faced adaptation challenges, with 31% still affected after six months, impacting academic performance (Nightingale et al., 2013).

Bewick et al. (2010) highlight that these negative psychological effects often persist beyond pre-university levels.

International students often experience greater mental health decline than local students (Pinamang et al., 2021), which may be attributed to acculturative stress (i.e., distress experienced when exposed to a new culture) from adapting to new environments such as a new country, new culture, and new models of learning and teaching (Lee et al., 2018). Key stressors include cultural differences, financial difficulties, academic pressure, and homesickness (Gebregergis, 2018; Lee et al., 2018). CIS face additional challenges such as language barriers (Li et al., 2017), high academic expectations rooted in Confucian values (Huang & Gove, 2015), and up until more recently, COVID-19 pandemic-related racial discrimination (Holliman et al., 2023). Given these unique stressors, research is needed to enhance support for CIS, with emerging literature emphasising the critical role of parental support in promoting student well-being.

Parental-Child Communication: Frequency and Content

Previous literature identifies that strong social networks in host countries can be a protective factor against poor mental health outcomes (Holliman et al., 2022). However, others argue that parents are the primary support for CIS due to cultural motivations to maintain interpersonal harmony by avoiding expressions of negative emotions to one's social circles (Ma, 2021). Implicit acculturation, where students retain their native culture while resisting host cultures (i.e., declining to fully immerse oneself in another culture), may limit *local* support (Anderson & Guan, 2018), making parental support crucial. PCC moderates stress and loneliness among CIS (Burke et al., 2016), with those living away from parents showing nearly double the suicidal tendencies despite similar acculturative stresses (Cho & Haslam, 2009). Therefore, parental support is a key protective factor, highlighting the need to optimise PCC by understanding influencing factors.

Some literature suggests that reduced PCC fosters young adults' independence, as frequent contact may limit autonomy and encourage reliance on parental decisions (Hofer & Moore, 2011). Frequent PCC can also lead to helicopter parenting, characterised by excessive control that may reduce life satisfaction (Schiffrin et al., 2013). Su et al. (2021) linked frequent PCC to increased levels of stress and loneliness, though their limited sample and quantitative methods restricted exploring the psychological mechanisms behind this association in sufficient depth. Conversely, frequent PCC is associated with enhanced autonomy, improved well-being, reduced adjustment difficulties, and lower loneliness (Bi & Wang, 2021; Reed et al., 2016). Some CIS engage in PCC due to familial obligations rather than choice (Stein et al., 2016), making them vulnerable to depressive symptoms if they are unable to meet their parents' expectations (Mejia et al., 2021), highlighting PCC's indirect effects on CIS well-being.

Beyond frequency, PCC quality shapes CIS experiences, with content playing an important role (Thormodson et al., 2020). Effective PCC behaviours include updates, deep conversations, checking in, expressing concern, active listening, respect, and complimenting the student (Hall et al., 2023). Students often avoid communicating certain topics with their parents, such as relationships, academic struggles, and well-being, due to privacy or detachment (Fletcher et al., 2023), seeking parental support mainly for serious matters (Bertram et al., 2014). Most literature lacks culture-specific perspectives; CIS, influenced by collectivism, for example, may avoid directing conversations or rejecting uncomfortable topics, differing from Western norms of autonomy and boundary-setting (Bi & Wang, 2021; Li & Hein, 2019). This highlights the need for culture-specific PCC research.

The Present Study

Students transitioning to university face heightened mental health risks, amplified for CIS due to potential acculturative stress, language barriers, and academic pressures (Conley

et al., 2018; Holliman et al., 2023). As a growing student population (HESA, 2023), urgent measures are needed to support CIS well-being (Hymas, 2022). Parental support is vital for student well-being (Cho & Haslam, 2009), but factors influencing its impact remain largely underexplored. Conflicting views on communication frequency (Hofer & Moore, 2011; Fingerman et al., 2012) and the importance of conversation content (Fletcher et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2023) highlight gaps in research. Most studies are quantitative and lack focus on first-year CIS, necessitating qualitative inquiry to capture nuanced experiences and cultural influences during university transition. This study's central research question is: *How do first-year CIS experience parent child communication?*

Role of the Researchers

The research team comprised M. Bao and A. Holliman from the same university and D. Waldeck from another UK university. M. Bao, the principal researcher, was involved in all stages of the study, while A. Holliman provided guidance on study design, recruitment, data analysis, and manuscript writing. D. Waldeck provided guidance on manuscript writing. A. Holliman, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Psychology at UCL Institute of Education, with research interests in educational psychology, higher education teaching and learning, and children's literacy. M. Bao is a postgraduate student at UCL Division of Psychiatry, with research interests in child and adolescent mental health, family dynamics, and trauma. D. Waldeck, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in Psychology at Coventry University, with expertise in the domains of Applied Psychology and Research Methods.

Method

Design

This research adhered to BPS ethical standards (BPS Ethics Committee, 2021) with institutional approval. It employed a qualitative approach given its suitability for exploring in more depth the richness of students' experience (Willig, 2013) using semi-structured

interviews to explore PCC influences among CIS while allowing for organic discussions that accounted for participants' lived experiences in their specific contexts.

Participants and Recruitment

Ten participants were recruited from a leading London-based university using purposive sampling and were identified from the researcher's social circle and two first-year classes. Participants were aged 18-20 years, and were all first-year CIS, born in China and had spent most of their teenage years there with their families. The sample included eight females and two males.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted on campus in mutually suited, quiet, sparsely populated and safe locations. Participants read an information sheet detailing the aims of the study and then were asked if they would consent to participate. Interviews ranged between 15-40 minutes and were audio-recorded and securely stored using Zoom. Participants were reminded that they had the right to withdraw and did not need to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. All participants were debriefed at the end of the interview and were assigned pseudonyms (Participants 1-10) to maintain anonymity.

The Interview

The 18-question interview schedule (see Appendix 1) was informed by literature on PCC determinants (e.g. frequency, content, parent gender). Guided by Indah (2022), sensitive topics were introduced later to build rapport, starting with demographics and general experiences, followed by PCC frequency, and concluding with parent-child dynamics and sensitive content. Additional prompts ensured depth, and using hypothetical scenarios (Borrill et al., 2012) rather than asking about personal experiences of distress reduced discomfort when discussing negative experiences.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis was chosen as researcher subjectivity is acknowledged, and the nuanced data captured provided a rich, detailed examination of the data, enabling the identification of recurring patterns across participants' experiences with PCC. The transcript was treated with the following steps: 1) data familiarisation, 2) creating initial codes, 3) identifying themes, 4) assessing themes, 5) interpreting and naming themes and 6) writing up. Steps 1-3 were conducted in NVivo 14, using inductive coding to generate themes directly from the data.

Reflexivity

The lead researcher's (first author) experiences with unhealthy cultural norms (e.g., over-emphasis of academic performance in daily conversations) influenced interest in this study, posing potential biases regarding PCC, culture, and parenting. Another one of the researchers (third author) had approximately six years' experience of working on a UK higher education degree where the majority of students were CIS. Anecdotal experiences, derived largely from personal tutorial sessions, indicated that some CIS felt immense pressure from their parents who seemed to play a significant role in their studies as well as their career decisions. To help minimise potential bias in theme development and evidence extraction, interview transcripts were regularly reviewed and reflected upon (e.g., noting any change in feelings). Participants were requested to review the finalised themes to ensure they accurately reflected their experiences to facilitate triangulation. Additional validation was sought from non-participant CIS peers with relevant PCC experience.

Analysis and Discussion

Analytical Overview

Through thematic analysis, eight sub-themes were identified and categorised into three overarching themes (see Figure 1).

Theme 1: Unfavourable Conversations

This theme discussed participants' experiences of conversing about unfavourable topics linked to maladaptive cultural communication dynamics.

Disliked Topics

This sub-theme pertains to *spoken content* during PCC and summarises participants' disliked conversation topics and their reasons for disliking them. It was revealed that CIS avoided discussing personal topics such as hobbies, relationships, and academia

I'm a cosplayer, so I don't want them to know about this. **(Participant 2)**

I definitely do not like discussing romantic relationships with my mum or dad. **(Participant 7)**

I tend to avoid (talking about) my academic stuff. **(Participant 10)**

Besides identifying what topics are disliked, insights into *why* they are disliked were also collected. Reasons included self-uncertainty, parental factors (e.g., unfamiliarity, perceived antipathy towards specific topics) and the emotional repercussions of speaking about them.

There will be some conversations that I will delay talking to them, for example romantic relationships like if I date someone…I want things to be more stable. **(Participant 9)**

She [her mother] doesn't really know how my university stuff works. **(Participant 10)**

I'll just be upset because I think sometimes, they don't really support that I do the cosplaying. **(Participant 2)**

I feel like [academic topics] sometimes give me some pressure. **(Participant 6)**

Detrimental Dynamics and Contributors

This sub-theme focuses on *unspoken qualities* that adversely affect PCC experiences among CIS. It illustrates that cultural characteristics often compel students to continue uncomfortable conversations.

Even though they just talk so many topics I don't like, but I still keep that conversation…it's not like only in a conversation we to show respect, it's also in your daily lives. **(Participant 8)**

I would want to keep the family running harmoniously…I would just try to get it done and over with…stopping the conversation is just a sign of conflict. **(Participant 10)**

Theme 2: Supportive Interactions

A summary of a broad range of parent-child interactions that are reported to be beneficial and appreciated by CIS as well as areas for improvement mentioned by participants.

Parent-Led Practical Support

Interviews also revealed that participants benefit from PCC through their parents' practical support, which includes advice and solutions to their challenges.

My mum and my dad gave me direction at [the start of university], which really helped me alleviate my stress about social interaction. **(Participant 1)**

She'll give me her past experiences like a life guide or teacher. **(Participant 7)**

I'm quite worried…cause I'm thinking about doing an internship, but I didn't find [one], and I don't know like how to do it so my father…contact[ed] his friends who is like the professor in China, and to get me to support. **(Participant 5)**

Parent-Led Emotional Support

All participants reported that PCC improved their well-being through emotional support provided by parents, which resulted in increased calmness and reduced anxiety and other negative affect.

I think this kind of conversation will make…calm down and not be that anxious about everything that not yet happened. **(Participant 6)**

My mum have really good ways to reduce my anxiety especially towards some deadlines or exam. **(Participant 3)**

Whenever I'm depressed, I'm feeling down or low, I'll just call my mum and she will comfort me and make my mood better. **(Participant 7)**

Child-Initiated Emotional Support

Other accounts depict students profiting from PCC by proactively and successfully seeking emotional support from parents through expressive discourse ("ranting"), with parental compliments and affirmation amplifying the benefits of expressive discourse.

Every time when I contact my parents, I have lots of things to say, and also, including those strange people I meet…how disgusting the food [is] here…I think it's good for my mental health. **(Participant 2)**

[I like to talk]About what kind of accomplishments I accomplished. I like to hear them compliment me. **(Participant 9)**

These words makes me feel I've been supported, and I feels that I'm really proud of myself…what [my parents] did makes me feel this place is not that bad. **(Participant 2)**

Improving Supportive Interactions

Participants called for increased sharing by parents instead of predominantly unilateral sharing by them.

I hope just like sometimes…let me think…talk about more things about their lives. **(Participant 6)**

I think like I hope that they talk to me like more about the things that happen with my grandparents or their friends. **(Participant 5)**

Simultaneously, participants also expressed a desire for less counterproductive parental responses to child divulgences, which may worsen negative situations or dampen previously positive moods.

> *[My father was] like pissed off and I was like really pissed off cause losing my phone was very stressful…I was already very sad, but [he] was still complaining about what I did.* **(Participant 9)**

> *I was really excited like I was starting a new chapter of my life…I called my mum right after I put down my luggage and she was like "£300 a week and the room is so small*?"*...talking to her at that time just made my happiness and excitement go away.* **(Participant 10)**

Theme 3: Communication Cadence

This theme separately discusses the crucial role of communication frequency and timing on how CIS perceive PCC.

Frequency

Most participants were generally satisfied with their communication schedules regardless of frequency. Some participants also expressed that their experience of PCC depend on having suitable schedules that facilitate connectedness and personal autonomy.

> *It is not taking up too much of my time and I'm still in contact with them.* **(Participant 1)**

Nonetheless, PCC experiences were still occasionally negatively affected by overly frequent or insufficient communication.

> *Well that's a little bit…overwhelming, I have to say...I can't read [my parents' messages] and I feel guilty if they send too much.* **(Participant 4)**

Yeah like if I'm struggling with my studies or there is really something that made me feel upset, I really want them to call me…I wish someone could call me. **(Participant 7)**

In isolated cases, hopes for increased communication may be due to concern for parents rather than self-oriented reasons.

It's almost like she becomes a toddler or teenager that is in need of life instruction. In this case I would hope to communicate more. **(Participant 10)**

Timing

Many participants described negative PCC experiences due to ill-timed communication attempts by parents, such as during classes or mood fluctuations. However, nuanced perspectives on the role of timing on post-PCC mood were also represented.

When they [asked me to visit libraries more often to study] it's…just before reading week so I was about to like play and drinks those stuff. After they said that I was like "okay just relax a bit but still need to focus." **(Participant 4)**

General Discussion

This study explored factors influencing how first-year CIS in the UK experience PCC. Positive experiences arose from emotional and practical support, well-managed communication schedules, and mutual initiation. Negative experiences stemmed from disliked topics, cultural dynamics, frequency extremes, mistimed interactions, and counterproductive parental reactions. Most findings aligned with existing literature (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2023), but findings on parental factors causing CIS' dislike for specific conversation topics remains uncorroborated due to scant literature on the impact of parental factors on conversation preferences. Another unsupported finding was parent problem-solving and advice provision as a benefit of PCC, likely due to existing literature focusing on non-Chinese samples (e.g. Fingerman et al., 2012), who may prioritise their

social circles during help-seeking, while Chinese students often see their parents as their primary support group (Anderson & Guan, 2018; Ma, 2021). In studies *with* a Chinese sample (e.g. Su et al., 2021), quantitative methodologies did not include "Problem-Solving and Advice" as a component of parental involvement, precluding its establishment as a communicative advantage.

Practical Implications

Present findings can guide parents in supporting CIS through effective communication by highlighting helpful and maladaptive behaviours. For example, parents should ideally offer more encouraging statements and compliments while minimising potentially counterproductive comments. Our findings may also have potential practical implications, for example, universities may consider facilitating parent workshops on PCC, which in turn may be beneficial in protecting first-year CIS students' mental health.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. For instance, most of the sample was female, which limits the understanding of male CIS experiences. Given that there are known gender differences in coping with stress (e.g., females may seek more social support than males, Theodoratou et al., 2023), future researchers should aim to explore male CIS perspectives. Students in a high-ranked university may also have high perfectionism and stress levels (Damian et al., 2016; Endleman et al., 2021), especially in females with higher self-expectations (Poots & Cassidy, 2020), causing potential selection bias. Future research could potentially replicate this design and capture CIS experiences of PCC in different institutions. Future researchers may also consider potentially exploring parents' experiences in PCC of CIS interactions. Alternatively, researchers may utilise longitudinal studies to examine the impact of PCC on CIS students over time (e.g., by measuring well-being at different intervals, such as monthly or per semester).

Conclusion

This research enhances understanding of factors influencing CIS experiences with PCC. Qualitative findings highlight communication content, frequency, timing, and cultural attributes as key to student well-being. The present study underscores the need for student-centred, sensitive parental support and encourages future multicultural research with gender-balanced samples and parental perspectives. Insights from such research can help parents and universities foster healthier communication, improving mental health and relationships for international students during university transition.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

1. Could you please share your age and gender?
2. Could you tell me your experience as an international student in the UK?
3. What are your preferred ways to keep in touch with your family?
4. How often do you communicate with your parents? (Prompt: Has this changed since coming to the UK?)
5. Are you satisfied with how often you communicate with your parents? (Prompt: Can you explain your reasons?)
6. How does the frequency of communication with your parents influence your daily life and emotional state?
7. In your communication with your parents, who typically initiates the contact? (Prompt: How does this make you feel?)
8. What are your feelings when your parents initiate contact first? (Prompt: Do you ever find it too frequent or too infrequent?)
9. What would be an ideal balance for initiating communication with your parents for you?
10. Do you prefer to communicate with one parent over the other? (Prompt: Why is that so? Do you notice any differences in your emotions when talking to your mother compared to your father or vice versa?)
11. Are there certain topics you prefer discussing with one parent over the other? (Prompt: Why is that so?)
12. What topics do you typically discuss with your parents?
13. Are there any topics you tend to avoid or particularly enjoy discussing? (Prompt: *(If a non-preferred topic is mentioned)* Do you still have to talk about this topic during

conversations despite you not liking this topic? Please elaborate on how these topics *(preferred or not)* affect your emotional well-being).

14. Does communication with your parents help manage your emotional well-being, such as stress and loneliness? (Prompt: *(If yes)* Could you elaborate on how? *(If no)* Why is that so?)
15. Can you recall specific conversations with either parent that significantly affected your emotional state?
16. Do you think your cultural background influences how you communicate with your parents? (Prompt: *(If yes)* In what ways?)
17. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences with communicating with your parents as an international student?
18. What changes, if any, would you like to see in your communication with your parents and why? (This could be parent-initiated or self-initiated)

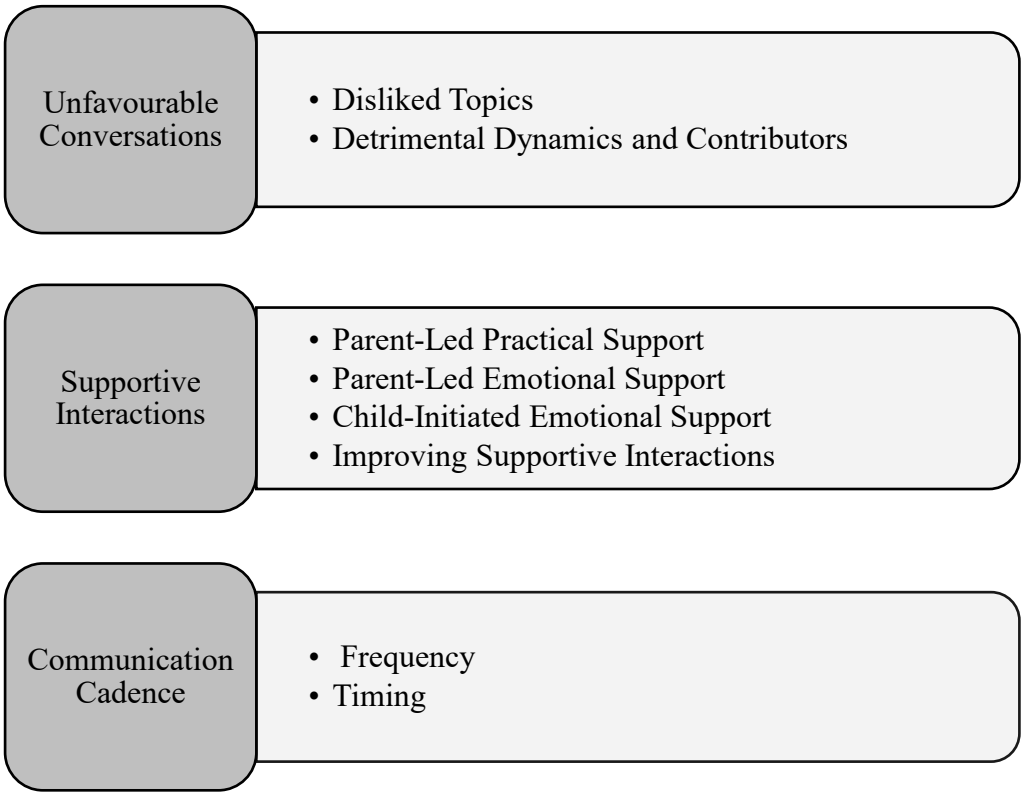

Figure 1: Thematic map of the parent-child communication experiences of first-year Chinese international students (themes left; sub-themes right)

[Alt Text: Figure displaying three themes on the left in darker background colour that are connected to their respective sub-themes on the right in lighter background colour].