Scientific Research Publishing

Psychology, 2025, 16(4), 511-520
https://www.scirp.org/journal/psych
ISSN Online: 2152-7199
ISSN Print: 2152-7180

Coping Styles and Socio-Demographic Variables as Predictors of Psychological Well-Being among International Students in China

Jiahui Kuang

Student Affairs Office, Shenzhen MSU-BIT University, Shenzhen, China
Email: 296975256@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Kuang, J. H. (2025). Coping Styles and Socio-Demographic Variables as Predictors of Psychological Well-Being among International Students in China. *Psychology, 16,* 511-520.
https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2025.164029

Received: March 26, 2025
Accepted: April 24, 2025
Published: April 27, 2025

Abstract

The study examined whether coping styles (reflective, suppressive, and reactive coping) predict the level of psychological well-being among international students in China. Living in a situation where the impact of acculturation stress is supposed to be rather high. In particular, we looked for any differences in preferred coping styles of university students to see the relationship between coping style and well-being. The participants were 145 students who were recruited with the support of offices of student's affairs of universities. They completed an online survey comprising the WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5), the Problem-focused Styles of Coping Inventory (PF-SOC), and a socio-demographic questionnaire. According to the result, Chinese language and health status are significantly positively related to well-being. After controlling for socio-demographic variables, coping exerted a high influence on the affective and functional state of international students. Reflective coping turned out to be a relatively stronger predictor of a high level of psychological well-being, whereas suppressive coping are predictive of a low level of psychological well-being. Also, reactive coping is rather dysfunctional but much less so than suppressive coping. Counseling services need to pay attention to the relatively high percentage of students with poor psychological well-being. Improving students' coping strategies may be an efficient way to improve their psychological well-being in academic/university and general life contexts.

Keywords

Psychological Well-Being, Coping Styles, International Students

1. Introduction

Coping is defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts employed to manage cir-

cumstances perceived as demanding or surpassing an individual's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Research involving international students suggests that coping strategies play a crucial role in adaptation, life satisfaction, academic success (Struthers et al., 2000), and self-efficacy (Sun & Lyu, 2022). Conversely, maladaptive coping mechanisms may negatively impact health outcomes (Pritchard et al., 2007). However, prior research has not conclusively identified which coping styles correlate with high or low well-being among international students from diverse cultural backgrounds living abroad.

The literature distinguishes between dispositional and situational coping. Proponents of dispositional coping theories argue that individuals tend to rely on preferred coping strategies across various stressful situations, reflecting a relatively stable trait rather than adapting anew to each context (McCrae & Costa, 1986). For this study, dispositional coping styles were measured using a questionnaire developed by Heppner, Cook, Wright, and Johnson (1995). Coping strategies are often categorized into problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused strategies target the resolution of the stressor itself, while emotion-focused strategies aim to alleviate the associated emotional distress. Within this framework, reflective coping—a problem-focused style—involves systematic analysis, planning, and examining causal relationships. In contrast, suppressive and reactive coping represent emotion-focused strategies. The suppressive style involves denying or avoiding problems, whereas the reactive style is characterized by emotional and cognitive responses that hinder effective coping (Heppner et al., 2004).

Prior research indicates that problem-focused coping is generally more adaptive and linked to greater psychological well-being (Holahan & Moos, 1987; Penley et al., 2002; Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2007). Conversely, emotion-focused strategies are often associated with negative outcomes, such as depressive symptoms, phobic anxiety, and somatization (Holahan & Moos, 1987; Penley et al., 2002; Watson & Sinha, 2008).

Psychological well-being encompasses a broad sense of happiness (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997) as well as an affective state marked by effective daily functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It thus represents the interplay between positive emotional experiences and optimal psychological functioning (Huppert, 2009). This study investigates the link between coping strategies and well-being among international students in China, specifically examining whether prior findings on coping styles and well-being hold true in this unique context. We hypothesized that reflective coping would predict higher psychological well-being, while suppressive and reactive coping styles would correlate with lower well-being in this population.

Coping strategies may evolve with age, as older individuals tend to employ more resource-efficient mechanisms, exhibit stronger emotional regulation, and perceive stressors as less intense (Aldwin, 2011). Additionally, sociodemographic factors—such as gender, age, financial support, degree level, and field of study—were expected to moderate stress levels and, consequently, well-being. These var-

iables were first analyzed for their predictive power in a regression model, after which the additional influence of coping styles was assessed.

2. Method

2.1. Characteristics of the Sample

The study included a total of 145 participants, with an age range of 18 to 38 years (Mean = 25.12, SD = 3.54). The majority of the sample identified as male (77.9%, n = 113), while females accounted for 22.1% (n = 32). In terms of educational status, 40% (n = 58) held a bachelor's degree, 39.31% (n = 57) had a master's degree, and 20.69% (n = 30) were doctorate candidates.

Regarding living conditions, 35.17% (n = 51) lived alone on campus, 29.65% (n = 43) lived with a partner on campus, 17.93% (n = 26) lived alone outside campus, and 17.24% (n = 25) lived with a partner outside campus. The time spent in China varied: 31.03% (n = 45) had been in the country for two to three years, 24.83% (n = 36) for four to five years, 21.38% (n = 31) for three to four years, 13.10% (n = 19) for one to two years, and 9.66% (n = 14) for more than five years.

Participants' self-reported Chinese language proficiency was distributed as follows: 37.24% (n = 54) rated their skills as "average," 31.72% (n = 46) as "good," 16.55% (n = 24) as "not so good," 8.97% (n = 13) as "excellent," and 5.52% (n = 8) as "bad." Physical health status was predominantly positive, with 57.24% (n = 83) describing it as "excellent," 33.10% (n = 48) as "good," 8.28% (n = 12) as "average," and only 1.38% (n = 2) reporting "bad" or "not so good" health (see Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 145).

Demographic variables	Categories	Total (N = 145)
Age (years)	Range 18 - 38	M 25.12 Sd3.54
Gender (n, %)	Male	113 (77.9)
	Female	32 (22.1)
Educational status (n, %)	Bachelors	58 (40)
	Masters	57 (39.31)
	Doctorate	30 (20.69)
Living Conditions (n, %)	Live alone outside campus	26 (17.93)
	Live with partner outside campus	25 (17.24)
	Live alone on campus	51 (35.17)
	Live with partner on campus	43 (29.65)
Time spent in China	One to two years	19 (13.10)
	Two to three years	45 (31.03)

Continued

	three to four years	31 (21.38)
	Four to five years	36 (24.83)
	More than five years	14 (9.66)
Chinese Level	Bad	8 (5.52)
	Not so good	24 (16.55)
	Average	54 (37.24)
	Good	46 (31.72)
	Excellent	13 (8.97)
Physical Health Status	Bad	1 (0.69)
	Not so good	1 (0.69)
	Average	12 (8.28)
	Good	48 (33.10)
	Excellent	83 (57.24)

2.2. Assessment

Psychological well-being was assessed using the WHO-5 Well-being Index (World Health Organization, 1998), a brief 5-item measure evaluating positive mood (e.g., good spirits, relaxation), vitality (e.g., energy levels, restfulness), and general interest in daily activities. Respondents rate the frequency of these positive experiences over the preceding two weeks on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = never to 5 = constantly), yielding total scores from 0 to 25. Higher scores indicate better quality of life, with scores below 13 suggesting poor well-being and potential depressive symptoms (World Health Organization, 1998). The scale demonstrates strong psychometric properties, including good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.82$) and established validity for measuring subjective well-being in general populations (Heun et al., 1999; Bonsignore et al., 2001).

The Problem-focused Styles of Coping Inventory (PF-SOC; Heppner et al., 1995) is an 18-item instrument designed to measure problem-oriented coping approaches. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = almost never to 5 = almost always). Through factor analysis, three distinct subscales were identified: Reflective Style (systematic problem-solving), Suppressive Style (problem avoidance), and Reactive Style (emotional response patterns).

The Reflective Style consists of 7-items that assesses the tendency to examine causal relationships, plan, and to be systematic in coping (such as BI consider the short term and long term consequences of each possible solution to my problems^). Raw score ranges from 7 to 35 on this subscale. The Suppressive Style has 6-items (raw score ranges from 6 to 30) that measure the tendency to deny problems and avoid coping activities (e.g., BI spend my time doing unrelated chores and activities instead of acting on my problems).

The Reflective Style subscale (7 items; score range 7 - 35) evaluates systematic coping approaches, including causal analysis, planning, and consideration of solution consequences (e.g., "I consider both short-term and long-term consequences of possible solutions"). In contrast, the Suppressive Style subscale (6 items; score range 6-30) measures problem avoidance tendencies, as exemplified by items like "I spend time on unrelated activities rather than addressing my problems."

Psychometric analyses by Heppner et al. (1995) demonstrated that the PF-SOC exhibits adequate reliability, with internal consistency coefficients ranging from $\alpha = 0.73$ (Reactive Style) to $\alpha = 0.77$ (Reflective Style) and 3-week test-retest reliability coefficients between $r = 0.65$ (Suppressive Style) and $r = 0.71$ (Reactive Style). The instrument's construct validity was supported by theoretically consistent patterns: Reflective coping showed negative correlations with psychological distress measures, while Suppressive and Reactive styles were positively associated with indicators of depression, anxiety, problem frequency, and psychological maladjustment (Heppner et al., 1995).

2.3. Procedure

We recuited the participants with the support of Offices of Student Affairs of universities. The samples include 61.35% students from Asia, 23.70% students from Africa, 14.95% students from Europe and America, which is consistent with the current basic sources of international students in China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). They were briefed about the purpose of the research and were requested to forward an advertisement (a designed poster provided by the researcher) to their students informing them about the project and requesting them to participate. The poster provided a brief introduction and significance of the project, criteria for participation and a web-link to participate. The participation of the students was completely voluntary. The data were collected through a web-based survey. Also, instruments were presented in English language. The online survey comprised The Well-Being Index (WHO-5), The Problem-focused Styles of Coping Inventory (PF-SOC), and a socio-demographic questionnaire.

3. Results

All of the measures reached a satisfactory level of internal consistency ranging from 0.70 (reactive coping) to 0.92 (SSI) (see **Table 2**).

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to find out the extent to which socio-demographic variables predict psychological well-being among the students. Variables were entered in the form comprised Gender, Age, Degree, Time in China, Chinese level, Health status. Female was coded as 0, whereas male was coded as 1. For degree, bachelor studies served as a reference group.

Results show that socio-demographic variables explained a small amount of variance (less than 1%) in well-being. None of Gender, Age, Degree, Time in

China reached statistical significance in predicting psychological well-being outcomes. Chinese level and health status were the predictors reaching significant values either regarding the analysis The analysis indicates the students who are better at Chinese have higher level of psychological well-being as compared to the students who is not good at Chinese. The students who evaluate themselves in better health status have higher level of psychological well-being as compared to the students who are in bad health status.

Adding the second block of variables consisting of coping styles resulted in a much better model in terms of explained variance. Reflective coping turned out to be a relatively stronger predictor of a high level of psychological well-being, whereas suppressive coping are predictive of a low level of psychological well-being. Also, reactive coping is rather dysfunctional but much less so than suppressive coping (see Table 3).

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and cronbach's alpha coefficients of the study variables (N = 145).

Variables	No. Of Items	*Alpha coefficient*	M Sd	Score *arrangement*
WHO-5 ellbeing index	5	0.90	56.11 (27.99)	0 - 25
Reflective coping	7	0.81	24.77 (5.22)	7 - 35
Suppressive coping	6	0.80	15.40 (5.04)	6 - 30
Reactive coping	4	0.70	14.05 (4.17)	4 - 20
Student stress inventory	26	0.92	17.45 (4.81)	26 - 130

Table 3. Predicting psychological well-being from socio-demographic variables and coping styles (N = 145).

Variables	International Students (N = 145)	R^2	F	*df*
Gender	−1.01			
Age	−0.80			
Degree	2.63			
The time in China	1.31			
Chinese Level	4.17*	0.71	7.97	144
Health Status	4.94*			
Coping Styles				
Reflective	96*			
Suppressive	0.62			
Reactive	−0.94			

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

The present findings reveal that socio-demographic variables, including gender, age, degree level, and duration of stay in China, accounted for a negligible proportion of variance (<1%) in predicting psychological well-being among international students. Specifically, the coefficients for gender, age, degree level, and time in China are −1.01, −0.80, 2.63, and 1.31 respectively. However, the overall R^2 value is 0.71, indicating that other unexamined variables such as Chinese level (coefficient = 4.17*), health status (coefficient = 4.94*), and coping styles (e.g., Reflective with a coefficient of 96*) are more influential. This aligns with recent studies emphasizing the limited role of static demographic factors in well-being outcomes within cross-cultural contexts, which demonstrated that demographic variables such as age and gender explained less than 2% of variance in well-being among Asian international students in Western countries, underscoring the need to explore dynamic psychological and contextual factors. The non-significance of these variables in our study may reflect the homogenizing effects of shared stressors (e.g., academic pressure, acculturative challenges) that overshadow individual demographic differences (Park et al., 2024).

Notably, Chinese language proficiency and self-rated health status emerged as significant predictors of psychological well-being. Students with advanced Chinese skills reported higher well-being, who identified language mastery as a critical mediator of social integration and emotional resilience among international students in China (Mamat & Anderson, 2023).

Improved language competence likely facilitates access to social support networks, cultural participation, and academic success—factors directly linked to reduced acculturative stress (Yin, Ong, & Qiao, 2024). Similarly, the strong association between health status and well-being corroborates global evidence that self-perceived health serves as a robust indicator of psychological functioning, particularly in populations navigating chronic stressors.

The introduction of coping styles substantially improved the model's explanatory power, accounting for a significant incremental variance. Reflective coping emerged as the strongest predictor of elevated well-being, supporting its role as an adaptive strategy for problem-solving and stress management. This aligns with the research before (Martinez et al., 2024), which identified reflective coping as a "psychological buffer" against academic and interpersonal stressors in international student populations (Yang et al., 2024). Conversely, suppressive coping was strongly associated with diminished well-being. Avoidance-oriented strategies exacerbate emotional dysregulation and social isolation. Reactive coping, while dysfunctional, exhibited weaker detrimental effects compared to suppressive coping, suggesting that even maladaptive emotional engagement may confer temporary relief in high-stress environments (Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2025).

These results highlight the primacy of dynamic, modifiable factors (e.g., coping mechanisms, language skills) over fixed demographic traits in shaping well-being trajectories. Universities should prioritize interventions that enhance reflective

coping strategies, such as cognitive-behavioral workshops and peer mentorship programs, while addressing structural barriers to language acquisition and healthcare access. Future research should explore longitudinal interactions between language proficiency, coping flexibility, and health outcomes in diverse cultural settings.

5. Conclusion

This study on international students in China found that socio-demographic variables like gender and age had little impact on psychological well-being, while Chinese language proficiency and self-rated health status were significant predictors. Coping styles also mattered: reflective coping positively predicted well-being, suppressive coping negatively, and reactive coping had a weaker negative effect. These results highlight the importance of dynamic factors. Thus, universities should design interventions to enhance reflective coping, like providing cognitive-behavioral workshops and peer mentorship, and remove barriers to language learning and healthcare access.

6. Limitations of the Present Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The current study provides valuable insights into the predictors of psychological well-being among international students, highlighting the importance of language proficiency, health status, and coping styles. However, several limitations warrant consideration for future research. This study employed a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to infer causality between variables. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to explore how changes in language proficiency, health status, and coping strategies over time impact well-being. Besides, the study did not explore the impact of university support systems and social networks, which are crucial in the acculturation process. Future research should put those in consideration. While the study controlled for cultural differences by including students from diverse backgrounds, it did not delve deeply into how specific cultural norms influence coping styles and well-being. Future research should explore these cultural nuances more thoroughly. The study identified reflective coping as a strong predictor of well-being but did not explore interventions to enhance this coping style. Future research should develop and evaluate programs aimed at improving reflective coping skills among international students. The study did not account for broader contextual factors such as university support systems, social networks, or economic conditions, which can significantly impact well-being. Future studies should consider these factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of well-being predictors.

In conclusion, while this study contributes to our understanding of psychological well-being among international students, future research should address these limitations to develop more effective interventions and support systems for this population.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

(1998). *World Health Organization.* https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/42065

Aldwin, C. M. (2011). Stress and Coping Across the Lifespan. In S. Folkman (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Stress, Coping, and Health* (pp. 15-24). Oxford University Press.

Bonsignore, M., Barkow, K., Jessen, F., & Heun, R. (2001). Validity of the Five-Item WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5) in an Elderly Population. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience, 251,* 27-31. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03035123

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Facilitating Optimal Motivation and Psychological Well-Being across Life's Domains. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne, 49,* 14-23. https://doi.org/10.1037/0708-5591.49.1.14

Heppner, P. P., Cook, S. W., Wright, D. M., & Johnson, W. C. (1995). Progress in Resolving Problems: A Problem-Focused Style of Coping. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 42,* 279-293. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.42.3.279

Heppner, P. P., Witty, T. E., & Dixon, W. A. (2004). Problem-Solving Appraisal and Human Adjustment: A Review of 20 Years of Research Using the Problem-Solving Inventory. *The Counseling Psychologist, 32,* 344-428. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000003262793

Heun, R., Burkart, M., Maier, W., & Bech, P. (1999). Internal and External Validity of the WHO Well-being Scale in the Elderly General Population. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica, 99,* 171-178. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0447.1999.tb00973.x

Holahan, C. J., & Moos, R. H. (1987). Personal and Contextual Determinants of Coping Strategies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52,* 946-955. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.5.946

Huppert, F. A. (2009). Psychological Well-Being: Evidence Regarding Its Causes and Consequences. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being, 1,* 137-164. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2009.01008.x

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping.* Springer.

Mamat, Z., & Anderson, M. C. (2023). Improving Mental Health by Training the Suppression of Unwanted Thoughts. *Science Advances, 9,* eadh5292. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh5292

Martinez, S. M., Esaryk, E., Chodur, G., Singh, S., Kalaydjian, S., Bullock, H. E. et al. (2024). Covid-19-Related Stressors Exacerbate Food Insecurity and Depressive Symptoms among Graduate Students Receiving Campus Basic Needs Services: Cross-Sectional Findings from Seven California Public Universities. *Stress and Health, 40,* e3345. https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.3345

McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T. (1986). Personality, Coping, and Coping Effectiveness in an Adult Sample. *Journal of Personality, 54,* 385-404. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1986.tb00401.x

Park, C., Shimada, S., Trisnadi, A. I., & Angelica, P. (2024). Changes in Psychological Challenges, Positive Experiences, and Coping Strategies among International Students in the United States before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 21,* Article 1232. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21091232

Penley, J. A., Tomaka, J., & Wiebe, J. S. (2002). The Association of Coping to Physical and

Psychological Health Outcomes: A Meta Analytic Review. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 25,* 551-603. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1020641400589

Pritchard, M. E., Wilson, G. S., & Yamnitz, B. (2007). What Predicts Adjustment among College Students? A Longitudinal Panel Study. *Journal of American College Health, 56,* 15-22. https://doi.org/10.3200/jach.56.1.15-22

Schmutte, P. S., & Ryff, C. D. (1997). Personality and Well-Being: Reexamining Methods and Meanings. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73,* 549-559. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.3.549

Shimazu, A., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2007). Does Distraction Facilitate Problem-Focused Coping with Job Stress? A 1 Year Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 30,* 423-434. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-007-9109-4

Struthers, C. W., Perry, R. P., & Menec, V. H. (2000). An Examination of the Relationship among Academic Stress, Coping, Motivation, and Performance in College. *Research in Higher Education, 41,* 581-592. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1007094931292

Sun, G., & Lyu, B. (2022). Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Self-Efficacy among College Students: The Mediating Role of Coping Styles. *Discover Psychology, 2,* Article No. 42. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44202-022-00055-1

Trudel-Fitzgerald, C., Smith, S. G., & Kubzansky, L. D. (2025). Are the Ways Women Cope with Stressors Related to Their Health Behaviors over Time? *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 59,* kaaf006. https://doi.org/10.1093/abm/kaaf006

Watson, D. C., & Sinha, B. (2008). Emotion Regulation, Coping, and Psychological Symptoms. *International Journal of Stress Management, 15,* 222-234. https://doi.org/10.1037/1072-5245.15.3.222

Yang, M., Guo, K., Liu, W., Fang, X., & Liu, T. (2024). Coping Tendency as a Mediator in the Relationship between Psychological Resilience and Health Problems among College Students. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 17,* 2619-2630. https://doi.org/10.2147/prbm.s466150

Yin, Z., Ong, L. Z., & Qiao, M. (2024). Psychological Factors Associated with Chinese International Students' Well-Being in the United States: A Systematic Review. *Journal of International Students, 14,* 529-551. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i4.6428