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Transforming International Education in China: Embedding a Framework of Care for Sustainable Wellbeing

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Abstract:

China's rise as a global hub for international education has brought significant growth but exposed critical challenges, including cultural adjustment struggles, language barriers, and insufficient support systems. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified these issues, revealing systemic vulnerabilities and underscoring the need for a shift toward inclusive and resilient education strategies. This study proposes embedding a "care framework" into China's international education policies and institutional practices. Drawing on sociomaterial theories and cultural values like Confucianism, it emphasizes fostering inclusive environments, intercultural understanding, and equitable support systems. Mixed-methods research, including surveys and interviews, highlights gaps such as inadequate financial aid, unclear post-graduation work policies, and limited mental health resources. The findings advocate actionable reforms, including culturally responsive care systems, streamlined policies, and accessible services. This approach positions China as a leader in compassionate international education, enhancing student wellbeing and advancing sustainable, inclusive global education practices.

Keywords — **International education, care framework, sociomaterialism, student wellbeing, cultural sensitivity.**

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE LANDSCAPE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN CHINA

International education has undergone a period of remarkable expansion in China over recent decades, transforming the country into a significant global hub for higher learning. This growth has been driven by a confluence of factors, including China's increasing economic prominence, its government's strategic focus on internationalization, and the growing aspirations of students worldwide seeking diverse educational experiences (Liu & Liu, 2016). However, this rapid expansion has also presented a unique set of challenges, ranging from ensuring quality and equity in educational provision to navigating cultural differences and fostering a sense of belonging for international students (Ji-jun & Chiang, 2016). Furthermore, the unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reshaped the landscape of international education, exacerbating existing challenges and introducing new complexities that demand innovative solutions.

Prior to the pandemic, China's international education sector was experiencing a period of sustained growth. The number of international students in China had risen dramatically, with the country aiming to host 500,000 international students by 2020 (Jiang & Ma, 2015). This influx of students contributed significantly to China's economic development, cultural exchange, and soft power projection. However, this rapid growth also brought about concerns regarding the capacity of Chinese universities to provide high-quality education and support services to a diverse student body. Issues such as language barriers, cultural

adjustment difficulties, and varying academic standards posed significant challenges for both international students and host institutions (Song, 2018). Moreover, ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities and fostering inclusive campus environments remained ongoing concerns.
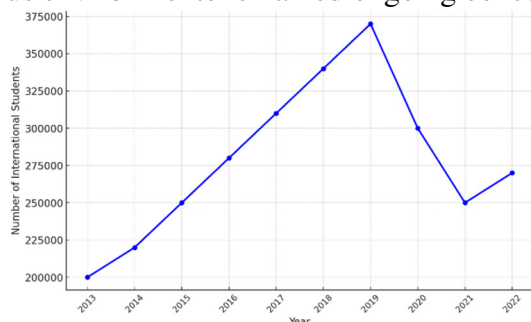

Fig. 1 A line chart showing the trends in international student enrollment in China over the past decade.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought about a profound shift in the global landscape of international education, and China was no exception. Border closures, travel restrictions, and the shift to online learning created unprecedented disruptions for international students in China. Many students faced difficulties returning to their home countries, experienced isolation and uncertainty due to lockdowns, and struggled to adapt to online learning modalities. The pandemic also highlighted pre-existing vulnerabilities within the international education system, such as the over-reliance on international student tuition fees and the lack of comprehensive support systems for students during times of crisis.

In the wake of these disruptions, the need for a more resilient and compassionate approach to international education has become increasingly apparent. This study argues for the adoption of a "care" framework as a transformative approach to enhancing the wellbeing of international students in China and fostering a more sustainable future for international education. The concept of "care" encompasses a multifaceted approach that prioritizes the emotional, social, and academic needs of international students. It involves creating inclusive and supportive learning environments, fostering intercultural understanding and respect, and providing comprehensive support services that address the diverse challenges faced by international students.

While the concept of care has been explored in various educational contexts, its application to international education in China remains relatively underdeveloped. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the potential of a care framework to transform the international education experience in China. Specifically, we examine how a care-centered approach can contribute to the sustainable wellbeing of international students by fostering a sense of belonging, promoting academic success, and enhancing their overall quality of life. By centering care as a guiding principle, we can create a more equitable, resilient, and enriching international education system that benefits both students and host institutions.
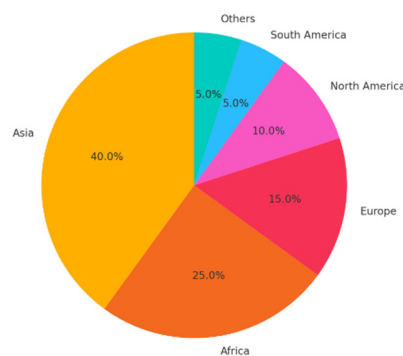

Fig. 2 Distribution of International Student by Country of Origin.

This research draws upon a range of theoretical perspectives, including student development theory, intercultural communication theory, and positive psychology, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of care in international education. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with international students in China, to explore their experiences and perspectives on the role of care in their educational journeys. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and administrators seeking to enhance the international student experience and build a more sustainable and compassionate future for international education in China.

II. EXPLORING SOCIOMATERIAL THEORIES AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

This study draws upon sociomaterial theories of care to understand the complex interplay of social and material factors in shaping care practices within international education in China. Sociomaterialism

offers a valuable lens for examining how care is not solely a social construct but is also deeply intertwined with material arrangements, technologies, and spaces. This perspective moves beyond traditional dichotomies between the social and material, recognizing their inherent interconnectedness and mutual influence.

A. Sociomaterial Theories of Care

Sociomaterial theories of care emphasize the relational and distributed nature of care, highlighting how care is enacted through networks of human and non-human actors. Rather than viewing care as a solely individual responsibility, this perspective recognizes that care is produced and experienced through interactions with various material elements, including technologies, physical spaces, and objects. For instance, in the context of international education, care can be manifested through the design of welcoming and inclusive campus environments, the provision of accessible online learning platforms, and the availability of culturally sensitive support services.
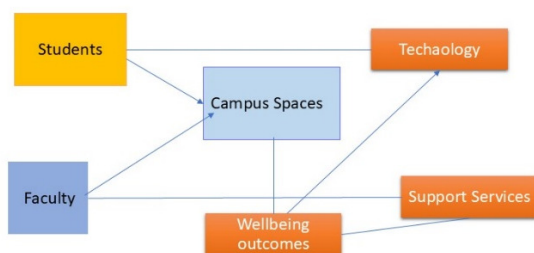

Fig. 3 A flowchart illustrating how sociomaterial care is enacted in international education, showing interactions between human (students, faculty) and non-human (technology, campus spaces) elements.

Care, within a sociomaterial framework, is understood as an ongoing process of negotiation and assemblage, involving the dynamic interplay of human intentions, material affordances, and contextual factors. This perspective challenges traditional notions of care as a static or pre-determined set of practices, emphasizing its emergent and situated nature. In the context of international education, this means that care practices must be responsive to the specific needs and experiences of international students, taking into account their diverse cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and personal circumstances.

B. Cultural Relevance of Care Practices in the Chinese Context.

Understanding care practices within the Chinese context requires considering the cultural values and historical traditions that shape understandings of care. Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on relationality, interdependence, and collective responsibility, which influence how care is perceived and enacted. The concept of guanxi (relationships) plays a central role in Chinese society, highlighting the importance of social connections and mutual obligations in fostering care.

Furthermore, traditional Confucian principles, which emphasize filial piety, respect for elders, and the importance of social harmony, also inform care practices in China. These principles promote a sense of collective responsibility for the wellbeing of others, particularly within families and communities. However, it is important to acknowledge that cultural values and practices are not static and can evolve over time, influenced by globalization, modernization, and other societal changes.

C. Integrating Confucian and Collectivist Principles with Global Sociomaterial Frameworks.

Integrating Confucian and collectivist principles with global sociomaterial frameworks offers a nuanced understanding of care practices in international education. While sociomaterialism provides a valuable lens for examining the relational and distributed nature of care, it is essential to consider how cultural values and norms shape the specific ways in which care is enacted. For instance, the emphasis on guanxi in Chinese culture can influence how international students build relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff, shaping their experiences of care and support.

Moreover, Confucian principles of reciprocity and mutual obligation can inform the development of culturally sensitive support services for international students. By recognizing the importance of relationality and interdependence in Chinese culture, universities can create programs and initiatives that foster a sense of belonging and community for international students. This may involve organizing cultural exchange events, establishing peer mentoring programs, or providing language support

services that facilitate intercultural communication and understanding.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the potential tensions that can arise between traditional cultural values and the diverse needs of international students. For example, while collectivist principles may promote a sense of community, they can also lead to challenges for international students who come from individualistic cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is crucial to adopt a culturally responsive approach to care that recognizes and respects the diverse values and experiences of international students.

By integrating Confucian and collectivist principles with global sociomaterial frameworks, this study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of care practices in international education in China. This theoretical framework provides a foundation for examining how care is enacted through the interplay of social, material, and cultural factors, informing the development of culturally sensitive and effective support services for international students. The findings of this study will contribute to the ongoing conversation about the role of care in fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future for international education.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Care and Policy in International Education in China

This section presents the findings related to the interplay of care and policy in shaping the experiences of international students in China. The analysis focuses on current policies, the challenges posed by an emphasis on economic growth and "soft power," and potential policy shifts that prioritize student wellbeing and address inequalities.

1) *Current Policies and Their Impact on Care:* China's international education policies have evolved significantly in recent decades, driven by a desire to attract talented students, enhance global competitiveness, and project "soft power". Several initiatives, such as the "Study in China" program and various scholarship schemes, have been implemented to attract international students. These policies have led to a substantial increase in the number of international students in China, contributing to the diversification of the higher education landscape.

However, the analysis reveals that current policies often prioritize economic and political goals over the wellbeing and care of international students. For instance, while scholarships are available, they may not adequately cover the rising costs of living and studying in China, creating financial burdens for some students. Similarly, post-graduation work policies, while designed to attract skilled graduates, can be complex and challenging to navigate, leading to uncertainty and stress for international students seeking employment in China.

TABLE I
A COMPARISON TABLE OF EXISTING INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION POLICIES VERSUS PROPOSED CARE-CENTERED POLICIES.

Current Policy	Limitation	Proposed Change
Focus on economic growth through international student tuition fees.	Over-reliance on tuition fees creates financial vulnerability for institutions and students.	Diversify funding sources and provide financial planning support to students.
Post-graduation work policies are complex and unclear.	Uncertainty causes stress and reduces students' post-graduation opportunities.	Simplify and clarify post-graduation work policies to reduce stress and improve access.
Limited emphasis on culturally sensitive support services.	International students face challenges adapting due to lack of targeted support.	Develop comprehensive, culturally responsive support systems for students.
Scholarship schemes prioritize numbers over adequacy of financial support.	Many scholarships do not cover rising costs of living, creating financial stress.	Increase scholarship funding and align it with actual cost-of-living metrics.
Promotion of soft power often overshadows student wellbeing.	Focus on image-building can lead to insufficient attention to individual student needs.	Prioritize student wellbeing and equity alongside soft power initiatives.

2) *Challenges Posed by Economic Growth and "Soft Power":* The emphasis on economic growth and "soft power" in China's international education policies can create tensions with the provision of care. The focus on attracting large numbers of international students can sometimes overshadow the need for individualized support and culturally sensitive services. This can lead to challenges for international students who may experience cultural adjustment difficulties, language barriers, or discrimination.

Furthermore, the pursuit of "soft power" can sometimes instrumentalize international students, viewing them primarily as tools for promoting a positive image of China rather than as individuals with unique needs and aspirations. This can undermine efforts to create a genuinely welcoming and

inclusive environment for international students, hindering the development of authentic intercultural understanding and exchange. For example, discusses the internationalization of Chinese Higher Education in the era of globalization. provides further context on the changing landscape and policies surrounding overseas education in China. These sources highlight the broader political and economic forces shaping international education. Additionally, offers a learner's perspective on the challenges of English-medium instruction in China, which can be a significant factor affecting international student wellbeing. Finally, explores how English language ideologies influence students' perceptions of international Master's programs in China, providing valuable insights into the cultural and linguistic dimensions of care.

B. Institutional Support and Care Practices

This section examines institutional support services and care practices within Chinese universities, critiquing existing provisions and exploring how care can be embedded more effectively into institutional practices.

1) *Critique of Existing Support Services:* While Chinese universities offer various support services for international students, including language courses, orientation programs, and cultural activities, the analysis reveals several areas for improvement. Existing services may not always be adequately tailored to the diverse needs of international students, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds or with specific learning requirements. Furthermore, access to mental health support and counseling services may be limited, and cultural sensitivity in service delivery can be inconsistent. For example, discusses the mental health challenges faced by Chinese international students in a different context, highlighting the importance of comprehensive and culturally sensitive mental health support. further explores the impact of cultural values on Chinese students in American higher education, offering insights into the potential cultural barriers that international students in China might also face. Examines the experiences of Chinese students in UK higher education, providing a comparative perspective on the challenges and opportunities of intercultural learning and the importance of institutional support. Finally, offers a literature review on acculturation strategies of overseas students, which can inform the development of more effective support services.

2) *Embedding Care into Institutional Practices:* Embedding care into institutional practices requires a holistic approach that considers the various dimensions of student life, including academic support, social integration, language and cultural barriers, and the use of technology.

Student Housing and Social Integration: Student housing plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and community for international students. Universities can promote social integration by providing opportunities for intercultural exchange, such as shared housing arrangements, social events, and peer mentoring programs. explores the intercultural experiences of "buddies" at a summer school in China, highlighting the potential of peer support programs in fostering social integration and intercultural understanding.

Addressing Language and Cultural Barriers: Language and cultural barriers can significantly impact international students' academic performance, social interactions, and overall wellbeing. Universities can provide comprehensive language support services, including language courses, tutoring, and interpretation services. Furthermore, cultural sensitivity training for faculty and staff can promote a more welcoming and inclusive campus environment. offers a brief introduction to student affairs in China, providing context for understanding the existing support structures and potential areas for improvement.

TABLE II
A TABLE CATALOGING EXISTING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS BASED ON STUDENT FEEDBACK.

Service	Description	Effectiveness	Recommendations
Language Support	Language classes and tutoring to help non-native speakers improve proficiency.	Medium	Expand tutoring options and provide online language learning resources.
Orientation Programs	Introduction sessions for new students to familiarize with campus and culture.	Medium	Include peer mentoring and country-specific guidance in orientation programs.
Mental Health Counseling	Professional counseling services for stress, anxiety, and other mental health concerns.	Low	Increase access to trained counselors and promote awareness of services.
Cultural Exchange Events	Organized events to foster intercultural understanding and friendships.	High	Continue events but integrate more student-led initiatives to enhance engagement.
Housing Assistance	Support for finding and securing appropriate housing for international students.	Low	Streamline housing processes and ensure availability of affordable options.

Using Technology for Accessibility and Engagement: Technology can play a crucial role in enhancing accessibility and engagement for international students. Online learning platforms, mobile applications, and social media can be used to provide information, connect students with resources, and foster a sense of community. However, it is essential to ensure that technology is used in a way that is inclusive and accessible to all students, regardless of their technological proficiency or access to resources.

3) *Sociomaterial Interactions and Their Impact on Care:* The design of campus spaces and the use of digital platforms can significantly impact the experiences of care for international students. Creating welcoming and inclusive physical spaces, such as student lounges, study areas, and cultural centers, can foster a sense of belonging and community. Similarly, designing user-friendly and accessible digital platforms can enhance communication, access to information, and student engagement. discusses the importance of considering culture and collaboration in the planning of academic facilities and programs, highlighting the need for a holistic approach that integrates both physical and social dimensions of learning. mentions the scarcity of research on cross-cultural collaborations, suggesting that further research is needed to understand the complex interplay of cultural heritage, modern design, and international-local brand collaborations in shaping the experiences of international students. discusses the influence of generational factors on customer and workforce expectations in the hospitality industry, which can offer insights into the evolving needs and preferences of international students. By addressing these aspects, institutions can create a more care-centered environment that supports the academic success, social integration, and overall wellbeing of international students in China.

C. Student Experiences and Agency

This section delves into the lived experiences of international students in China, detailing the challenges they face and highlighting their agency in creating and accessing care.

1) *Challenges Faced by International Students:* International students in China encounter a range of challenges that can impact their wellbeing and academic success. These challenges include:

- Cultural Adjustment, Mental Health, and Racism: Adapting to a new culture, language, and social environment can be stressful and emotionally challenging. International students may experience culture shock, homesickness, and difficulties building social connections. Furthermore, they may face instances of racism or discrimination, which can negatively impact their sense of belonging and self-esteem. discusses the mental well-being of international students, connecting research and practice. examines barriers and facilitators associated with the use of mental health services among immigrant students, which can offer relevant insights into the challenges faced by international students in China. provides a review of the acculturation experiences of international students, highlighting the potential for acculturative stress and adjustment problems.

TABLE III
A TABLE CATALOGING EXISTING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS BASED ON STUDENT FEEDBACK.

Challenge	Example/Insight	Suggested Solutions
Cultural Adjustment	Students often experience culture shock and homesickness, impacting their academic focus.	Implement orientation programs and cultural exchange events to foster understanding.
Language Barriers	Non-native speakers struggle to follow lectures and communicate effectively with peers and faculty.	Provide language support services, such as tutoring and workshops tailored to student needs.
Access to Support Services	Limited availability of culturally sensitive support services hampers students' ability to navigate challenges.	Develop comprehensive support services with cultural training for staff and multilingual resources.
Mental Health Challenges	High levels of stress and isolation lead to increased demand for mental health services.	Establish accessible counseling services with trained professionals familiar with international student issues.
Discrimination and Racism	Instances of implicit bias or outright discrimination affect students' sense of belonging.	Introduce anti-discrimination training and policies to create a more inclusive environment.

- Access to Healthcare and Support Services: Navigating the healthcare system in a foreign country can be complex and challenging. International students may face language barriers, difficulties understanding health insurance policies, and limited access to culturally sensitive healthcare providers. offers suggestions for student affairs professionals to support international students, which can inform the development of more effective healthcare and support service.
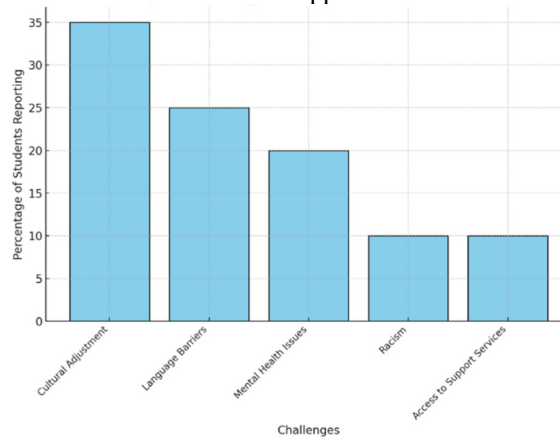

Fig. 4 A bar chart displaying the percentage of students reporting various challenges (e.g., cultural adjustment, racism, mental health issues).

2) *Students as Active Agents of Care:* Despite the challenges they face, international students are not passive

recipients of care. They actively seek out support, build networks, and create their own care communities. This agency is manifested in various ways:

- ***Peer Support Groups and Informal Networks***: International students often form peer support groups and informal networks to share experiences, provide emotional support, and navigate the challenges of studying abroad together. These informal networks can be crucial sources of care and resilience. discusses the importance of supervisor-doctoral student relationships, highlighting the need for positive and supportive relationships within the academic environment. explores the complexities of supporting international pre-service teachers during practicum, emphasizing the importance of understanding their unique challenges and providing appropriate support.
- ***Collaborative Projects for Intercultural Understanding***: International students often engage in collaborative projects and initiatives that promote intercultural understanding and exchange. These projects can create opportunities for students to share their cultures, learn from each other, and build bridges across cultural divides.

3) ***Recommendations for Supporting Student-Led Care Initiatives:*** Universities can play a vital role in supporting student-led care initiatives by providing resources, mentorship, and platforms for collaboration. This can include:

- Funding and logistical support for student-led projects and events.
- Creating spaces for intercultural dialogue and exchange.
- Training faculty and staff on culturally sensitive communication and support.
- Integrating student perspectives into the design and delivery of support services.

Universities can play a vital role in supporting student-led care initiatives by providing resources, mentorship, and platforms for collaboration. This c By recognizing and supporting the agency of international students, universities can create a more collaborative and empowering environment for care.

D. The Role of China in Global Educational Transformation

This section analyzes China's growing influence on international education norms and discusses how embedding care aligns with the nation's broader societal goals. It also explains the study's contributions to global discussions on care, wellbeing, and sustainable internationalization.

1) ***China's Growing Influence on International Education Norm:*** China's increasing prominence in global higher education is undeniable. The country has become a major destination for international students and is actively investing in international collaborations and partnerships. This growing influence provides China with an opportunity to shape international education norms and practices. discusses the internationalization of Chinese higher education in the era of globalization. examines the new sphere of international student education in Chinese higher education. provides an overview of overseas education in China, including changing landscapes and policies. researches the necessity for the establishment of international schools in China, highlighting the growing demand for global education.

2) ***Embedding Care and China's Societal Goals:*** The concept of care aligns with China's broader societal goals of building a harmonious society and promoting sustainable development. A focus on care can contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable education system that supports the wellbeing of all students, both domestic and international. discusses how education can lead to happiness, emphasizing the importance of human values in education. explores the need for global citizenship education in Chinese secondary schools, highlighting the importance of values and intercultural understanding. discusses how a conceptualized global citizenship education curriculum could function within Chinese secondary schools. examines educational policy development in China, offering insights into the country's educational priorities. discusses the higher educational transformation of China and its global implications.

3) ***Study's Contributions to Global Discussions:*** This study contributes to global discussions on care, wellbeing, and sustainable internationalization in several ways:

- ***Providing empirical evidence on the experiences of international students in China:*** The study's findings offer valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of internationalization from the perspective of students.
- ***Highlighting the importance of embedding care into institutional practices:*** The study demonstrates how a focus on care can enhance the wellbeing and academic success of international students.
- ***Offering recommendations for creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments:*** The study's recommendations can inform policy and practice at both the institutional and national levels.
- ***Contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the role of care in international education:*** The study's focus on care provides a fresh perspective on the complex dynamics of internationalization and its impact on students.

By examining the intersection of care, internationalization, and China's role in global education, this study contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities of creating a more equitable and sustainable future for higher education.

IV. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A CARE-CENTERED FUTURE IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

This study has explored the multifaceted concept of care within the context of international student

experiences in China. By examining the challenges, support systems, and agency of international students, this research has illuminated the crucial role of care in fostering inclusive and sustainable internationalization within higher education. The findings underscore the need for a paradigm shift in how we approach internationalization, moving beyond a purely transactional model towards one that prioritizes the holistic wellbeing of international students.

One of the key findings of this study is the diverse range of challenges faced by international students in China. These challenges encompass cultural adjustment, mental health concerns, instances of racism, and difficulties accessing healthcare and support services. Navigating a new cultural landscape, coupled with language barriers and systemic differences, can create significant stress and impact students' academic performance and overall wellbeing. Furthermore, experiences of racism and discrimination can undermine students' sense of belonging and create a hostile environment. The study highlights the urgent need for institutions to address these challenges through comprehensive support systems and intercultural training programs. It is imperative to create a campus climate where international students feel safe, respected, and valued.

However, the study also reveals the remarkable agency of international students in navigating these challenges and creating their own care communities. Through peer support groups, informal networks, and collaborative projects, international students demonstrate their resilience and proactive engagement in seeking support and fostering intercultural understanding. These student-led initiatives provide valuable spaces for sharing experiences, building social connections, and promoting cross-cultural learning. The study emphasizes the importance of recognizing and supporting these student-led care initiatives, empowering students to become active agents in shaping their own experiences and contributing to a more inclusive campus environment.

Furthermore, this research analyzes China's growing influence on international education norms and practices. As a major destination for international students, China has the potential to shape global discussions on internationalization and promote a more care-centered approach. The study argues that embedding care into institutional policies and practices aligns with China's broader societal goals of building a harmonious society and promoting sustainable development. By prioritizing the wellbeing of international students, China can enhance its reputation as a welcoming and supportive destination for global learners, fostering mutually beneficial relationships and contributing to a more interconnected world.

This study makes several significant contributions to global discussions on care, wellbeing, and sustainable internationalization. Firstly, it provides empirical evidence on the lived experiences of international students in China, offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of internationalization from the students' perspective. Secondly, it highlights the importance of embedding care into institutional practices, demonstrating how a focus on care can enhance the wellbeing and academic success of international students. Thirdly, it offers practical recommendations for creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments, informing policy and practice at both the institutional and national levels. Finally, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of care in international education, providing a fresh perspective on the complex dynamics of internationalization and its impact on students.

In conclusion, this research advocates for embedding care as a transformative approach to enhance international education in China. By addressing the challenges faced by students and aligning practices with cultural and global norms, we can create a sustainable model that prioritizes wellbeing, inclusivity, and equity.

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