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# Analyzing the Problems of Chinese Students Studying at Universities in Korea

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## Abstract

*This study is conducted to determine whether Chinese students currently attending Korean universities are satisfied with their university life and to identify the problems they are experiencing. A survey was conducted with the graduate students attending K University and 202 students participated in the study. According to the study, most students are very satisfied with Korean universities and would recommend them to their friends. Regardless of gender, degree program, or major, the most difficult aspect of school life is understanding and communicating in class due to language problems. Even students with high TOPIK scores experience difficulties in communication and comprehension during class. One of the most significant problems that Chinese students have is a lack of interaction with Korean students. They want to interact with Korean students through club and team activities at the university. They requested that the university provide international students with opportunities to participate in various programs, such as sports activities, to help overcome feelings of alienation and isolation. Based on the study results, suggestions to support Chinese students to adjust educational environments in Korea were presented.*

**Keywords:** Chinese students, international students, Study in Korea, Language problems. Cultural problems, social problems. Cross-cultural communication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, it has been steadily increasing the number of foreign students coming to study at Korean universities. According to data from the National Statistical Office[1], as of 2023, there were approximately 182,000 international students studying in Korea. This represents a significant increase from the 167,000 international students in 2022, showing a growth of nearly 9%. This increase is part of Korea's broader effort to attract more international students through initiatives like the "Study Korea 300K Project," which aims to have 300,000 international students by 2027[2]. The nationalities of students studying in Korea include those from China, Vietnam, Mongolia, Japan, the United States, and Uzbekistan, with Chinese students making up around 40% of the international students[1]. These international students are enrolling in universities in Seoul and other regions. Recently, as the school-age population in Korea has plummeted due to the low birth rate,

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the government has been providing scholarships and many other incentives to foreign students. Korea tries to attract foreign students by promoting various policies, such as simplifying visa issuance procedures and offering living support. Consequently, many students are choosing to study in Korea, which offers relatively inexpensive but high-quality education. In addition, interest in Korean is leading many foreign students to choose Korea for their studies, allowing them to experience life and cultural experiences[2].

As foreign students increase, many Korean universities operate excellent educational programs in various fields in engineering, medicine arts, business, and social science. Korea's policy of globalizing higher education has had a significant impact on Chinese international students[2] [3][4]. Since the 2000s, Korea has attracted many international students through strategic programs such as the "Study in Korea" project and the "Global Korea Scholarship" (GKS). The "Study in Korea" project is an international student attraction program promoted by the Korean government. This project aims to promote Korea's education system and culture and attract global talent by providing various scholarship programs and support services to help foreign students study successfully in Korea. One of these programs is the "Global Korea Scholarship (GKS)," which offers international students the opportunity to study in Korea. GKS is used as a public diplomacy tool to enhance the country's image and help students develop positive perceptions of the Republic of Korea. Beneficiaries of the GKS stay in Korea during their studies and directly experience Korean culture and society[4].

However, despite these policies, international students face problems such as language barriers, employment challenges, and cultural adaptation issues[5][6]. Many universities are trying to lower the language barrier by offering a variety of degree programs taught in English and bilingual education programs to attract international students, so even students who do not speak Korean are choosing to study abroad. The problems faced by international students staying in Korea include language barriers, cultural differences, financial burdens, administrative procedures, social isolation, and academic stress. Such challenges can significantly hinder international students' ability to adapt and complete their studies in Korea[6].

In analyzing the problems faced by Chinese graduate students studying in Korea in detail, various dimensions emerge, including motivational factors, academic stress, transitioning challenges, work experiences, and mental health issues. Firstly, the motivational factors that drive Chinese students to study in Korea can be understood through the push-pull framework. [6]'s study pointed out academic achievement pressures and educational barriers as push factors for Chinese students. Family and community trends, as well as national-level education policies, play significant roles. Conversely, pull factors include emotional and ethnic solidarity, and friends in Korea, and favorable policies like the "Study Korea Policy"[6]. These factors collectively influence the decision-making process of Chinese students considering higher education in Korea. Academic stress is another critical issue. [7]'s study revealed that international graduate students experience significant academic stress, influenced by their interactions with faculty and their sense of belonging. The study found that faculty interactions have a negative effect on academic stress and a positive effect on a sense of belonging, which in turn reduces academic stress[8]. Notably, international students were more affected by faculty interactions compared to their Korean counterparts, indicating the importance of supportive faculty relationships for alleviating academic stress among Chinese graduate students. Transitioning challenges are also prominent. Chinese graduate students must navigate the dual transition of adapting to adulthood and learning in a new educational environment. This includes understanding the adult learning context in Korea, which may differ significantly from their previous experiences in China[9]. Such transitions can pose substantial challenges both inside and outside the classroom, affecting their overall academic and social adaptation. Mental health issues, particularly those related to perceived discrimination and ethnic identity, are significant concerns. [10]'s study found that perceptions of personal rejection and overt acts of discrimination were strongly associated with depression and anxiety. The exploration of ethnic identity was positively linked to anxiety, suggesting that the process of reconciling one's cultural identity in a foreign context can be stressful[10]. These findings underscore the need for mental health support services that are sensitive to the unique experiences of Chinese students in Korea.

Chinese graduate students in Korea face a multifaceted array of challenges, including motivational factors, academic stress, transitioning difficulties, work-related stress, and mental health issues. Addressing these problems requires a comprehensive approach that includes supportive faculty interactions, culturally sensitive mental health services, and policies that facilitate smoother transitions and integration into Korean academic and social life. This holistic understanding can inform interventions aimed at improving the overall experience and well-being of Chinese graduate students in Korea[11],[12].[13].

However, no systematic research has been conducted to specifically address the problems faced by these students. In particular, the challenges faced by Chinese graduate students, who need to write a thesis in Korean to earn their degrees, have not been explored. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the problems international students encounter and analyze the situation in detail. By examining the difficulties experienced and analyzing the problems in school life, this study aims to provide basic data for developing an educational program to support international students. To achieve the research goals, three research questions are presented as follows:

1. What is the satisfaction level of international students with Korean universities?
2. What is the level of Korean language proficiency among international students?
3. What is the most difficult aspect of university life in Korea for international students?

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, a survey method was employed. The survey was conducted with Chinese students currently enrolled at K University to analyze the issues they face. A total of 202 Chinese international students participated in this study, and 109 were master's students and 93 were doctoral students. However, only 197 students answered personal information question. Among the 197 respondents, there were 105 female students and 92 male students. The largest group of respondents were those majoring in the humanities and social sciences, with 63 participants. Students majoring in education, business administration, sports, and engineering also participated in the survey. The specific number of participants is presented in [Table 1]."

**Table 1. Research Participants by Gender and Major**

	Education	Sports	Business	Human Science	Engineering	Total
Male	9	7	26	38	12	92
Female	8	19	31	25	22	105
Total	17	25	57	63	34	197

The researcher gathered information through preliminary research to design the questionnaire. The questionnaire included a total of 32 questions, with 4 items rated on a 5-point scale covering school perception, information services provision, adaptation to classes, and participation in school activities. It also included multiple-choice questions regarding problems with school life and one open-ended questions for suggestions. The questions and reliability of the questions are presented in [Table 2].

**Table 2. Research Questionnaire**

	Number of Questions	Reliability
About school image	8	0.95

Information service	7	0.95
Adjustment to class	8	0.91
Participation in school activities	8	0.84
Satisfaction with school	2	0.93
Problems with school life	10	N/A/
Open answer	1	N/A
Total	32	

After developing the Korean questionnaire, it was translated into Chinese, pre-tested, and uploaded onto an online survey platform. Once the questionnaire was available online, text messages were sent to Chinese students studying abroad to encourage their participation in the survey. The text messages stated that participation was voluntary and assured participants that their personal information would remain confidential. Responses from survey participants were automatically saved online in Excel format and analyzed using SPSS 28.

### 3. DATA ANALYSIS

#### 3.1. What is the satisfaction level of international students with Korean universities?

When analyzing students' satisfaction with Korean universities, it was found that satisfaction was very high, averaging 4.13. Students indicated satisfaction with school life and expressed a willingness to recommend studying abroad in Korea to their friends. When dividing the students into master's and doctoral programs and analyzing whether there was a difference in satisfaction using a t-test, it was found that there was no statistically significant difference. Additionally, gender differences were examined using a t-test, and differences by major were analyzed using an ANOVA test, but no statistically significant differences were found. Furthermore, students' TOPIK levels and duration of residence in Korea did not show any difference in their satisfaction with the universities in Korea.

**Table 3. Students' Satisfaction With the University**

Question	Mean	S.D
Q29 I am satisfied with my school life	4.15	1.079
Q30 I would like to recommend Korean universities to my friends.	4.12	1.214
Total	4.135	1.145

#### 3.2. What is the level of Korean language proficiency among international students?

As a result of analyzing the Korean language level of Chinese students, out of 202 respondents, 128 did not have a TOPIK score, 26 were at level 1, 20 were at level 2, and 14 were at level 3. The level of Korean was found to be very low, with only 14 students at level 4 or higher. Approximately 60 master's and doctoral students did not have TOPIK scores. The Korean language level of Chinese international students was so low that they could not even engage in basic daily conversations on campus. Even if their TOPIK scores are high, their Korean proficiency is insufficient to understand classes and conduct research in their major field. It appears impractical for them to carry out academic activities in classrooms.

**Table 4. Students' TOPIK levels**

	None	Level1	Level2	Level3	Level4	Level5	Level6	Total
Masters	61	16	6	7	2	0	1	93
Doctorate	67	10	14	7	5	3	3	109
Total	128	26	20	14	7	3	4	202

### 3.3. What is the most difficult aspect of university life in Korea for international students?

In response to the multiple-choice question about inconveniences, respondents cited (1) difficulties in communication and understanding classes due to language problems as the most significant issue. Following this were (2) lack of school events for participation, (3) cultural differences causing inconvenience, (4) uncertainty about how to obtain information about the school or department, (5) insufficient career information after graduation, and (6) challenges in communication. An analysis of "difficulties in communication and understanding classes due to language problems" according to TOPIK level showed that even students with a high TOPIK level reported class and communication as the most difficult problems. These results indicate that the TOPIK level is not a reliable standard for judging the level of communication proficiency among students.

**Table 5. Difficulties of the Students**

Communication and understanding classes	Lack of school events for participation	Cultural differences	Lack of school information	Lack of career information	Challenges in communication
76	69	60	51	45	42

**Table 6. Communication Problems by TOPIK Levels**

	None	Level1	Level2	Level3	Level4	Level5	Level6	Total
Communication Problems	40	17	6	14	2	1	1	75

When analyzing the open-end question regarding the problems that the students have, the following responses were provided in smarty.

- I would like to strengthen the Korean language study of Chinese students by creating a study group with Koreans and Chinese.
- I hope that Chinese students will be able to participate in physical education, sports, and badminton, and that programs will be created so that they can participate in outdoor activities.
- We hope that one-year master's students will be able to choose their classes autonomously rather than having their classes assigned by the school.
- I would like to build a friend-making platform for international students.

- I hope to carry out activities with many Chinese and Korean cultural club organizations and organize cultural learning and exchanges with more Chinese and Korean students.
- I hope that the professor will guide my thesis well and help me graduate.
- Please provide many venues and opportunities for cultural exchange between Korea and China.
- I would like to learn more about my major subject.
- We hope to expand communication opportunities with professors, increase psychological counseling, and expand communication opportunities with Korean students.

When analyzing the responses that are presented above, it was found that Chinese students want to interact with Korean students through clubs and school activities. They are trying to overcome the problems of language and cultural differences through such exchanges. Students want to relieve social alienation and isolation through activities other than academics, such as sports, and maintain a healthy mental state so that they can focus on their studies. They hope that schools develop and provide an application for making friends and social activities. It appears that they want to communicate with university members, including professors and students.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study was conducted to determine whether Chinese students currently attending Korean universities are satisfied with their university life, and to identify the problems they are experiencing. To achieve the purpose of this study, a survey was conducted on graduate students attending K University. Most students responded that they were very satisfied with Korean universities and would recommend them to their friends. However, many students did not have a TOPIK scores or have low TOPIK level scores, and only few students have level 4 or higher scores. Regardless of gender, degree program, or major, the most difficult aspect of school life was in understanding and communicating in class due to language problems. Even students with high TOPIK scores addressed difficulties in communication and understanding in class. The Chinese students proposed setting up exchange programs with Korean students as a way to address these language issues. They believed that through interactions with Korean students, they could not only improve their language skills but also enhance their understanding of Korean culture and resolve the problem of social isolation. The respondents expressed a desire to interact with Korean students through club and team activities. They wanted the school to provide international students with opportunities to participate in various programs, such as sports activities, to overcome feelings of alienation and isolation. They also wanted to maintain a healthy mental state so they could focus on their studies.

As a result of this study, the following conclusions were drawn: Chinese students studying in Korea are very satisfied with the curriculum and class content of Korean universities. They are also very satisfied with Korea's educational system and educational direction, but they are experiencing many difficulties due to language problems. They feel culturally different and socially alienated because they do not have opportunities to interact with Korean students. Although meetings and consultations with advisors are well conducted, language problems are leading to academic issues because understanding class content is an area that international students must handle. Since the students are graduate students, language problems lead to difficulties in writing theses. Even for students with high TOPIK scores, communication problems still exist. It appears that the TOPIK level does not improve the ability of international students to interact with Koreans or take classes at universities.

In order to solve such problems, there is a need to develop supporting programs that facilitate integration and intercultural understanding. By fostering relationships between Chinese and Korean students. Based on the needs, programs and activities enhance the Chinese students' language skills and cultural competence. can be proposed. First, language exchange programs can serve as an effective platform for Chinese students to practice

Korean and for Korean students to practice Chinese. These programs can be structured as one-on-one or group sessions where students meet regularly to engage in conversational practice. As noted in the literature, language barriers are significant challenges for international students [14], and language exchange programs can help overcome these barriers. Second is establishing peer mentoring programs where Korean students mentor Chinese students can be highly effective. This approach not only provides academic and social support but also helps Chinese students navigate the complexities of the Korean education system and society. Strong mentoring relationships have been shown to be protective factors for successful adjustment [14]. Lastly, workshops focused on multilingualism and multicultural communication strategies can be beneficial. Workshops can cover topics such as intercultural communication skills, conflict resolution, and collaborative problem-solving in a multicultural setting.

By implementing these programs and activities, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for Chinese graduate students, fostering meaningful relationships with Korean students and enhancing their overall academic and cultural experience in Korea. Accepting international students as general members of our university is crucial. This integration not only benefits the international students themselves but also significantly enriches the host institution and its local student body. International students' participation can foster active engagement and improve the overall academic environment by contributing to the financial health and sustainability of universities. The financial outcomes from international student enrolment help universities enhance their facilities, resources, and services, which ultimately benefit the entire student body [15]. The presence of international students thus supports the economic viability of higher education institutions, enabling them to maintain and improve the quality of education provided. Further, the integration of international students aids in the development of multilingual and multicultural competencies among all students. Research on the intersecting identities of international post-graduate students in the UK indicated that engaging with diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives helps students develop a deeper understanding of their own identities and the academic context they are part of. This reflexivity and enhanced cultural awareness are crucial skills in an increasingly globalized world [16]. Therefore, an educational environment and support plan for international students is essential. This will help them broaden their understanding of Korea and receive the education they seek at Korean universities.

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