

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19397127

ASSESSMENT OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY AMONG CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Received: 06/08/2025

Accepted: 05/10/2025

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ABSTRACT

University-level depression and anxiety are serious global health problems that are especially high among students in China. This study provided a full review of the literature evaluating the prevalence of depression and anxiety in Chinese university students. This research was successful in identifying and selecting six qualifying peer-reviewed studies that reported on these issues from 2020 to 2025, using the PRISMA guidelines. The findings identified that psychological distress were highly prevalent among Chinese college students where depression and anxiety typically co-occurred together in the same population group. There is evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic was an important contextual variable contributing to higher levels of distress; however, studies report that higher levels of distress persisted beyond the impact of the pandemic. Studies also found that there were several predictors of depressive and anxiety symptoms such as lifestyle factors, social support, and psychological factors, which illustrates how many variables contribute to the mental health of students. Although there have been many studies on the issue of mental health, this analysis finds major methodological flaws. The prevalence of cross-sectional data hinders researchers' ability to determine a cause-and-effect relationship, while the extensive usage of self-reported tools like PHQ-9 and GAD-7 raises questions about the appropriateness of the instruments in terms of cultural relevance for Chinese people. Additionally, without the use of qualitative and longitudinal research methods, there is inadequate information available to understand how mental health changes over time. Overall, this review emphasises the importance of more culturally appropriate, varied methodologies, and longitudinal data when studying the measurement of depression and anxiety among university students in China.

KEYWORDS: Depression, anxiety, mental health, university students and China

1. INTRODUCTION

Depression and anxiety are critical mental health issues that students experience worldwide; however, the rates of depression and anxiety among students in China are very high. Evidence supports that a large number of students will experience mental distress during their college years. Approximately 28.4% of Chinese college students have depression indicating mental illness will have a large impact on this group of people (Gao et al., 2020). More recent studies report pooled rates of about 34.7%, with post-pandemic data suggesting that rates of anxiety are rising further (Lin et al., 2025).

Anxiety is also extremely common in the Chinese college student population. Prevalence of anxiety among Chinese students is reported to be 5% to 40% that varied due to assessment of dynamic study populations as well as measurement tools. As of 2023, an epidemiological study of university students, approximately 11.5% had clinically significant anxiety and approximately 9.8% were depressed. This study provided strong evidence that depression and anxiety continue to have a significant impact on students in China today. Therefore, given the fact that China has 36 million university students, millions of students are affected by these issues (Han et al., 2025).

The period when students are in university is a time of great struggle and concern due to the changes in their lives such as: increased demands from school, forming their identity, and transitioning into adulthood. The burden on students in China is compounded by Confucian values that have an impact on students' academic performance, the obligation to support their parents, and collective responsibility to the community. This increased amount of stress has created a very competitive job market, and students feel this pressure now more than ever because of COVID-19, with reports indicating that at least 26% of students showed signs of depression during this time as a result of the psychological effects of the pandemic (social isolation, disruption of education, etc.) (Luo et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to systematically evaluate how anxiety and depression are assessed

with Chinese students today due to the many complexities and extent of these issues.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

To among students in China, it is important to view this phenomenon through the broader lens of economic development and changes in the way that the population interacts with education system. Since 1999, there have been large-scale changes to the Chinese educational system that have resulted in a massive increase in student enrolments (Cheng & Hamid, 2025). The means by which students' access education has changed from elite to mass, so many more Chinese students have access to attend university. This increase has created a heightened sense of competition between students and an increased number of students graduating with unrealistic expectations of job opportunities. The overabundance of graduates compared to what is available in the job market has created a situation where many new graduates are uncertain about whether their investment in their education will create a financial return, which is leading to increased levels of anxiety among students (Bai et al., 2025).

When one looks at the mental health experiences that the Chinese population has, it is important to take into account how much of the experience is impacted by the belief systems of Confucian society (academic success, family honour, and community). As a result, many Chinese students have parents who have unrealistic expectations of their academic performance, creating excessively high levels of internal pressure on them to succeed. They feel an ethical obligation to do well in school and are therefore significantly more likely to internalise feelings of failure, increasing their susceptibility to depression. The Confucian perspective also impacts how a person either shows or conceals the experience of mental illness (Colzato et al., 2024).

Furthermore, students' psychological outcomes are affected by structural inequalities. Rural-urban disparities have a significant effect on students from underdeveloped areas, especially when it comes to experiencing financial difficulties, sparse

social capital, and being unable to adjust to urban universities. The institutional stratification of higher education in China has caused further difficulties for students enrolled at lower-tier universities regarding finding employment and the stress associated with those limited job opportunities (Yang & Lomer, 2025).

The current literature has shown that psychometric instruments are often used which have been developed using Western norms, such as the PHQ-9 & GAD-7. These instruments may not accurately capture culturally specific manifestations of distress among Chinese populations. For example, individuals from China frequently report somatic symptoms (e.g., fatigue, headache, and sleep problems) but they may be inadequately captured by standardised scales. Therefore, there is an ongoing discussion about the cultural validity and sensitivity of these assessment tools, and consequently, concerns are raised regarding the accuracy and comparability of prevalence estimates (Wang et al., 2023).

There are other reasons why people do not report their symptoms or seek help than just the perception that it is a sign of personal weakness or family shame. Stigma related to mental illness remains a major barrier to both help-seeking and reporting. Even though mental health has been in the news more since the government started paying attention to mental health, the stigma attached to psychological disorders (e.g., the belief that they are a sign of personal weakness or family shame) still influences how society views people with these disorders and affects how likely students are to access professional assistance and the number of severely depressed students will show up in any study that measures mental health (Yu et al., 2022).

Moreover, the disruptiveness of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed existing vulnerabilities in the area of supporting student mental health. With the prolonged closure of college campuses, the transition to a digital learning environment, and restrictions placed on the freedom of students to move around, feelings of isolation and uncertainty have been magnified. Additionally, the overwhelming use of cross-sectional designs in current research hampers the ability to investigate

how mental health impacts the long term. The existing literature does indicate a complex web of structural, cultural, and methodological factors influencing the assessment of depression and anxiety in Chinese university students, suggesting a need for better grounded cultural and more methodologically sound approaches to this research question (Liu et al., 2022).

3. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This research has a primary focus on systematically evaluating the methodologies used in assessing depression and anxiety amongst university students in China with an emphasis on both methodological rigour and cultural validity. Despite a wealth of research suggesting a high rate of depression and anxiety among Chinese university students, inconsistencies in measurement tools, diagnostic thresholds, sampling frameworks and settings provide significant questions surrounding the reliability and comparability of existing research findings related to depression and anxiety among the same demographics. The current study critically evaluated psychometric instruments that are commonly used in China to measure depression and anxiety among university students by examining the extent to which these instruments capture culturally specific manifestations of psychological distress, including somatisation. In addition, the current study also synthesised evidence regarding the prevalence and key determinants of depression and anxiety, while identifying methodological shortcomings of current research designs, particularly the overreliance on cross-sectional research methodologies. The end goal of this research is to assist in improving the development of more culturally sensitive methods for assessing depression and anxiety, and to contribute to evidence-based psycho-education and mental health interventions within higher education institutions in China.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been an explosion in the amount of research into depression and anxiety in the Chinese

university student population during the last two decades, reflecting an increase in academic attention to these issues as a result of an increase in concern about mental health of university students; additionally, concerns about mental well-being amongst this age group have also been raised at a policy and community level (Chen et al., 2022). The body of literature includes many references to increased prevalence rates; however, the vast majority of the published literature is also characterised by severe conceptual and methodological fragmentation. The author's analysis of the literature indicates that three themes dominate: 1) variability in the prevalence of depressive and anxiety disorders among Chinese university students, 2) problems in the measurement of depressive and anxiety disorders, and 3) potential influences of sociocultural and structural determinants.

For the first theme (variability), the literature provides a multitude of estimates of the prevalence of depression and anxiety amongst Chinese university students with a high degree of variability. Although most meta-analytic studies indicate moderate to high levels of psychological distress exists amongst Chinese university students, the estimates used are often inconsistent and vary widely (Lin et al., 2025). The variability can be linked to sampling strategies (type of sample and geographical representation), but also to the selection of measurement instruments and cut-off scores for determining prevalence. For example, studies utilising more sensitive screening instruments show higher prevalence rates suggesting that the base rate is being overestimated. The opposite is true when studies employ more stringent diagnostic criteria, leading to the possibility of under-reporting severe types of mental illness in children and adolescents. The fact that the literature reflects so much variability contributes to the difficulty of making cross-study comparisons and hinders the development of an epidemiologically coherent understanding of the issues affecting this segment of the population (Sevenoaks et al., 2022).

Second, the appropriateness of many psychometric tools used in practice has long been

discussed within research. Many of the studies are based on Western-developed self-report measures such as the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and the Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7). Many of these instruments have been found to have adequate levels of reliability and internal consistency, yet there are significant questions regarding their cultural validity within a Chinese context. For example, in China, conceptualisations of mental health generally include somatic (physical) and not simply affective (emotional) symptoms, which may lead to failure to detect distress when utilising standardised metrics (Wang, 2022). In addition, the validity of these measures may be compromised because of issues related to the equivalence of translations of the instruments, the cultural interpretation of the items included in the instruments, and the use of a westernised threshold for evaluating diagnostic conditions. Therefore, there is a growing literature calling for culturally appropriate assessment frameworks to be incorporated into practice and research (Sit et al., 2024).

Third, there is a large body of evidence that demonstrates the impact of both sociocultural and structural variables on mental health outcomes. Academic pressure is consistently found to be one of the largest contributors to mental health problems for young people, and is primarily influenced by the effects of the Gaokao examination and the overall cultural value placed on academic success (Yang et al., 2023). Academic pressure is more than just academic; it is also perceived as moral pressure to perform in a manner that will bring honour to the family and promote upward social mobility. Consequently, failure to achieve academically and a perceived lack of success generates significant anxiety and depressive symptomatology (Awadalla et al., 2024).

Students studying in urban universities from rural or low socioeconomic backgrounds may face multiple forms of prejudice, financial hardship, less access to resources, and challenges to socially integrate into their new environment. These cumulative risk factors elevate an individual's vulnerability to developing psychological distress. Furthermore, students who attend less elite higher

education institutions experience additional inequities associated with their employment prospects and encourage anxiety (Xie & Liu, 2026).

Another barrier to addressing mental health/counselling related needs identified throughout literature review is stigma surrounding mental health issues. In light of continued growth in awareness of mental health issues, cultural perspectives about sharing psychological distress are still very limited and create significant implications both to research and practice. For example, stigma surrounding mental health issues has the potential to yield biased results on survey studies – reducing the likelihood of survey participant reporting accurately and subsequently due to lack of access/use of mental health services; thus, readers must interpret self-reported data with care (Luan et al., 2025).

Finally, there is an emerging area of research that looks at the relationship between digital technologies and student mental health during COVID-19. Digital technologies offer opportunities for social connection, but excessive use can lead to higher levels of anxiety, sleep disturbance, and negative social comparisons. The pandemic has heightened these issues due to isolation and uncertainty, resulting in significantly higher levels of distress (Luo & Mohammed, 2023). However, research studies use primarily cross-sectional research designs, so there are currently no causal inferences able to be drawn or any long-term impacts assessed. Overall, current literature has shown that determining depression and anxiety levels in Chinese university students is complex, and while many advancements have been made, the continued methodological limitations and lack of cultural sensitivity indicate much more work needs to be done through methodologies that will yield more contextually relevant results (Han et al., 2025).

5. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- To evaluate the prevalence of depression and anxiety among Chinese university students.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Study Selection

This study was pursued using a systematic review method, following the reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analysis (PRISMA), which provided clarity, consistency, and consistency regarding the manner in which relevant literature is selected. Search for empirical studies on depression and anxiety among Chinese university students was conducted with Google Scholar, using keywords of depression, anxiety, Chinese university students, mental health, and China, and Boolean operators to focus the search. Approximately 135 records were identified in an initial search, and these were screened for duplicates, non-academic sources, and unrelated publications, leaving 78 records to be evaluated further. A detailed screen of titles and abstracts resulted in the exclusion of studies not directly addressing the focal interest of this research, resulting in retrieval of 33 full-text articles. Each of these articles was evaluated against predetermined eligibility criteria, excluding studies that did not have original data, were not methodologically rigorous, or did not belong to the context of China. After this assessment, six studies were identified as highly relevant and will be included in the final study. The selected studies for the review analysis were identified as Huang & Liu (2023), Han et al., (2025), Xiao et al., (2022), Luo et al., (2022), Chen et al., (2025) and Gao et al., (2021).

6.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A specific set of inclusion and exclusion criteria were created for high-quality and contextually appropriate studies to be included in this review. Studies that were published in English, were authorised journal articles and were about Chinese university and college students between the years of 2020 to 2025, were included in the review as long as they used valid and reliable data sources such as the PHQ-9 or GAD-7 or the DASS-21 as their instruments for collecting primary data. Studies were not included in the review if they did not include a Chinese population, if they had no statistical or empirical analysis, or if they did not include access to the full text of the article. Studies that had been published previous to 2020 were also not included; this is so that the findings can relate

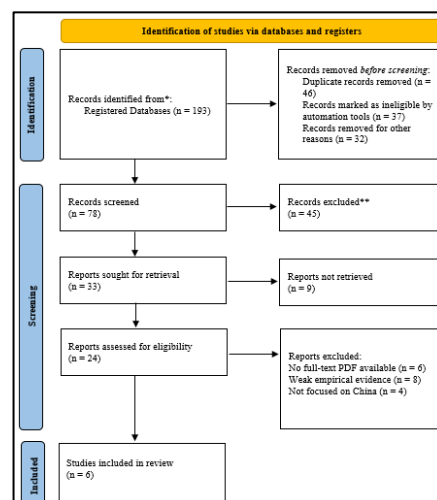
to more current and COVID-19-relevant data. The criteria used to select studies also guarantee that only studies that were methodologically sound (i.e., good research design) and current were included in this review.

6.3 Data Extraction

The authors of the six eligible studies were identified, and a data extraction process was developed to collect relevant information from each study. The following data was extracted from each eligible study: authorship, publication date, study purpose, sample size and characteristics, study design, measurement tools used to assess participants' level(s) of depression, measurement tools used to assess participants' level(s) of anxiety, and statistical analysis used in each study. The measurement tools, or instruments, used to assess the participants' level(s) of depression and anxiety were carefully reviewed, along with the determinant factors that influence the mental health of students attending universities in China. The information that was extracted from each study was then categorised thematically to facilitate comparisons between the studies and the identification of similarities, differences, and patterns in the findings from these studies. Through this systematic process, a comprehensive overview of the literature was synthesised, which helped in developing a critical understanding of how mental health is evaluated in the context of Chinese university students.

6.4 Study Quality Assessment

The evaluation of literature quality included assessing each study within the review for credibility (research design), reliability (methodological rigour), and objectivity (clarity of aims). The criteria for evaluating the studies were study design, methodological rigour, clarity of aims, relevance of the research issue, and validity of the results. Studies using empirical data, employing suitable analytical procedures, and explicitly delineating their study frameworks were assessed as possessing superior methodological quality compared to other reviewed studies. Preference was given to publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal since these publications undergo a more stringent editing and peer-review assessment procedure. In evaluating the articles, the clarity of the study technique and the relevance of the results to the research issue were taken into account throughout the evaluation process. The aforementioned quality evaluation approach allowed the selection of research that provide credible and academically valid material to underpin the examination of prevalence of depression and anxiety among Chinese university students.



7. RESULT

The six studies selected in this systematic review provide extensive evidence of the prevalence and risk factors of depression and anxiety among university students from China before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While all six studies reported high levels of psychological distress across their samples, the magnitude of psychological distress reported was significantly influenced by the characteristics of the samples, instruments used to assess psychological distress, and the analytic approaches used by the researchers.

For example, Luo et al. (2022) conducted a study with a massive sample size of 140,259 students and reported a very high prevalence of depressive symptoms, underscoring the widespread and serious mental health issue among students in higher education within China. Similarly, Han et al. (2023) reported that both depression and anxiety continue to be common among Chinese university students in 2023, suggesting that high rates of psychological distress have continued after the COVID-19 pandemic. Taken together, these results show that mental health problems among university students in China are not simply a situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic but rather are an ongoing public health concern.

Huang & Liu (2023) build upon previous work by investigating how anxiety and depression are related and how common they are together for individuals experiencing one type of mental health issue; they found a strong association between both disorders with respect to students who were experiencing distress associated with either anxiety or depression, noting the relationship between these two types of disorder illustrates that these are connected in nature. The prevalence of the two disorders is also supported by data posted by Xiao et al., (2022) showed that both anxiety and depression had a negative correlation with overall life satisfaction, which indicates there are additional considerations when determining students' well-being.

Determinants of the two disorders are explored across various studies; certain studies discuss the various factors influencing depressive symptoms

(Chen et al., 2025) by using multiple dimensions (behavioural, psychological, and social). Gao et al. (2021) discuss how certain lifestyle behaviours (physical activities and sleep) of first-year students impacted their ability to cope with academics, suggesting that there are multiple complex interactions between different domains influencing both depression and anxiety, as opposed to solely academic stressors driving the disorders.

Across multiple studies, the COVID-19 pandemic is a shared area of interest. Huang & Liu (2023) discuss the psychological ramifications of lockdowns, social distance, and disruptions to regular academic schedules on mental health, while Xiao et al. (2022) evaluate the mental health status of individuals nine months after the beginning of the pandemic and report lingering distress levels. Luo et al. (2022) place these findings in the context of the pandemic's "normalization" phase, wherein rates of depression continue to be elevated despite lowered restrictions.

Methodologically, the six studies used cross-sectional survey methodology, each using standardized self-report measures of depression and anxiety, such as the PHQ-9 and GAD-7. Although these measures allow for large-scale data collection and comparison across all six studies, they also create problems with self-report bias and establishing causal relationships. The level of sophistication used to analyse the data varies; Chen et al. (2025) used binary logistic regression to analyse predictors of depressive symptoms, while Luo et al. (2022) performed a large, population-based epidemiological analysis to examine temporal patterns in the prevalence of depression and anxiety.

Regardless of their methodology, all six studies demonstrate a consistent pattern of high prevalence of both depression and anxiety, frequently presenting simultaneously, based on a combination of individual, behavioural, and contextual variables. However, extensive reliance on similar types of research designs integrated in the selected articles may indicate convergence of using similar measurement tools and methodological convergence. This may limit the in-depth nature of research findings as well as diversity related to

insights on prevalence of mental health illness of students in Chinese universities.

8. DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that depression and anxiety are both prevalent in the university student population in China, but also reflects the methodological and conceptual limitations present in previous research. One commonly seen observation is that high levels of psychological suffering occur in almost all instances in the studies reviewed, but appear to be ongoing even after the acute phase of the COVID-19 global pandemic has passed. This suggests that while the stressors brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic have likely amplified mental health problems amongst Chinese university students, they also are interacting with structural and cultural pressures that have already existed in the Chinese higher education system.

The recognition that many different factors impact the mental health of students in China illustrates a growing understanding of the complexity of student mental health issues. Lifestyle behaviours, social support, and psychological coping mechanisms are shifting research away from purely academic explanations of the causes of student mental health issues to more holistic models of student mental health problems. However, while some of the research (e.g., Chen et al., 2025) makes an attempt to reflect a multidimensional approach to the understanding of student mental health issues, the reliance on cross-sectional data limits researchers' ability to determine any causal pathways between the identified risk factors for depression and anxiety, and therefore whether those identified risk factors are either antecedents, consequences, or simply correlated with depression and anxiety.

One issue to consider is the prevalence of standardised self-reports such as the PHQ-9 or GAD-7 across all studies; while standard assessments allow for comparisons across studies, their use in China raises concerns about cultural validity because culturally adapted measurement frameworks do not exist. Therefore, they risk undercounting somatic indicators of distress and

other culturally unique types of distress, which will impair ability to accurately estimate prevalence. Further, cross-sectional designs are the dominant methodological design used across all studies as well; they give us only a snapshot of mental health at one point in time and cannot capture the dynamic and evolving process of psychological wellbeing, especially when rapid social changes occur like during or after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, even though analytic sophistication has increased over the years through the use of regression modelling, most selected studies are primarily quantitative in nature and lack means to understand in-depth the experiences of students and the sociocultural context of mental health. Overall, it can be stated that the selected studies have provided significant insight on determinants as well as prevalence of anxiety and depression of Chinese university students. Utilisation of studies such as Huang & Liu (2023), Han et al., (2025), Xiao et al., (2022), Luo et al., (2022), Chen et al., (2025) and Gao et al., (2021) assisted to highlight diverse and dynamic knowledge about the prevalence of depression and anxiety among university students in China.

9. CONCLUSION

Psychological distress is highly prevalent among the individuals surveyed and, in many instances, depression and anxiety were experienced by individuals at the same time. While COVID-19 has exacerbated psychological distress, there is evidence that indicates the level of psychological distress from before the pandemic is still present, thereby suggesting that there are many other underlying structural and cultural variables that are contributing to psychological distress in this population. The studies reviewed collectively illustrated that there is a myriad of influences on student mental health. The studies demonstrated that students experience mental health issues through a variety of behavioural, psychological, and contextual influences. There are complex relationships between lifestyle behaviours, social support, and academic pressure, and therefore, there is a need for comprehensive assessments of mental health as well as a need for mental health

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interventions to take a holistic approach to addressing mental health issues. There exists a large body of empirical evidence, but the underlying research is limited by a number of methodological issues.

A prevalent limitation across all studies included the use of cross-sectional research designs which limit the ability to establish a cause-and-effect relationship and, therefore, they do not capture the changing nature of mental health over time. Furthermore, the use of standard self-report instruments on a large scale raises significant concerns about the appropriateness of cross-cultural differences, especially in cultures where psychological distress is expressed in somatic form. And, lastly, the lack of qualitative research is

restrictive to the richness of the understanding of students' experiences. Future research efforts should focus on longitudinal studies, culturally appropriate assessment instruments, and mixed methods approaches. This will aid in developing knowledge of mental health among Chinese university students through better understanding of existing gaps. Such gaps must be addressed to develop appropriate and contextually relevant mental health interventions while ensuring that Chinese universities have responsive and comprehensive support systems given the complexities of student mental health.

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