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The Role of Spirituality in Cultural Adjustment of Asian International Students

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ABSTRACT

Many Asian international students face adjustment challenges as they live and study in the United States (US). While it is largely unrecognized in the West, collectivist spirituality is an essential part of Asian cultures and functions as a potent source of resilience. This article, therefore, explores spirituality and describes how it functions as a coping mechanism for Asian international during their cross-cultural adjustment. Additionally, implications are made for university-based counselors, educators, and administrators to better support this student population.

1. Introduction

American higher education institutions are educating an increasing number of international students, and a large percentage of them are from Asia. While transitioning to new educational settings in the unfamiliar culture, Asian international students often face a unique set of challenges originating from an imbalance between cultural demands and available resources (Ma, Pitner, Sakamoto, & Park, 2020).^[25] For one, having come from relatively homogeneous countries (compared to the US), they may migrate to the US with a weak sense of cultural identity. Adjusting to the new culture requires/demands that they reconstruct their sense of self in relation to others within the new environment (Hsieh, 2006,^[12] Kim, 2012).^[17] This process of cross-cultural adjustment is likely to cause psychological

difficulties that may have a long-lasting impact on the mental health of these students (Li & Lin, 2014).^[23]

Studies have reported that some Asian international students use spirituality to reduce the deleterious effects of adjustment strains (Chai, 2009;^[4] Philip, Neuer-Colburn, Underwood, & Bayne, 2019,^[37] Potkar, 2013,^[38] Sato & Hodge, 2009).^[40] Although spiritual practices may vary in forms among individual students, for these students, spirituality gives meaning to their daily lives, helps integrate different layers of their identity, and provides a source of social support through acceptance and approval.

What is spirituality? While there exist many definitions of this term, spirituality is perhaps best understood as a search for meaning and purpose in life through a greater self-understanding in either a religious or nonreligious context (Hill et al., 2000,^[10] Miller & Thoresen, 2003).^[31] Spirituality provides a means to understand the various

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aspects of life and unify one's identities both within the self and within a larger society (Pecchenino, 2009).^[36] Also, spirituality recognizes the complexity of life, sees struggles as developmental opportunities, and promotes a sense of connectedness among people (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000;^[2] Potkar, 2013).^[38]

What characterizes Asian spirituality? In contrast to Western cultures that value competition, independence, and autonomy, Eastern collectivist cultures feature relational harmony, interdependence, and connectedness (Triandis, 1995).^[43] Generally speaking, members in collectivist cultures tend to identify themselves as part of a larger whole while also maintaining strong emotional attachments to their small, selective in-groups. Preserving in-group harmony is a means of fulfilling social and familial roles. Goals are communal, and achievements are attributed to collective effort. Collectivist cultures are commonly observed in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Triandis, 1995).^[43]

In the context of a new language and culture, spirituality plays a critical role in supporting Asian international students in facing, understanding, adjusting, adapting, and enjoying new learning, living, and social environments. As Canda and Furman (2010)^[3] claim, spirituality is essentially a cultural diversity issue. The spiritual experiences, behaviors, and beliefs of Asian international students are diverse, but the core values of Asian spirituality are similar among collectivist cultures. Asian students with strong spiritual beliefs are less likely to take a fatalistic approach to their problems. In fact, they may be compelled to look inward, reflect on their personal and cultural values, and seek purpose and strength to move forward. In this process, spirituality as meaning-making enables them to reframe their situations from more positive perspectives. For many, it may help restore healthy self-relationships and create novel interpersonal connections as a powerful source of support and validation.

Despite its relevance, Asian students' spirituality has been largely overlooked in U.S. higher education institutions. Addressing the needs of this group of learners and including them in university services would foster an environment of greater social justice, a core commitment of higher education. And, understanding the characteristics of Asian spirituality would enable faculty and staff in higher education to respectfully interact with Asian international students and to effectively help them build personal strengths based on their core values (Hanna & Green, 2004).^[9]

This article aims to explore how spirituality can function as a coping mechanism for Asian international

students from collectivist cultures during their studies in the US. The author is aware of the idiosyncrasies existing within Asian cultures, including different spiritual practices. The scope of this article is confined to overall tendencies and characteristics shared among Asian international students from collectivist cultures. This broad scope may run a risk of oversimplifying the complexity of certain cultures or spiritual beliefs, but it is useful to explain the general acculturation experiences of these students in order to establish baseline clinical practices that are informed by spirituality.

2. Transitions to a New University: Challenges and Opportunities

For several decades, keeping abreast with fast-paced international developments, many U.S. universities have made systematic efforts to increase campus globalization. During the 1990-1991 academic year, 407,529 international students enrolled in U.S. universities. This number reached 1,095,299 during the 2018-2019 academic year, and international students contributed close to 45 billion dollars to the U.S. economy in 2018. The top three countries that sent the largest numbers were China, India, and South Korea, making up more than half the international student population (Institute of International Education, 2019).^[15] The integration of students with diverse cultural experiences and perspectives enriches both university prestige and community. International students have also been instrumental in enhancing diversity and cultural awareness in the U.S. higher education.

While transitioning into the new environment, many Asian international students cope with challenges by using familiar cultural assets from their own heritage (Hsieh, 2006;^[12] Kim, 2012;^[17] Philip, Neuer-Colburn, Underwood, & Bayne, 2019;^[37] Potkar, 2013)^[38] and engaging in collective efforts through shared experiences that may attenuate the impact of individualism (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007).^[14] This tendency becomes complex when cultural values of the host nation are in conflict with those of international students. Thus, many Asian international students experience adjustment challenges that often cause acculturation stress.

Major stressors for Asian international students include the language barrier, strenuous academics, financial constraints, homesickness, discrimination, immigration requirements, and social isolation (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008;^[1] Ma, Pitner, Sakamoto, & Park, 2020,^[25] Wei et al., 2007).^[45] Although some may argue that these challenges are universal to all international students, students from

collectivist Asian cultures who live in the US have reportedly experienced the highest level of adjustment difficulties due to salient cultural differences (Hsieh, 2006).^[12] Asian international students shoulder additional stressors that derive from their cultures, such as family recognition through academic success, an emphasis on emotional suppression, and a greater stigma toward mental illness (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007;^[14] Wei et al., 2007).^[45]

The aforementioned collectivist cultural stressors can compromise mental well-being as Asian international students pursue their academic goals. For example, Asian international students desire academic success based on their cultural expectations (Ma, Pitner, Sakamoto, & Park, 2020).^[25] Many base their self-worth on academic success and find it difficult to cope with the idea of failing. This expectation involves more than just personal pride; it is a way of bringing honor to their families and fulfilling their roles (Li & Lin, 2014).^[23] Asian cultures are interdependence-oriented and the ability to suppress emotions, particularly negative ones, is important to maintain in-group harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).^[26] Furthermore, Asian international students may perceive it as culturally inappropriate to speak of personal problems outside of their primary support groups (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008),^[11] sharing with outsiders may be perceived as a slight against the cultural code of interdependence among in-group members and thus evoke feelings of guilt and shame. As a result, many Asian international students are unwilling to seek outside help, which could increase levels of stress (Ma, Pitner, Sakamoto, & Park, 2020).^[25]

As mentioned in the Introduction section, some research studies have shown the potential of using spirituality as a means to reduce the deleterious effects of adjustment strains among Asian international students (Chai, 2009;^[4] Philip, Neuer-Colburn, Underwood, & Bayne, 2019;^[37] Sato & Hodge, 2009).^[40] Asian spirituality, based upon collectivist cultures, values harmony and connectedness (Potkar, 2013),^[38] which can help protect against the negative impact of adjustment stress via seeking friendship, networking, and support (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007;^[14] Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988).^[44] Because most members of collectivist cultures view all aspects of life as interconnected, close social connections with their in-groups help these international students feel complete, informed, and safe. For some Asian international students who study and live in rural areas in the US, where making in-group connections is relatively difficult, social disconnections with in-groups would normally add to

their feelings of loneliness, sadness, hopelessness, and helplessness. In this situation, Asian spirituality presents opportunities for deeper cross-cultural understanding and transformation through critical self-reflection, personal analysis in relation to the external world, and the desire for connectedness. In this sense, coping with adjustment challenges can foster personal growth by increasing perceptiveness and self-understanding. By sharpening self-awareness and seeking connection with “other foreigners”, many Asian international students successfully cope with stress and eventually achieve a higher level of acculturation they desire.

3. Spiritual Coping for Asian International Students

As briefly discussed in the Introduction section, spirituality is a broad construct with a multitude of meanings. It draws on plural and diverse experiences of human beings (Lindsay, 2002).^[24] Existing literature defines spirituality as a search for meaning, connectedness, unity, transcendence, and ultimate human potential (Emmons, 1999),^[7] a quest for authentic self, rooted in meaningful relationships and a source of energy that actualizes innate human capacity (McGhee & Grant, 2008),^[29] and internalization and consistent manifestation of core values (Mattis, 2000).^[28] Some scholars differentiate religiosity and spirituality, claiming that the former has to do with formally structured, institutional beliefs and practices, whereas the latter takes a more personal, subjective, and experiential path. Religiosity and spirituality share similar constructs, however. Both involve searching for meaning and purpose in life, valuing increased connectedness, seeking answers to existential questions, and are culturally conditioned and socially practiced (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006;^[6] Hill et al., 2000;^[10] Pargament, 1999).^[32] However, the construct of “spirituality” is more relevant for the focus of this article as some Asian countries, such as China and Vietnam, do not have religious freedom yet practice spirituality as part of their cultures. Therefore, this author will refer to the term “spirituality” for the remainder of the discussion as it provides a more comprehensive perspective of Asian students’ spiritual development as a coping strategy for adjustment strains.

Spirituality embodies questions of larger purpose and meaning and describes how human beings conceptualize themselves in relation to the world around them. According to Emmons (2005),^[8] there are four categories in which people strive to find meaning in life: achievement/work, relationships/intimacy, religion/spirituality, and self-transcendence/generativity. Being committed to

one's work, as well as valuing a challenge, are aspects of achievement. The relationships/intimacy category refers to relating well to others, trusting them, and being altruistic and helpful. Expressions of religion/spirituality are shown by believing in an afterlife, having a personal relationship with God, and contributing to a faith community. Finally, generativity encompasses contributing to society, leaving a legacy, and seeing beyond self-interests. However, for many Asian international students, spirituality may transcend a religious component. Meaning-making is essential to human functioning and growth (Park, 2007).^[35] It orients individuals to reflect on values that they hold as important, evaluate key experiences and encounters, and situate them within larger structures of significance. Spirituality provides a framework for individuals to construct meaning and purpose from their experiences, as well as directions for "living to the fullest." In the context of meaning-making, spirituality fosters resilience and optimism in stressful times (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005).^[27]

For Asian international students, spiritual coping may pertain to developing a deeper understanding of their own culture and cultural identity. This journey of self-understanding is essentially spiritual. Studies have suggested that living in a new culture draws people closer to their own culture and help them gain greater respect and appreciation for their cultural identity (Hsieh, 2006;^[12] Potkar, 2013;^[38] Sato & Hodge, 2009).^[40] As Asian students navigate a world of uncertainty, sharp cultural differences between collectivism and individualism may drive them to repeatedly examine their own culture and develop a better and clearer understanding of their values and beliefs. As a result, they will turn to spirituality as a cultural resource to cope with life's challenges. Cultural identity issues emerge in cross-cultural contexts, and the newly assigned identity of "international student"—which is deficit-oriented within the hegemony of the dominant culture and a marker for outsiders and an indicator of social exclusion—may intensify insecurity and vulnerability (Hsieh, 2006).^[12] In addition, limited language skills not only restrict students' expression of themselves, but also prevent them from interacting with US-born students and faculty members, increasing the potential for social isolation. This may make them feel vulnerable, insecure, and even inferior (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008),^[1] as well as create a gap between how they see themselves and how others view them (Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007).^[16] As a means to provide contexts to life's experiences, spirituality serves to amalgamate old and new identities, including the hoped-for self, in the process of acculturation. This enables students to seek a balance between self and the

needs of the environment (Pecchenino, 2009),^[36] while discouraging students from taking a defeatist approach.

Studies have indicated a positive link between spirituality and quality of life, and have identified beneficial health outcomes of spiritual coping (Krägeloh, Billington, Henning, & Chai, 2015;^[20] Miller & Thoresen, 2003;^[31] Park, 2007;^[35] Seybold & Hill, 2001).^[41] Spiritual coping refers to an attempt to use spiritual beliefs and practices to lessen the emotional distress caused by predicaments, thereby making suffering bearable by giving it meaning (Koenig, 2012).^[19] Recent literature suggests that spirituality is a protective factor for mental health (Miller & Thoresen, 2003;^[31] Seybold & Hill, 2001).^[41] A college student sample showed that spirituality ameliorates adverse effects of stress on affective and physical adjustment through an experience of the sacred. For example, a deep communication with a higher power helps the students see challenges as being useful in the large context of life and provides inner peace that protects against negative feelings (Kim & Seidlitz, 2002).^[18] Furthermore, those who report a high level of spirituality are more likely to adopt task-oriented and social diversion coping strategies. People with spiritual beliefs cope with difficulties better by attempting to solve the problem with an attitude of openness and interdependence, seeking social resources in times of suffering (Krok, 2008).^[21]

The use of spirituality as a coping mechanism is found to be more prevalent among Asian students, and spirituality is used to fill the sense of loss resulting from relocating to a new culture (Chai, Krägeloh, Shepherd, & Billington, 2012).^[5] It is comforting for students to rely on familiar spiritual practices. In addition to health benefits, spiritual coping seeks to reinstate social connection and provide cultural continuity that connects the students to their roots (Potkar, 2013).^[38] A comparison study conducted by Hsu, Krägeloh, Shepherd, and Billington (2009)^[13] revealed a positive relation between spirituality and the psychological and social quality of life among international students. International students rated themselves more spiritual than domestic students. Further exploring the topic, Chai, Krägeloh, Shepherd, and Billington (2012)^[5] found that Asian students reported significantly lower scores on physical and environmental quality of life than European students, but adopted spiritual coping to reduce stress more than their European peers. The use of spiritual coping enhanced the psychological and social quality of life for Asian students. The two studies were conducted in New Zealand, but the findings could be transferrable to Asian students living in the US to some extent as New Zealand is also considered a Western culture. Similar results were found in an Indian

graduate student sample (Potkar, 2013).^[38] Indian students studying in the US found that the use of spiritual beliefs and practices provided them with personal and social support as well as “a grounding influence” in the face of challenges (p. 61).

Spiritual coping as outlined above is possible because of spiritual strivings, the theoretical mechanism. According to Emmons (1999, 2005),^{[7][8]} spiritual strivings are the sacred-oriented goals related to ethics, ultimate purpose, and transcending self by connecting with a higher power through purposeful effort and commitment. Spiritual strivings increase self-determination, commitments, and potentiality, and in turn result in positive outcomes. Strivings may serve three functions. First, they empower people to persevere in the pursuit of goals under challenging situations. Second, they provide stability and support by directing people to what is ultimately important in life. Third, they offer a unifying philosophy of life and an integrating force that gives coherence and continuity in the face of social and cultural pressures that promote personality fragmentation. In times of crisis, people who use spiritual coping seek concrete forms (Pargament & Raiya, 2007),^[34] such as practicing prayers, reading scriptures, exercising meditation/mindfulness, seeking and/or expanding spiritual support through involvement with spiritual communities, and collaborating with a higher power (Philip, Neuer-Colburn, Underwood, & Bayne, 2019).^[37]

Spiritual coping is particularly helpful for socially marginalized groups including ethnic minorities who have little power to change their environment (Pargament, 2002).^[33] From the identity development perspective, international students are assigned the legal status “international students” by their host culture upon their arrival. This new identity within a Western culture dilutes their native cultural identities. In addition, this assignation relegates them to a minority group and puts them in a disadvantaged position (Lalonde & Cameron, 1993)^[22] when compared to their US-born peers. When feelings of hopelessness and helplessness overpower international students, reframing their situations makes suffering more endurable and may increase self-efficacy. Understanding their social locations in the host culture and recognizing interconnectedness among international students can be empowering. However, the international student community is by nature fluid with its high level of mobility, which makes it even more difficult to take collective action to bring them in from the margins of the society so that they can voice their opinions and assert their rights. Such obstacles highlight the importance of institutional support for international students via

integrating techniques and bolstering ethnically associated community-based programs and services.

In summary, cross-cultural challenges push Asian international students to pursue a new level of self-awareness to manage the stress of finding meaning. Adjusting to these stressors may alter their self-perceptions, and having limited resources to cope may lead to the development of emotional and behavioral health issues. Spirituality can provide these students with a coping strategy to move forward in the face of these unique obstacles. Spirituality also helps Asian students cultivate compassion toward the self and others, shifting their focus away from deficits and weaknesses, toward wholeness and well-being.

4. Implications for Practitioners and Educators

The examination of Asian international students’ acculturation stress and use of spirituality as a coping mechanism suggests several implications for higher education and communities. Specific recommendations for university-based counselors, educators, and administrators are provided below.

Understanding Cultural Differences in Spirituality. When experiencing acculturation strains, Asian international students tend to rely more on internal resources, such as willpower, rather than seeking professional help (Wei et al, 2007).[45] In keeping with Asian cultures’ emphasis on internal regulation, these students will not be inclined to seek help from university counseling services. In addition, those few students who do seek help will generally receive counseling services rooted in Western cultural values. The most common form is individual talk therapy with little regard to interdependence in healing (Yeh, Hunter, Madan-Bahel, Chiang, & Arora, 2004).[46] As a result, counselors may have limited knowledge and experience with non-Western cultures (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992;[42] Zhang & Dixon, 2003).[47] This can create a mismatch between needs of Asian students and available services. Approaching cultural differences from only an intellectual perspective without referencing a spiritual dimension may hinder counselors from connecting spiritual practice to coping, and a lack of trust and rapport may prevent Asian students from seeing them as valuable resources. It is therefore recommended that university-based counselors in the US seek to expand their cultural and spiritual knowledge and understanding by attending pertinent training and talking to spiritual leaders in the international student community so that they become more aware of

differences.

University-based counseling services tend to prioritize academic success, providing little or no interaction addressing students' spiritual issues. Counseling, however, is in essence a spiritual matter. Although it may not be explicitly labeled as spirituality, whatever concerns lead students to reach out to counselors involve students' core values and beliefs. However, in this author's observation during her eleven years in U.S. higher education, it is often assumed that spirituality is exclusively a matter of religion; talking about spirituality can cause legal and political problems; and spirituality is a subjective matter and is perceived as irrelevant to students' academic progress. Because spirituality promotes optimal human functioning with the goal of self-realization, disregarding (or discounting) spirituality only inhibits the healthy, holistic development of students. Given these concerns, it would be advisable for university-based counselors to assess the spirituality of the students they counsel and help them see the impact of their spirituality on their adjustment process and academic performance. Furthermore, university-based counselors can benefit from training and workshops that include themes and ideas reflecting a diverse range of faiths, noting differences between religion and spirituality and learning about the core elements of Asian spirituality.

Probing Spiritual Journeys. Each individual's spiritual journey is different and highly personal. It is most unlikely that all Asian international students' spiritual journeys follow the same path, albeit they may share the same or similar spirituality or faith. Therefore, it is important for college counselors, academic advisors, and administrators to understand the individual differences so as to assist each student accordingly. With this awareness, practitioners are more capable of engaging in meaningful conversations with each individual about his/her beliefs, values, life story, and the path of spirituality (Hodge, 2006;^[11] Puchalski, 2006).^[39] Such interaction and communication allow students to open up, share their authentic thoughts and feelings, which allows advisors and staff to provide meaningful support and guidance. Some questions in probing an international student's spiritual journey include: (1) Describe your life journey and how did you end up here?; (2) what are you afraid of, why?; (3) what is a meaningful life for you?; and (4) what does happiness mean to you? These questions will help practitioners develop a concise picture of a student's spiritual journey, understand the power and concerns of his/her spiritual practice, and thus develop a personalized relationship and strategy that can best support the student's needs. Understanding, respect, and

customized support from staff will encourage international students to be more willing to speak with them about problems that they are encountering. This will assist students to maintain their spiritual equilibrium.

Incorporating Spirituality into Curricula and Classroom. Teaching or exploring spirituality in the classroom is not a common practice in current U.S. higher education. Some Asian countries have incorporated spirituality into daily school activities. For example, in South Korea where the author grew up, young students at some schools are asked in the morning to sit down and listen to encouraging messages or sometimes spiritual music to boost positive energy. While reflecting on the meaning of the messages, students set goals for the day and contemplate how best to fulfill the goals. Although the spiritual practice may be implemented differently in other countries, for many Asian students, spirituality is never isolating or static; it ceaselessly evolves. It may be extrapolated from this experience that spirituality is an essential part of who students are and is a source of affirmation and cultural understanding amid the growing feeling of otherness. Despite the established relevance and benefits, few graduate programs in U.S. higher education include elements of spirituality in their curriculum (Miller, 2001).^[30] Integrating the realm of spirituality into classroom will help students see spirituality not just as an individual's inward journey, but also an act of being in communion with others in a learning environment. Learning to set a tone of openness and acceptance of people from diverse spiritual backgrounds will better prepare students to engage in "spiritual dialogue" with their peers, which in return will help them build trusting relationships with not only their peers in the classroom, but also people in communities and in their future workplaces.

5. Conclusion

Navigating between two cultures, many Asian international students in the US seek to derive meaning from their new experiences. The concerns they have, academic or social, are primarily related to making sense of the world around them and understanding who they are and who they are becoming. Spirituality provides a way for Asian international students to cope with intercultural challenges. Understanding spirituality is important for higher education providers when trying to help these students identify tools to reduce stress. To provide much-needed spiritual support, educators and practitioners in the US should make personal and institutional commitments by critically examining their values and beliefs and engaging in dialogues committed to fostering spiritual

diversity and competence. These concerted efforts to expand inclusivity will contribute to building mutually transformative relationships, as well as promoting diversity and social justice.

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