



# How Chinese American Adolescents Navigate Academic Stress and Peer Relationships

Jincheng Wu<sup>1</sup>, Shuyi Deng<sup>2</sup>, Chun-Chi (Sarah) Yang<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, <sup>2</sup> Beijing Normal University, Faculty of Psychology,

<sup>3</sup> University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley School of Education

Contact us: clydewu@upenn.edu

## Abstract

This study examined how Chinese American adolescents experienced stress and engaged with peers during the college application year. Utilizing longitudinal interview and survey data from 32 participants, our mixed-methods analyses suggest that stress often emerged early and was shaped by a complex interplay of self-expectations, academic workload, parental expectations, and peer competition. While emotional support with peers was common, academic support was more limited, offering insights into how cultural contexts shape adolescents' socioemotional development.

## Background

- U.S. Culture: Encourage peer support, feedback, and collective problem-solving (Cheng, 2021; Tang, 1999); View broader emotional sharing as an effective stress-coping strategy (Taylor et al., 2007)
- Traditional Chinese Culture: Emphasizing individual effort and self-regulation, relying less on direct academic support from peers (Tang, 1999; Mortenson, 2006); Tend to confide academic stress within small, trusted peer networks (Chen & Danish, 2010)
- Growing up as a minority in the U.S., Chinese American adolescents (CAAs) may balance traditional family values and mainstream school norms (Shi & Lu, 2007; Syed & Juang, 2018).
- The current study investigates: (1) how Chinese American adolescents perceive academic stress and gain peer support during college application season; and (2) how Chinese traditional culture shapes their stress perception and peer relationship from a cross-cultural perspective.

## Methods

- Data were drawn from the Chinese American Adolescent Stress and Sleep Project (CAASSP), a longitudinal mixed-method study investigating the interplay between academic stress and peer relationships among Chinese American high school seniors ( $N = 32$ ).
- Data were collected using both surveys (Confucianism & Traditionalism Questionnaire) and semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer (Wave 1) and during the fall semester (Wave 2), focusing on participants' recent sources of academic stress, perceived stress levels, cultural identity, application information sharing and emotional sharing behaviors

## Quantitative Results

Theme	Subtheme	Percentage
Stress Source	Self-Expectation	90.63%
	Academic-Related Workload	75.00%
	Parental Expectation	50.00%
	Peer Competitions	50.00%
Stress Level	Increase	28.13%
	Stable	28.13%
	Decrease	43.75%
Emotional Sharing	Share both positive and negative emotions	32.26%
	Share only negative emotions	58.06%
	Never share emotions	9.68%
Academic Support	Share everything	18.75%
	Share some information	34.38%
	Never share	46.88%

Stress Source	Mean Score of Confucianism	
	Mentioned	Not Mentioned
Self-Expectation	2.73	2.36
Academic-Related Workload	2.68	2.73
Parental Expectation	2.80	2.58
Peer Competitions	2.76	2.64

- Most of adolescents (78.12%, 25/32) reported consistent high stress ( $\geq 7$  out of 10) across both waves.
- Among most of adolescents (71.87%, 23/32), fall stress levels remained similar to or lower than summer levels.
- Among the adolescents who don't share application materials, about a half of them (47.06%, 8/17) mentioned peer competition in their explanations.

## Main Takeaway

Early Intervention is Critical: Substantial academic pressure emerges well before the senior year. Results suggest that mental health support should target high school juniors to mitigate stress before the peak of college application season.

## Thematic Analysis Results



## Discussions

- High stress was prevalent among Chinese American adolescents (CAAs) during the college application year, with most of adolescents reporting consistently high stress across both waves.
- Contrary to our initial expectation, stress levels did not generally increase from summer to fall. Qualitative evidence suggests that the early stage of the application process may be especially stressful, as adolescents simultaneously navigated heavy AP coursework, major exams, and early application preparation.

*"It's just like... stress in the past, like my most stressful time of the year would be like AP testing season or like near those testing times and this is just more than that but it's also not unmanageable."*

- While adolescents often shared emotional distress (e.g., anxiety about college outcomes) with close peers, they were less willing to share college application materials (for support).
- Perceived peer competition emerged as a key barrier to academic sharing, among adolescents who don't share application materials, about a half of them mentioned peer competition in their explanations, reflecting the tension between support and competition in high-achieving school contexts.

*"Even though we're friends, but then at the same time, we're also like kind of competing against each other, so we're not really... giving much feedback."*

- Together, these findings suggest that peer relationships among CAAs during the application process are emotionally supportive but academically constrained, shaped by both cultural expectations and competitive environments.



Reference  
List



About the  
Research