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# Mental Health and Cultural Adaptation of International Students from “One Belt and One Road”: A Study

Zheng Yang<sup>1</sup>, Nanyuan Gao<sup>1</sup>, Yuan Tian<sup>2</sup>, Jie Tian<sup>1</sup>, Li Chen<sup>3</sup>, Xiaojia Liu<sup>4</sup>, Guanmian Liang<sup>5</sup>, Yanqing Yang<sup>6</sup>, Wenjuan Mao<sup>7</sup>, Linjian Hu<sup>8</sup>, Linjie Xie<sup>1</sup>, Tong Tong<sup>1</sup>, Yan Wang<sup>1</sup>, Shandan Ma<sup>1</sup>, Shiming Tang<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hangzhou Normal University, 311121, China

<sup>2</sup> Northwest Normal University, 730000, China

<sup>3</sup> Hangzhou Wickham International School, 310056, China

<sup>4</sup> Zhejiang Conservatory of Music, 310024, China

<sup>5</sup> IBMC of Chinese Academy of Science, 310005, China

<sup>6</sup> Amity Global Institute, 238853, Singapore

<sup>7</sup> Hangzhou Linping Fifth People's Hospital, 310005, China

<sup>8</sup> Shanghai Municipal Health Commission, 200125, China

**Abstract:** With the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has become one of the world's major study abroad destinations, attracting a large number of international students from different countries. The present study aimed to explore the relationship between cultural adaptation and mental health of international students in China, especially for the current situation of international students from the “Belt and Road” countries. By revising the SCL-90 Symptom Self-Rating Scale and the Cultural Distance Questionnaire, the study will analyze the effects of acculturation strategies, cultural distance, and the level of acculturation on the state of mental health. Meanwhile, this study also plans to construct a mental health education service system for international students coming to China in order to improve their cultural adaptation ability and mental health.

**Keywords:** Belt and Road; international Students; cultural adaptation; mental health;

## 1. Background

### 1.1 “Study in China” in the context of “Belt and Road”.

The year 2023 is the 10th anniversary of the proposal of “One Belt, One Road”, and China has become one of the world's major study abroad destinations. International students from different countries experience China in different ways, which also enhances their understanding of China. With the improvement of China's comprehensive national strength

and the enhancement of its educational attractiveness, more and more international students are coming to China to study. During their stay in China, they have enhanced their understanding of China's national conditions through classroom education and field visits. They actively participate in humanistic exchanges, scientific research cooperation, social practice and other activities, playing an active role in promoting people-to-people exchanges and deepening friendship and cooperation between countries. With the promotion of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, China has become a popular choice for more and more overseas young people to study. International students in China not only seek high quality education resources, but also want to know more about China's history, culture and values. Under the background of the "Belt and Road" initiative, Chinese culture education has become an important way to promote cultural exchanges and humanistic cooperation.

### **1.2 The significance of united front work of international students in colleges**

International students in China are a group with special united front significance, and it is very important to inject united front thinking into the management of international students in colleges and universities, so as to serve the overall situation of national diplomatic strategy and enhance the international influence of Chinese culture.

Since the 18th National Congress, the central government has paid more and more attention to the United Front, especially after the Central United Front Work Conference, the pattern of the Great United Front has been gradually formed, and the so-called "Great United Front", briefly speaking, means to "unite all the people who can be united, unite all the forces who can be united, draw the biggest concentric circle, consolidate and develop the broadest patriotic united front". The broadest patriotic united front will be consolidated and developed, and broader support will be provided for the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".

Under the pattern of the Great United Front, the scope of the United Front should be wider, the targets more diversified and the contents more rich, and based on this, it is a general trend to put forward the new proposition of "internationalization of the United Front". The majority of international students and graduated international students are valuable international social resources for united front work, and it is necessary to "make full use of the international stage to actively organize and explore the international social resources for united front work".

Therefore, injecting the United Front thinking into the cultivation and management of international students expands the target and scope of the United Front work and extends the content of the United Front work, which is an important aspect of the internationalization of the United Front in the country and the universities, and will further promote the all-round development of the cause of the United Front.

## **2. Framework:**

### **2.1 Research Related to Cultural Adaptation of International Students**

Acculturation was first studied in the U.S. In the early 1900s, the number of immigrants to the U.S. increased dramatically, and researchers found that these immigrants experienced a variety of psychological problems after arriving in the U.S., and that they were far more likely to suffer from mental illness than native Americans. This prompted sociologists and

psychologists to begin exploring the cultural adaptation that occurs when immigrants settle abroad. A large number of early studies examined changes in group acculturation from an anthropological and sociological perspective. In recent years, acculturation has attracted the interest of psychologists and has focused more on the experiences and changes of individuals in new cultural environments. However, despite extensive research from numerous disciplines over the decades, there is still no agreement on the definition and measurement of acculturation.

Numerous researchers have analyzed the factors related to acculturation of international students, and the main ones are as follows:

### **Language**

Chen (2020) argues that acculturation stress due to language barriers can interact with all aspects of learning and life to lead to all-around acculturation stress, as language barriers affect international students during the learning process in a range of issues such as listening, comprehension, homework, exams and classroom questions. [Chen, C., 2020]

Poyrazli (2021) found that international students in the U.S. with lower proficiency in English usually also exhibit low academic achievement. [Poyrazli, S.& Kavanaugh, P.R., 2021]

Pisecco (2022) similarly examined the relationship between English language proficiency and academic level among international students, and the results of both studies were consistent [Poyrazli, S., Arbona, C., Bullington, R.& Pisecco, S., 2022].

In addition, Trice interviewed 27 professors, department chairs, and deans through a qualitative study and they generally agreed that language is the main challenge of cultural adjustment to study abroad and noted that language affects students' academic performance [Trice, A., 2023].

### **Education**

Among the many influences on acculturation, educational acculturation is also an important factor that affects the adjustment of international students. Misra (2023) found that international students in the United States felt more stress and had a harder time adjusting to academic problems than other problems [Misra, R., Crist, M.& Burant, C. J., 2023]. The same result was presented by Hashim (2023), who studied African and Western international students studying in China and found that academic stress was the most common stress in both groups [Hashim, I. H., & Yang, Z. L., 2019].

### **Social support**

International students need to re-establish a social network when they leave their families and friends and come to a new environment. Some recent studies have shown that personal characteristics such as attachment styles, anxiety traits, and intra- and extra-personal tendencies can have an impact on international students' friendships and indirectly affect international students' socio-cultural and psychological adjustment [Rachel A. S., Nigar G., & Khawaja, J., 2022].

Language barriers, different cultural and ethical norms, and understanding the way locals make friends can prevent international students from establishing good friendships with locals, leading to increased loneliness. In an Australian study, all 10 international students who participated in the survey reported difficulty in establishing friendships with locals

[Townsend, P. & Poh, H. J., 2020]. Another qualitative study investigated the loneliness of 200 Australian international students [Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G., 2022]. Two thirds of these respondents reported that they often felt lonely, especially in the first few months, and completely isolated.

In addition, Zhang (2024) found that 55% of Chinese international students in New Zealand wished they had more opportunities to become friends with locals, but they felt that such opportunities were rare [Zhang, Z., & Brunton, M., 2023]. Some studies have found that international students receive less social support and more loneliness and homesickness than domestic students [Pedersen, P. B., 2021].

## 2.2 Research on the Mental Health of International Students

Mental health is a very complex concept in the field of psychology, and as a result there is a wide range of opinions on the criteria for mental health. At present, there are two main understandings of mental health: One is the understanding of clinical psychiatry. They believe that mental health is normal mental functioning and the absence of psychological symptoms. This view is convenient for clinical operation, but it simplifies the problem of mental health; the other is mainly the understanding of humanistic psychology, which believes that mental health is a stable psychological state, with good personality qualities of resisting setbacks and adapting to the environment, so that human potential and creativity can be given full play to realize the value of life.

Based on the above view, modern scholars agree that psychological health refers to the ability of an individual to maintain a good state of psychological effectiveness in various environments, and to adjust his/her internal psychological structure in time in the interaction with the ever-changing external environment, so as to achieve balance and coordination with the environment, and to gradually improve the level of psychological development and perfect his/her personality traits.

Psychological health status of foreign students in China: With the internationalization of China's education, a large number of foreign students choose to come to China for further study, and the psychological health status of these foreign students when they are studying and living in China has been gradually noticed by the majority of researchers.

Hu Fang, Cui Lizhong (2022) used a symptom self-assessment scale to investigate the mental health status of 53 international students from Anhui Normal University and Jiangxi Normal University and analyzed them in comparison with the Chinese youth norms [Hu, F., Cui, L., & Gao, L., 2022]. The results showed that the scores of obsessive-compulsives, phobic, paranoid, and psychotic factors of the international students were significantly higher than those of the Chinese youth norms ( $P < 0.05$  or  $0.01$ ).

Li Fan (2023) used the SCL-90 and the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Screening Scale (PCL-C) to administer a questionnaire to two colleges and universities in Dalian, which have a large number of international students coming to China, and the results showed that international students coming to China were generally fearful and uneasy, and that international students were at high risk for PTSD. The results showed that international students in China were generally fearful and uneasy, and that international students in China were a risk group for high incidence of PTSD, with 90% of those screened positive for the

initial diagnosis of PTSD. This indicates that this group has a high level of tension and stress and mental health problems [Li, F., 2023].

According to Li Fan (2022), factors affecting the psychological status of international students include: the length of contact with Chinese culture, the distance between the native culture and Chinese culture, the level of social support from compatriots and local socio-cultural members, the international students' own cognitive styles, knowledge, skills, coping strategies, and expectations, as well as the international students' gender, age, and education level [Li, F., 2022].

Wu et al. (2020) compared the mental health status of 68 international students in China at Central South University with that of 68 Chinese students matched for age and gender by using the Symptom Self-Criticism Scale (SCL-90) and found that international students' factor scores for compulsion and relationship sensitivity were significantly higher than those of Chinese students and Chinese youth norms ( $P < 0.05$ ) [Wu, C. G., & Zhou, X., 2020].

### **2.3 Study on Cultural Adaptation and Mental Health of International Students**

Li Qiuju (2019) conducted a survey on the psychological condition of 120 international students coming to China from 50 different countries, and found that the students' gender, age, whether they had a cross-cultural background, and whether they had received cross-cultural training were not associated with depression [Li, Q. J., 2019]

Zhang Zhengshan et al. (2018) conducted a survey on the intercultural adaptability of international students at a medical university, and based on the survey data collected, they concluded that intercultural adaptability is closely related to the psychology and communication ability of international students, and that it is necessary to alleviate the psychological burden of adapting to the Chinese culture and to strengthen the intercultural communication ability of international students [He, P. Y., Zhang, Z. S., & Wang, Y., 2018].

Chen Yue pointed out that international students would face cross-cultural adaptation problems at the socio-cultural level, personal level, and interpersonal level, which would have a negative impact on their physical and mental health. She put forward several strategies to effectively solve the intercultural adaptation problems of international students, including: constructing internationalized cultural exchange activities, integrating intercultural communication in teaching, and cultivating high-quality campus culture. These suggestions actually improve the intercultural adaptation ability of international students from the exogenous factors, and the effectiveness is very high. However, mental health problems also need to be caused by internal factors [Chen, Y., 2021].

### **2.4 Review of Research**

From the viewpoint of existing research, there have been a large number of studies on the mental health and cultural adaptation of international students, most of which are mainly quantitative, while the results of the studies on the mental health and cultural adaptation of international students in different cities and universities under different categories are different due to the differences in geographic regions and research tools.

Although scholars have summarized the influencing factors of cross-cultural adaptation and mental health according to different classifications, cross-cultural adaptation of international

students is affected by many complicated factors, so there is room for further exploration of the relationship between the two.

### **3. Analyses**

#### **3.1 Theoretical significance**

Overseas research on acculturation has been conducted earlier, and a set of theory system suitable for western culture has been constructed. However, China has formed its own unique cultural spirit, temperament and national conditions over the past 5,000 years, and the results of western research cannot fully explain the cultural adaptation of international students in China.

Based on the revision of the cultural adaptation questionnaire for international students in China, this study aims to find the relationship between cultural adaptation and mental health of international students in China, so as to lay a foundation for improving the overall content of cultural adaptation of Belt and Road international students, and to provide basic information and basis for the government or schools to improve the cultural adaptation of international students in China and the intervention of mental health.

#### **3.2 Practical significance**

With the deepening of the Belt and Road cooperation, more and more international students and personnel from Belt and Road countries come to study and work in China. Based on the current status of their cultural adaptation and the problems they encounter, this study proposes solutions and countermeasures to promote the cultural adaptation and mental health of international students from Belt and Road countries coming to China, to help them better adapt to their study and life in China, and to enhance their sense of Chinese cultural identity, and at the same time, to provide a scientific basis for the development of educational measures for Hangzhou colleges and universities, and to promote the exploration of college and university paths of internationalization in the Unified Front.

### **4. Proposal**

#### **4.1 Main content**

With the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “Maritime Silk Road” (referred to as “One Belt, One Road”), in addition to close economic and political cooperation between the countries along the Belt and Road, there will also be closer cultural exchanges. In addition to close economic and political cooperation, cultural exchanges between the countries along the Belt and Road will also become closer. International students, as important messengers of national cultural exchanges, their cultural adaptation level is of great significance to the cultural exchanges between the two countries.

However, current research lacks an understanding of the current situation of mental health status and cultural adaptation of international students from the Belt and Road to China, and there is also a lack of exploration of cultural adaptation strategies and cultural distance that affect mental health status and cross-cultural adaptation.

Therefore, this study plans to carry out a dynamic mental health assessment, strengthen the sample survey on the mental health status of international students coming to China, assess

the psychological needs of international students coming to China in an early and timely manner, provide precise psychological services, personalized psychological guidance, and enhance the sense of access to social support.

At the same time, research is committed to building a physical and mental healing service system. By actively organizing Hangzhou traditional culture experience activities and carrying out sunshine mental health education courses, it taps into the endogenous motivation of international students in China during their own growth process, and enhances their psychological resilience and positive qualities.

Finally, this study aims to build a sample platform of mental health education service system to promote the cultural adaptation of international students, relying on the platforms of on-campus and off-campus art healing institutions and mental health education centers to smooth the channels of psychological help, in order to empirically prove the quality of mental health education services in our university.

#### **4.2 Research process**

Study 1, this study intends to revise the SCL-90 Symptom Self-Rating Scale and Cultural Distance Questionnaire. In the revision process, 10 Belt and Road international students were pretested first, and the official scale was determined through item analysis. Then the official scale was administered to 117 Belt and Road international students in China to analyze the relationship between the mental health status of Belt and Road international students in China and the status of cultural differences.

Study 2, this study mainly administered the Cultural Adaptation Scale, the Cultural Adaptation Strategies Scale, and the Social Support Scale to 117 Belt and Road international students coming to China, to determine whether there were significant differences in the levels of cultural adaptation, adaptive strategies, and social support among these demographic characteristics in terms of five aspects: gender, time of arrival, purpose of arrival, Chinese language proficiency, and pre-arrival experience.

Through correlation and regression analyses, the relationship between cultural adaptation, adaptive strategies, and social support levels and mental health status was explored, and then countermeasures were proposed to solve the problem of cultural adaptation.

Study 3, based on the results of the questionnaire survey, this study conducts in-depth interviews with international students with cultural adaptation difficulties and psychological disturbances, conducts regular psychological counseling, organizes Hangzhou traditional culture experience courses, and carries out interactive group counseling activities between international students and local students to form an effective mental health education system to help these students better adapt to campus life, learn about the way of life under the Chinese culture, and acquire a sense of belonging.

#### **4.3 Research methods**

In this study, the SCL-90 Symptom Self-Rating Scale and the Cultural Distance Questionnaire were first revised through data collection, interviews, exploratory factor analysis, validation factor analysis, and reliability and validity tests. The questionnaires were tested to have good reliability and validity, meeting the requirements of psychometrics.

Then, using the revised SCL-90 Symptom Self-Assessment Scale, Cultural Distance Questionnaire, and Cultural Adaptation Strategy, Cultural Adaptation Level Questionnaire, and Social Support Scale as the research tools, 117 Belt and Road students studying in China from Hangzhou Normal University were selected as the research subjects to investigate the current status of their cultural adaptation as well as the relationship between cultural adaptation, cultural distance, adaptation strategy, social support level, and the state of their mental health.

The data were statistically analyzed using SPSS25.0 and AMOS25.0.

#### **4.4 Key points**

A specialized mental health service system for international students coming to China is yet to be built, in which relevant realities including Chinese culture, Chinese education system, Chinese social interaction etiquette and other sample building and its typical window are yet to be filled.

Firstly, Conducting focused action research and long-term tracking research can we collect up-to-date data, analyze the evolution of mental health problems and influencing factors, and better grasp the development trend at home and abroad as well as summarize and implement successful experiences in a targeted manner.

Secondly, conduct interdisciplinary research. Nowadays, mental health problems are not only a problem of psychology, but also involve many fields such as education, sociology and medicine. Through interdisciplinary research methods, we can understand the mental health problems of international students in China more comprehensively and propose more integrated intervention strategies.

Thirdly, the organic combination of policy and practice, focusing on the close integration of policy formulation and practice application, ensures that research results can be translated into concrete mental health promotion measures to provide guidance for policy makers and mental health service providers; only in this way can we keep abreast of the times, promote the development of society and the advancement of science and technology, and cope with the mental health challenges faced by international students in China in the new era.

This study will focus on emerging issues, such as Internet addiction and the impact of social media use on mental health in different cultures, to ensure that the study can reflect the characteristics of the current era; it will also explore the model of mental health education, and seek public support and assistance for the construction of a psychological service system for international students in China, so as to realize President Xi's slogan, "Gathering all the world's talents and gathering all the creative strengths for the cause of the Party and the country". We will strive to realize President Xi's ardent wish "to gather talents from all over the world for the development of the Party and the country, and to mobilize creative strength".

#### **4.5 Expected value**

##### **The degree of theoretical innovation**

Overseas research on cultural adaptation has been conducted earlier, and a set of theory system suitable for western culture has been constructed. However, China has formed its own unique cultural spirit, temperament and national conditions over the past 5,000 years, and the results of western research cannot fully explain the acculturation of international students.



Based on the revision of the SCL-90 Symptom Self-Rating Scale and the Cultural Distance Questionnaire, this study aims to find out the relationship between cultural strategies, cultural distance, and the level of acculturation and the state of mental health, so as to enrich the theory of acculturation research and the model of mental health education. Through the research on the cultural adaptation status of international students, we can lay a preliminary foundation for improving the overall content of cultural adaptation of incoming personnel on the Belt and Road, and provide basic information and basis for the government or schools to improve the cultural adaptation of incoming personnel.

### **Practical Value**

With the deepening of the Belt and Road cooperation, more and more international students and personnel from Belt and Road countries come to study and work in China. Through the revision of SCL-90 Symptom Self-Assessment Scale and Cultural Distance Questionnaire, this study explores and digs deeper into the interrelationships and mechanisms of action between cultural adaptation, cultural distance, adaptive strategies and mental health status. Through interviews and questionnaires, this paper learned about the acculturation problems and psychological distress in studying, living and interacting with others in China.

Based on the current status of their cultural adaptation and the problems they encountered, this propose solutions and countermeasures to promote the cultural adaptation of Belt and Road international students coming to China, explore a specialized mental health education model, and design activity courses with the theme of cultural adaptation, so as to help them better adapt to their study and life in China, and to enhance their sense of Chinese cultural identity. Provide scientific basis for Hangzhou universities to formulate educational measures and promote the internationalization of education in China.

## **5.Survey**

### **5.1. Census**

In order to better understand the mental health status of college students, including international students, a psychological health survey was conducted on the basis of voluntary registration. Through the census, the psychological health problems of college students were timely discovered, providing scientific basis for targeted psychological health education and counseling. The survey adopted the Symptom Check List 90 (SCL-90), the adult version of the Relationship Questionnaire and the Chinese version of the Family Intimacy and Adaptability Scale (FACESI-CV). Through data analysis, the following results were obtained. Among the the Belt and Road students participating in the survey, the ratio of boys to girls was 1:2, and the distribution range was undergraduate and graduate students. The positive detection rate of SCL-90 is about 10%, indicating that the overall mental health status of international students is good.

From the overall score, about 10% of international students have a total score of  $\geq 39.6$ , which may indicate a certain degree of mental health problems. From the factor dimension, international students with factor scores  $\geq 3$  have moderate psychological problems, accounting for about 5% of the total population. Meanwhile, among various factors, the positive detection rate of obsessive-compulsive symptoms, interpersonal sensitivity,

anxiety, and campus life adaptation reached about 20% of the total population, indicating that international students are prone to psychological crises in these four areas. Secondly, the top four factor scores for both male and female international students, from high to low, are obsessive-compulsive symptoms, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, and anxiety, indicating that international students, regardless of gender, experience more psychological distress in these four areas. Among them, female international students scored the highest in interpersonal sensitivity, except for obsessive-compulsive disorder, while male international students scored in depression, indicating that compared to male students, female students may be more concerned about issues in interpersonal communication. In addition, male international students scored lower than female international students on all factors, but there was no significant gender difference in the seven factors of the mental health questionnaire ( $p>0.05$ ), indicating that the overall mental health levels of male and female international students are similar. The seven factor scores of SCL-90 for international students range from 1.24 to 1.68, with scores from high to low as follows: obsessive-compulsive symptoms>interpersonal sensitivity>campus life adaptation>anxiety>depression>hostility>paranoia.

## 5.2 Counseling

Among various factors, the positive detection rate of obsessive-compulsive symptoms, interpersonal sensitivity, anxiety, and campus life adaptation reached about 20% of the total population, indicating that international students are prone to psychological crises in these four areas. According to the Friedman test results, the scores for obsessive-compulsive disorder and interpersonal sensitivity were significantly higher than those for paranoia, hostility, and depression ( $p<0.005$ ).

Based on the census results, the research team followed up on three major counseling services, including individual interviews: conducting individual interviews with screened international students who may have psychological problems, understanding their specific situations, and providing corresponding psychological counseling and counseling services as needed; Group counseling: Conduct group counseling activities to address common issues and help international students improve their mental health awareness and coping abilities; Establish a psychological profile: Establish a psychological profile for each international student, recording their mental health status and counseling situation for timely tracking and feedback

## 5.3 Intervene

This study emphasizes individual counseling services: providing face-to-face individual counseling services to help students solve various psychological problems, such as academic stress, interpersonal relationships, emotional issues, etc. At the same time, provide telephone and online consultation services for students in need; Crisis intervention: A comprehensive crisis intervention mechanism has been established, which can intervene in a timely manner in case of emergencies and provide necessary support and assistance. For example, by using emergency crisis intervention hotlines and promptly intervening on-site to handle extreme events caused by psychological problems; Consultation process: Provide professional consultation services to visitors according to the professional consultation process, including appointment, reception, interview, evaluation, intervention,

feedback and other links. At the same time, detailed files have been established for each consulting case for easy follow-up and recording.

This research has empirically demonstrated the following experience: firstly, it is necessary to establish a good trust relationship. Establishing a good trust relationship with international students is the foundation of consulting work. During the consultation process, it is important to respect the feelings and opinions of international students and make them feel warm and safe; Secondly, it is necessary to flexibly apply consulting skills. Counselors should flexibly apply various counseling techniques based on the specific situation of international students, such as listening, questioning, explanation, guidance, etc., to achieve good counseling results; The purpose of psychological counseling is not only to help international students relieve their emotions, but more importantly, to assist them in solving problems. During the consultation process, the counselor should guide international students to actively think and find ways to solve problems

#### 6. Vision

This project work should not only strengthen the construction of mental health education courses, further improve the mental health education curriculum system, enhance the quality of courses and teaching effectiveness. We need to further carry out mental health promotion activities. Through various forms of promotional activities, popularize knowledge about mental health and increase students' awareness of mental health. We also need to strengthen the construction of the psychological counselor team, increase the training efforts for psychological counselors, and improve their professional level and service ability. Researchers need to further improve the mechanism of mental health work, enhance the evaluation, feedback, and assessment mechanism of mental health education work, and ensure the effective implementation of various tasks.

Through preliminary research and action studies, the research team has achieved problem-solving and innovative work in the areas of psychological comfort, education, counseling, and intervention for international students. At the same time, continuous improvement and perfection are needed to provide professional, efficient and high-quality mental health education and consulting services that keep pace with the times for college students, including those coming to China along the "the Belt and Road", and promote all-round development and healthy growth

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