BEIJING — In the fall of 2015, as I began my last year of graduate school, I sensed something was wrong. I woke up in the mornings with a pounding heart. In seminar discussions my sentences came out in faltering fragments, while my classmates’ voices reached me as a cacophony of piercing sounds.

Until that point, I had enjoyed my time on the Harvard campus, whose maple-shaded Georgian buildings I had first seen in pictures my father took 20 years earlier on his first trip from China to America. On the back of one of the photos, he had inscribed in blue ink, “You will see it with your own eyes someday.”

But in those days, instead of taking in its beauty, my eyes were fixed on the grou as I slogged from one academic building to the next, counting pavement stones to help tame my racing thoughts.

The anxiety attacks took me by surprise. I had spent eight years studying and working in the United States away from my home in Beijing. Over time, the isolation of graduate school, the heavy reading load in a second language and the strain that distance put on relationships with people in Beijing all began to add up.

Trying to make sense of what happened, I recalled incidents among fellow Chinese international students that at the time had seemed like only minor slumps in coping with the demands of student life: missed classes, complaints of insomnia,
months of sudden absence from group events, lengthy Facebook posts strung with sullen adjectives.

There were 544,500 Chinese studying abroad in 2016, and a more recent report said 329,000 are studying in the United States alone. For those students, the opportunity is the culmination of uncounted after-school hours devoted to American standardized test prep lessons, and it means liberation from the merciless Chinese education system.

Yet those triumphs come with hidden perils. A survey released in 2013 by Yale researchers found that 45 percent of Chinese international students on campus reported symptoms of depression, and 29 percent reported symptoms of anxiety. The rates are startling, compared with the roughly 13 percent for depression and anxiety among the general population in American universities. Those findings are corroborated by reports from other American campuses, as well as from some schools in Australia and Britain with large Chinese student populations.

The Chinese students acknowledge the usual challenges of living abroad — like the language barrier and cultural differences — but cite academic pressure as the most likely cause of stress. Despite all they have heard about a liberal arts education, they are often surprised by the rigor needed to succeed. The results-oriented mind-set with which many Chinese tackle their studies doesn’t fit well in a system that emphasizes the analytical process and critical thinking.

As a result, the determination and perseverance that have made Chinese students winners at home can deepen their sense of frustration abroad, when a paper outline does not easily emerge from heaps of painstakingly compiled notecards, or when a history exam asks questions about hypothetical scenarios rather than the chronology they have committed to heart.

The feeling is not eased by a frequently cited difficulty in building productive relationships with academic advisers. In a study that interviewed 19 Chinese graduate students at a university in the American Southwest about their sources of stress, many described having trouble establishing trust with their advisers. Some
feared that the language barrier might lead advisers to doubt their intelligence. Others confessed to being kept awake at night thinking about communication blunders such as a bungled conversation or a misphrased email to an adviser.

Those challenges may seem common enough; many, indeed, are not unfamiliar to American students. But for the Chinese students, who grew up imbibing messages that all but equated their life prospects and self-worth with academic achievements, the setbacks can be profoundly unnerving. The bright promise of intellectual freedom often ends up producing an insecurity so consuming that it leaves them unable to consider failing.

The price of failure is more than imaginary for a majority of those students. Chinese international students overwhelmingly pay full tuition. An annual cost of, say, $50,000 to $60,000 is about 10 times the average urban disposable income in China and often requires working-class families to empty bank accounts or sell properties. Although parents have not hesitated to make those sacrifices when it comes to the future of their treasured only child, to the conscientious American-college freshman from Shenzhen or Changsha struggling to keep up with academic requirements, that weight can feel like an avalanche bearing down.

A Chinese student in Chicago (using a pseudonym) voiced a popular sentiment when she told The Paper, a popular Chinese online news outlet, of her constant wondering whether her school performance justified the money her working-class parents spent on her education. It made her more anxious than she had been during the “gaokao,” the notoriously cutthroat national college entrance exam.

People like that student are unlikely to find consolation in recent statistics: according to a September report from the Center for China and Globalization, a Beijing-based think tank, and Zhilian Zhaopin, a Chinese recruitment agency, 80.5 percent of Chinese overseas returnees make less than $1,500 a month, with their average pay only marginally higher than that of graduates of mainland colleges.

These shared difficulties have led Chinese students to turn to one another in moments of distress. The stigma in Chinese culture associated with mental
illnesses is just beginning to lift, as several Chinese celebrities have opened up about their personal battles. But because of the heavy shortage of well-trained therapists in China, therapy remains a hazy concept even for the most worldly students. The Yale survey found that despite the alarming rate of mental illness, 27 percent of Chinese students on campus had never heard of the university’s mental health counseling service, and only 4 percent had ever used it.

Some of those who have tried the services are often left underwhelmed. In addition to the long wait and limited session time that are common to the increasingly crowded university mental health counseling centers, there are thornier problems. How can Chinese students convey the texture of their thoughts and moods in a foreign language when the language barrier is a cause of their stress and inhibition in the first place? How do they communicate their nostalgia for mouthwatering homemade Chinese dishes when the sympathetic therapist may not have ventured beyond Panda Express?

A few institutions, such as Purdue University and Ohio State University, have set up counseling services tailored to Chinese students. More schools need to follow suit. Hiring Chinese-speaking mental health counselors may be the ideal solution, although qualified candidates can be hard to find.

Informal counselor-led support groups and outreach programs, which have received positive feedback from Asian-American students, could be extended to Chinese international students. Universities could hire and train well-acclimated Chinese students to become counselors for their communities.

Chinese students are the largest international student group on most American campuses, and their tuition is a major source of much-needed revenue. College administrators should work harder to meet their mental health needs — at least as hard as the students worked to gain admission.

Helen Gao is a policy analyst at a research company and a contributing opinion writer.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.
A version of this op-ed appears in print on December 13, 2017, on Page A14 of the National edition with the headline: Chinese and studying in America.

© 2017 The New York Times Company