

Cultural Shock and Adaptation of International Students in China*

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Cultural shock and adaptation of international students have become a thriving field of study. This article reviews studies on international students in China and demonstrates an increasing favor for empirical research over nonempirical research in recent years and studies the current situation and problems of international students' cultural adaptation in China. This review ends with implications and directions for future research.

Keywords: cultural shock, culture adaptation, international students

Introduction

In the past few decades, the globalization process of the world has accelerated, and cross-cultural communication is also growing. In recent years, the number of international students in China has been growing steadily for 20 years. According to the Ministry of Education, 207,746 students were studying in China from 64 countries along the Belt and Road in 2021, an increase of 13.6% year on year, higher than the average growth rate of other countries. At present, China, like many countries in Europe, attracts more and more students from different nationalities who wish to broaden their knowledge at Chinese universities. This article reviews research on culture shock and adaptation among international students studying in China and puts forward the prospect of future research.

Research on international students began in the early 19th century. In the first half of the 19th century, there was little relevant research, which mainly recorded their experiences in the host country. In the second half of the 19th century, there was a gradual increase in the study of international students, with a wider range of research topics, which began to focus on the attitude of international students towards the host country, the interaction with local people, psychological health and other issues. In the 1980s, China implemented the policy of reform and opening up. This policy provided an opportunity for a large number of outstanding scholars and students to communicate with other countries in the academic field. Since the early 1990s, research on international students has been booming, and since 2005 there has been an exponential growth in research on

* **Acknowledgements:** This study is supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (WUT: 225217003).

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macro policy and mobility trends, cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural development, second language acquisition, and many other areas.

The internationalization of higher education is one of the main ways of building a world-class university. However, due to the cultural and institutional differences between countries, how to overcome the “cultural gap” in international exchanges is of great significance to carrying out cross-cultural dialogue and building an academic community. Previous studies in this vein have found that the conflict between Chinese and Western cultures is caused by the difference between collectivism and individualism (Wan, 2008). The development of human civilization needs to communicate with different nationalities, observe and study the cultures of other countries, and face their own culture from the perspective of “others”. Therefore, investigating cultural shock and adaptation of students studying in China will be helpful to understand Western culture and better promote Chinese culture, and an insightful discussion on it provides a new theoretical perspective for the research in this field.

Cultural Shock of International Students

Cultural shock was put forward by American anthropologist Oberg as early as 1960. As a metaphor, cultural shock refers to a psychological state of anxiety and depression caused by a person’s social isolation (Oberg, 1960). This psychological state is often caused by sudden exposure to a foreign cultural life environment or long-term separation from the original cultural environment and later return to their own original cultural environment. When foreign students first arrive in China and live in a new cultural context, they will encounter cultural conflicts and psychological fluctuations due to the differences in living habits and values. Cultural shock is a pervasive problem, it exists not only in the contact between national culture and foreign culture, but also in the cultural contact of the same country, different regions, different languages and different social strata.

Oberg (1960) divided cultural shock into four stages: the honeymoon stage; the uncomfortable stage; the acceptance stage; and the adjusted and autonomous stage. The first stage is characterized by a fascination with “new things” and an overall pleasant experience that lasts from a few days to six months. In the second stage, international students may feel depressed, anxious and angry. The third stage is a process of crisis resolution and cultural learning, in this stage, individuals become more familiar with the new culture and have insight into how to behave appropriately in the cultural background of the country they live in. And finally enter the final stage of complete recovery, reflecting the enjoyment and adaptation to the new environment. Because of the different adaptability of individuals and the external environment, the duration of these four stages in different people is different, and the specific manifestation and degree are also different. This four-stage hypothesis has been adopted to analyze the phenomenon of cultural shock of international students and it provides a reference model for cultural adaptation, and makes readers realize that the psychological adaptation of international students cannot be ignored.

It is a painful process for foreign students to overcome cultural shock for their intercultural experiences differ in substantial ways (Song & Xia, 2021). Symptoms of cultural shock are mainly manifested in the following aspects: they feel strained from the effort to adapt to a new culture most of the time; they feel unaccepted by the local people in the new culture; they are confused about their role or identity in the new

culture; they are unable to adapt to the new curriculum and so on (Saylag, 2014). Five categories of challenges encountered during their study abroad have been concluded: psychological, academic, lifestyle, socialization, and language-based (Gong, Gao, Li, & Lai, 2021).

Cultural shock has attracted researchers' attention with an increasing number of students studying abroad. Xue (2019) analyzed the formation mechanism of cultural shock in the academic education of Bangladeshi students in China and found that religious belief, culture, language, educational system, climate, and lifestyle are important mechanisms for the formation of "shock". Most international students encountered practical or lifestyle difficulties when living in China. However, lifestyle challenges with distinct Chinese characteristics were also found, such as e-payment and Chinese character contexts (Gong et al., 2021). There are some facilitating factors that helped to minimize the obstacles. These include various components of successful adaptation and the establishment of new social identity pathways, such as host-national connectedness, forming in-person and online groups with co-nationals and multinational peers, and the host society's gradual adaptation (Raja, 2021). Even at the advanced stage of the Chinese level, cultural shock may occur. Therefore, universities and relevant educational organizations should provide help to international students to adapt to Chinese cultural environment through communication with local people, so that they can adjust their psychological state to learn cultural knowledge better, ensure their psychological and physical health and achieve our educational objectives.

The phenomenon of "cultural shock" in cross-cultural communication occurs frequently and can not be avoided. China's story concerning international students' social identity change is not yet researched (Raja, 2021). In addition, the research is mostly from the macro perspective, ignoring the micro aspect, with insufficient research involving the international students themselves. Therefore, the existing research on foreign students' cultural shock has more places worthy of discussion, and more detailed and in-depth research is needed.

Cultural Adaptation of International Students

Intercultural adaptation occurs when people attempt to establish and maintain relationships with those new cultural contexts after leaving their home cultures (Kim, 2001). People perceive themselves in a much broader context during cross-cultural contacts. This can lead to identity construction largely from local social interaction.

When foreign students come to China to study, there will inevitably be cultural imbalance in China's educational environment. How to help foreign students overcome cultural shock and help them adapt and integrate into Chinese culture is an important topic demanding prompt solution. With frequent contact between countries, international students actively try to integrate into the new environment. At the same time, higher education also plays an important role in the process of adaptation. International students are an important part of higher education, cultural competence in education has increased in importance and value, which is one reason the number of students enrolled in foreign higher education has increased (Smith, 2015). Intercultural education aims to increase students' knowledge about their own and target cultures, affect their emotions concerning other cultures, and develop their interpersonal abilities to communicate well with people from other cultural contexts (Otten, 2003). University administrators should meet their daily needs to ensure that they can

study and live at ease in the new environment, given this perspective, cultural adaptation is a required course for every international student.

Research on international students in China mainly focuses on two aspects: studies on different student groups and those on the influencing factors and solutions of cultural adaptation. Existing studies mainly focus on foreign students from specific groups, such as the higher vocational students, the undergraduate students and graduate students. Chen (2017) found that higher vocational students in China can reach the level of “harmony but difference” in the co-existence of the two cultures through “self-cognition” of the culture of their home country, respect, and appreciation of Chinese culture. Foreign undergraduate students’ anxiety in the process of acculturation can be caused by language learning, social interaction and negative stereotypes of Chinese culture (Xu & Hu, 2017). There are the same problems in cultural adaptation between doctoral students, graduate students and undergraduate students studying in China, including cultural shock, language communication, customs and daily life (Du & Huang, 2013). The problems of cultural adaptation encountered by foreign students with different educational backgrounds are similar, strengthening the cross-cultural communication ability of international students and implementing non-discriminatory management will help to improve their cultural adaptation ability.

The influencing factors of international students in the process of cultural adaptation can be roughly divided into four aspects: communication and thinking patterns, living habits, cultural values and religious beliefs. Chen and Lin (2017) found that the Chinese proficiency, the support and help of friends in China and students’ family economy background have a significant impact on cultural psychological adaptation. Interpersonal interaction, the Chinese level, the time spent in China, cultural distance and satisfaction all affect the cultural adaptation of foreign students (Wen, Liu, Hu, & Chen, 2014). Most of the difficulties encountered by foreign students in the process of cultural adaptation are similar, these influencing factors are the main obstacles in the process of cultural adaptation, if not properly solved, they will have a significant impact on the life of international students.

Difficulties in the process of cultural adaptation are unavoidable. It is very necessary to take positive measures to overcome cultural shock and shorten the transition time. Actively exploring and building a “convergent management model” for international students with Chinese characteristics will help to cultivate high-quality international students in China (Ma, 2020; Zhou, 2020). The state and universities should cooperate, formulate reasonable policies according to the characteristics of Chinese students, delegate power to colleges and universities, and strengthen the training of professional teachers and management teams, so as to help students adapt to the new cultural background as soon as possible (Li, Li, & Zhang, 2016). Moreover, the improvement of Internet access and provision of more Chinese newspapers and television stations to sets in student dormitories by universities might facilitate greater cultural adaptation by international students and improve their perceptions of study in China (Zhu & Krever, 2017). In addition to the foreign students themselves actively learning to adapt to the new cultural environment, researchers should also strive to find the reasons for the abnormal development of foreign students’ psychological cultural shock and reasonable countermeasures, and give them correct guidance.

China’s cross-cultural education for international students in China is far from mature (Tan, 2020). At present, the domestic research on the cultural adaptation of foreign students mostly relies on Western cultural

adaptation theories and focuses on the perspective of psychology and sociology (Chen, 2017). Cultural adaptation is a long process, more research is needed in the future to help foreign students overcome the obstacles of cultural adaptation.

Conclusion

This article showed that most of the studies in China on cultural shock and adaptation are based on Western theories and mainly discussed from the aspects of communication, psychology and pedagogy. Despite the increasing number of international students in China, the research on international students is insufficient, and their experience in China remains largely unknown. There are many deficiencies and defects in cultural shock and adaptation research.

According to different educational backgrounds, future research can involve more participants, and a more detailed division can be adopted. Because of individual and national differences, the same adaptation strategies for different types of cultural shock are not appropriate for all international students. Therefore, future research can examine how and which adaptative strategies are most suitable for multilingual and multicultural international students' environments in the new cultural context. After staying or living in another cultural environment, it is also difficult to readjust to one's own culture. At present, the research on reverse cultural shock in China is very limited, future research can change the research focus to study the reverse culture shock and adaptation of Chinese students after returning to China.

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