

Cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese overseas students: A review of the past decade

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ABSTRACT

China has become increasingly important in the process of internationalization and globalization. Thus, many Chinese students are leaving China to study abroad. In the last decade, students from China were more likely to study abroad than students from India. Such groups are expected to grow quickly in the next decade and become the world's largest group of migrants who leave their country to study abroad. As the number of students studying abroad increases, the need to develop the cross-cultural adaptability of such students likewise increases. Therefore, it is worth investigating how Chinese higher-education students prepare for their overseas studies via intercultural communication. Specifically, this study explores how students' past intercultural learning influences their cross-cultural adjustment and how their prior cultural awareness can affect their knowledge. Our results showed that academic institutions cannot assure high-quality education and thus cannot achieve their mission and goals or serve their social, economic, and public purpose. Hence, such institutions should be actively involved in their students' psychological and cognitive health. This scenario is especially true for public universities.

Keywords: Chinese students; Cross-cultural adaptation; overseas universities

INTRODUCTION

University students' desire to study abroad increased dramatically in the past decade. Depending on whether they are engaged in a full-time study program or enrolled in institutions of higher learning, students are highly likely to study abroad. Compared with their peers back home, overseas students have more hurdles to overcome in adapting to different living and learning conditions in foreign countries. For example, researchers found that international students face difficulties adapting to their new surroundings, including feelings of loneliness and a lack of sense of belonging to their new community (Fang & Baker, 2018). According to Kim (2017), most of those habitual behaviors beneficial in the previous setting may appear ineffective in the new setting when people relocate and live in new locations. For international students, adapting to a new environment entails overcoming many academic and social hurdles. Thus, international students' cross-cultural adaptation should be investigated owing to such identified problems (Li & Ma, 2018; Zaykovskaya et al., 2017).

Overseas students' cross-cultural compatibility has become a hot topic among academics at home and abroad as the number of Chinese students studying in Western countries continues to rise. Students from foreign countries may find fitting in with the local culture difficult owing to cultural and linguistic differences. In addition, the financial situation of international students and their families may be problematic. When it comes to mental health disorders like anxiousness, anxiety, and depression, international students may be more vulnerable than their Western counterparts (Jiang et al., 2000). Several studies showed that Chinese international students experience difficulties adapting to their new surroundings. When starting their studies abroad, international students face the challenge of a new educational system and culture. Such students must adapt to the different cultures, form new friendships, and cope with various aspects of their lives on their own, which can be a tremendous burden.

A study on cross-border higher education will be beneficial if it can address Chinese international students' cultural adaptation. Currently, research on cross-cultural adaptability is centered on the management of international students in China and their responsiveness to the

Chinese cultural influences of Chinese scholars. Academic collaboration between Chinese and international institutions of higher learning in specific fields, majors, and courses is an important part of studying in China, and the articulating plan is a significant component of such a collaboration. After completing one or two years of study in a Chinese university, students are sent to the United Kingdom to finish the remaining two years of their university education and obtain a British university degree. This bilateral education and training cooperation system in Chinese universities is the most popular form of Sino foreign partnership and demonstrates rapid development progress (Zhan, 2017). Considerable differences exist between spoken Chinese language education at the elementary level and other languages and stages in terms of subject matter and learning level. The main goal of oral education is to teach students verbal communication skills. Reading, writing, and translating are the three basic elements of second-language education training in addition to listening and speaking (Shuting, 2021).

A considerable number of studies were conducted to effectively understand the cross-cultural adaptation challenges faced by international students, such as the methods they employ to overcome such obstacles and the factors influencing their success (Shafaei & Razak, 2016). Students' cross-cultural adaptation is relevant not only during their adaptation period but also before they go abroad for their studies. According to several academics, predeparture preparations can effectively help international students adjust to a new culture. In terms of intercultural relations and mediating cultural differences, well-prepared international students tend to succeed compared with unprepared students. Moreover, their preparation time during the predeparture stage may influence international students' readiness for future cross-cultural adaptation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ADAPTATION TO A DIFFERENT CULTURE

In terms of adaptation to an alien socio-cultural environment, Kim (2017) defined cross-cultural adaptation as a person's efforts to maintain comparatively stable, correlating, and dynamic interactions. "Psychological adaptation" refers to people's "psychological well-being or emotional contentment." By contrast, "socio-cultural modification" refers to "the attempt to stick in, to develop culturally relevant skills, and to negotiate introduced mechanisms of the cultural context" (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Trying to fit into a new social or cultural group can be difficult for various reasons. Long-term tourists may experience "an identity metamorphosis, a subtle, and generally intuitive transition" from "a mostly monocultures to an emerging multicultural self-other perspective" (Kim, 2017).

To understand how individuals deal with language and cultural challenges when moving between cultures, scholars traditionally focused on cross-cultural adaptation research (Kim, 2017). Previous studies classified individuals based on their cross-cultural adaptation, such as short-term tourists, foreigners, and immigrants. Cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic and multifaceted process that may include elements of effect, social interaction, behavior, and cognition (Baker, 2015; Zhou et al., 2008). As described in this study, sojourners' adjustment to new cultures is a multistep process resulting in a new set of attitudes, feelings, ideas, and actions that can help individuals become globally-minded, bilingual, and multicultural (Zhou et al., 2008). The psychological and socio-cultural adaptation of students studying abroad must be examined and unpacked to present a holistic picture of intercultural teachings and learning before and throughout students' experience abroad. According to this argument, when considering cross-cultural adaptation, a dynamic model is preferable, as it considers the traveler as an active participant in, rather than a victim of, the pathology (Zhou et al., 2008).

Most studies focused on Chinese students' cross-cultural transformation and examined the problems that such students encounter, the approaches they use to overcome challenges, or the

factors influencing their adaptation and provided suggestions based on their analysis of students' adaptation knowledge (Fang & Baker, 2018; Henze & Zhu, 2012). Although previous studies comprehensively explored how Chinese students studying abroad can continuously improve their cross-cultural adaptability, most focused on what the students can do once they arrive in their host countries instead of how they can improve their preparation before leaving.

CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Early intercultural learning, which focuses on Chinese students' predeparture period, was examined extensively. Using a poststructuralist perspective, this research explores culture as an "intricately intertwined social structure, rather than a natural system, that evolves due to humans' collective growth in the region" (Baker, 2015). According to Liu and Fang (2017), "culture should not be only a cognitive construct, but rather from a critical standpoint that critiques an idealist set of cultural meanings."

Classifying intercultural learning from a poststructuralist perspective is difficult, as it may be seen as an objective, a procedure, or a specific type of communication (McConachy, 2017). This study aims to examine the components contributing to students' cross-cultural adaptation through the lens of intercultural learning (Tulasiewicz, 2010). In other words, this study refers to intercultural learning as acquiring knowledge and "obtaining an increasing recognition of qualitative cultural environment, together with one's personal, and developing greater ability to communicate thoughtfully and skillfully across contextual factors" (Bennett, 2009). Thus, the concept of cross-cultural learning and growth can be examined in various cultural contexts, and the results can be transferred to other cultural situations (Bennett, 2009). An alternative definition of intercultural learning is the improvement of one's cultural awareness, including the attitudes, information, and abilities necessary to communicate effectively with persons from diverse cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2009). Predeparture intercultural learning may help students succeed in their cross-cultural adaptation by preparing them for the challenges they will face once they reach their destination (Jackson, 2020; Tian & Lu, 2018).

Despite the importance of previous preparation to cross-cultural adaptation, few studies focused on international Chinese students' predeparture phase. Using a four-item questionnaire, Liu (2008) examined Chinese students' intercultural adaptation experiences while studying abroad and prior preparedness. According to Liu, prior preparedness is the sum total of a student's prior cross-cultural training and how well he/she prepared for his/her new language and cultural environment. Well-prepared students prefer assimilation and integration tactics. Baker and Fang (2019) surveyed Chinese student sojourners to determine how well their English classes prepared them for studying abroad. Most of the participants believed that they were not well-prepared for their overseas study experience because they believed that their English classes did not equip them with the skills they needed. Research on international Chinese students' perception of their intercultural competence and how their preexisting intercultural learning can affect their adaptability to foreign settings is limited.

METHODS

This research was conducted by reviewing the existing literature. The selection of the literature was based on specific keywords. A thorough exploration of numerous articles and journals was conducted to provide a deep understanding of the topic. Based on the search criteria, the materials that fit in the literature were explored and compared with others studies.

FINDINGS

CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTABILITY IMPROVEMENT TECHNIQUES

Future overseas study program students and their parents can benefit from experts' combined work experience and research findings, which they use to provide recommendations for improving the domestic education system, increasing learners' self-efficacy in cross-cultural transitions, and developing students' identities.

ENHANCE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEAMWORK AND INCREASE THE VARIETY OF READING MATERIALS

Teamwork is emphasized heavily in American universities. Students are taught to collaborate, coordinate, manage their time, and communicate effectively with others to succeed. Students from China should familiarize themselves with the instructional methods used in Western universities prior to enrolling in such institutions. Academic learning and team leadership development are essential for students to succeed in the workplace. Students interested in serving as leaders in their school must be aware of the responsibilities accompanying membership in an effective management and leadership team. Students must also learn to interact, coordinate, and integrate with one another and divide the work among group members while proving their academic talents. After utilising various forms of communication, team members work together to attain the same objectives.

MAXIMIZE THE CURRICULUM DESIGN AND SPECIFY LEARNING GOALS

Students should spend the first two years of their domestic study period studying the cultures and traditions of their intended destination. For Chinese learners to grasp other cultures, they must study and comprehend other countries' historical backgrounds (Haidar & Fang, 2019). Thus, students must learn the common language used in their target country and its local culture, cultural roots, and cultural distinctiveness. Owing to different historical contexts, traits related to national spirit emerged.

REDUCE EXPECTATIONS OF OVERSEAS LIFE

Chinese students' understanding of American culture and society is primarily derived from Western films and television programs. Students who visit the United States for the first time are disappointed to discover that the town where their chosen university is located is far from the busy and exciting pace of Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, or other popular entertainment centers. Students away from home for an extended period may easily feel lonely or bored. When students move from a bustling Chinese city to a quiet, less crowded foreign city, they are more likely to suffer from a psychological disconnect than those who relocate from smaller Chinese cities. Universities and families should guide students through their process of adaptation cognition and emphasize that the goal of studying abroad is an academic achievement rather than enjoyment in an affluent international megacity. To effectively prepare students for their international experience, cultural introduction classes can be provided to teach them about the realities of life in small US cities before they leave for their expected big-city studies (Zhong et al., 2020).

IMPROVE STUDENTS' HAPPINESS ABROAD BY DEVELOPING THEIR LIFE SKILLS

The majority of the foods consumed in the United States is spaghetti and dairy products. When Chinese students first visit the United States, they find it difficult to adjust to the local cuisine. After consuming large quantities of hamburgers and pizza, Chinese students become enraged by different elements, including the weather, water, other natural resources, and food preparation methods. However, before traveling overseas, most students have little knowledge of food preparation and grocery shopping. When studying in the United States, Chinese students have no choice but to cook for themselves, increasing their anxiety about their eating

habits. Parents of international students preparing to embark on their international studies should plan ahead and teach their children to shop for groceries, cook and prepare simple and delectable meals (Zhong et al., 2020). Developing students' sense of self-management outside their families is encouraged as well as their abilities to cook and care for themselves in all areas of their lives. The ability to provide for one's daily needs is a crucial life skill that can increase one's level of happiness when studying overseas.

UTILIZE "QUASI-NATURAL" ORAL TRAINING SCENARIOS APPLYING SITUATIONAL TEACHING MODES

Speaking and writing are two of the most significant aspects of language adaptation when studying and living overseas. Oral training should be extended as much as possible. The content and frequency of students' talks in seminars serve as criteria for determining their intellectual aptitude. In China, students are afraid to speak up before their peers due to traditional cultural ideas such as respect and restraint. For example, oral training exercises should address learners' "fear of scorn". Students from China are more fluent in English than students from other countries, especially those with a high degree. In its purest form, language serves as a tool for exchanging ideas. Students may find communicating with their professors difficult, as they refuse to participate in class discussions. Cultivating a generation of Chinese students who are not afraid to express their views and speak confidently is essential (Fang, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Students in China will take the initiative to improve their behavior after fully comprehending Western social cultures and educational paradigms. Students should exert effort to develop cross-cultural integration tactics using the positive aspects of Chinese and American cultures while eliminating undesirable characteristics. Students should adapt to American colleges' academic and cultural notions instead of the Chinese cultural model with which they are familiar. Chinese students will benefit from such practices by not needing to adjust considerably to the new culture. According to students, studying abroad gave them a better understanding of modern society. It improved their ability to speak several languages, work in teams, and write in English academically, thereby increasing their professional and cultural awareness. Among the most noticeable changes in such students is the improvement of their oral and writing abilities in English and responsibility in promoting Chinese writing.

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