

Article

Study on Cross-Cultural Adaptability of International Students in China

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Abstract: In recent years, the number of international students in China is growing rapidly, showing a vigorous upward trend. However, it is a challenging work to reveal the law of cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China. In this paper, the group of international students in a high-level university in Xi'an, China was taken as the research object. Through the research method of questionnaire survey and SPSS analysis, the cross-cultural adaptation ability of international students in China was comprehensively and comparatively studied from the aspects of academic status, language status, social communication, psychological status and natural environment. The result show that language adaptation, communication with Chinese classmates and teachers, and academic adaptation are the three major challenges faced by international students. Degree of understanding of the university and education level are the most correlated factors with the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. In addition, the stronger the cross-cultural adaptability, the greater the ability to acquire achievements in China. It is hoped that this work can play a guiding role in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China.

Keywords: cross-cultural adaptation; international students; education level; achievements

1. Introduction

As the number of international students in China continues to rise, their social integration and academic performance have gradually become the focus of public attention. Although international students often arrive with curiosity and high expectations, cultural differences and the challenges of adapting to a new environment can lead to confusion and discomfort. This phenomenon has garnered significant interest within academic and educational circles. According to the latest data from the Ministry of Education, as of 2018, China attracted 492,185 international students from 196 countries, of whom 258,122 were degree-seeking students [1]. The combined number of master's and doctoral students reached 85,062, marking a 12.28% increase from 2017. Specifically, there were 25,618 doctoral students, 59,444 master's students, and 234,063 non-degree students. Looking ahead, the international education sector in China is expected to continue flourishing, contributing further to global talent cultivation and international educational exchanges. Therefore, studying the adaptability of international students is particularly important to help them integrate into Chinese academic and social life more efficiently.

Current reviews on the adaptability of international students focus on several key aspects.

The cross-cultural adaptability of international students in China has been explored from a psychological perspective [2-5]. One study analyzed cross-cultural adaptation using qualitative research methods, including interviews and observations of 204 doctoral students from various disciplines and countries. By employing analysis and induction, a

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cross-cultural adaptation model was established to explain the adaptation process of doctoral students. The collected data indicated that most international students experience negative emotions, such as anxiety and a lack of confidence, during their early days in China, primarily due to language barriers.

The relationship between academic and cross-cultural adaptation has also been analyzed [6-10]. Research examined factors influencing academic adaptation and explored the mediating role of intrinsic motivation. Using SPSS and AMOS for analysis, the results showed that psychological adjustment has a direct positive impact on academic adjustment, while social and cultural adjustment exerts an indirect influence. Consequently, improving the academic adaptation of international students requires enhancing their psychological resilience and intrinsic motivation. Future longitudinal studies are recommended to track these impacts across different stages to optimize the research model.

Adaptability has further been investigated from the perspective of educational management. A study utilized the management practices of a specific university as a starting point to investigate the cross-cultural adaptability of African students. By examining enrollment, teaching, and daily management alongside student satisfaction and emotional attitudes, the study identified significant positive correlations between enrollment management and time spent in China [11]. Teaching management was found to correlate with age, education, and enrollment management, while differential management correlated with Chinese proficiency and teaching quality. The findings highlighted issues such as insufficient enrollment channels, unreasonable curriculum settings, and challenges in the supervisor system.

Problems and countermeasures regarding intercultural adaptation have also been explored through communicative behavior [12-14]. A structural equation model was constructed to identify the main approaches to cross-cultural adaptation. The results indicated four primary pathways: host-country communicative competence, social communication, basic intercultural transformation, and advanced intercultural transformation, with significant positive correlations among these factors [13].

The relationship between second language acquisition and cross-cultural adaptation has been discussed from the perspective of language proficiency. Research explored core factors affecting language acquisition and adaptation through in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires with 25 international students. The results suggested that oral proficiency varied by regional background, and that the distance between the native culture and the host culture influenced the difficulty of learning Chinese in the early stages [15].

Finally, factors affecting cross-cultural adaptability have been explored through the dual identities of being both foreigners and students [16-18]. One study examined the psychological adaptation, academic performance, and social lives of specific student groups, identifying influencing factors and coping strategies used during cross-cultural conflicts.

Overall, previous studies on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China have mostly focused on single dimensions, such as psychology, language, or communication, lacking a multidimensional comprehensive analysis. While single-perspective methods allow for deep exploration of specific aspects, they may not fully reflect overall adaptability in a cross-cultural environment. Furthermore, existing literature is relatively insufficient regarding comparative studies of adaptation factors. Determining which factors have the most significant relationship with adaptation is crucial for formulating effective strategies. Additionally, there is limited research on the relationship between adaptation and the specific abilities or results acquired by students during their stay. Studying this relationship helps clarify how adaptation translates into actual learning outcomes and aids in evaluating the effectiveness of educational programs.

This paper selects a group of international students from a well-known university in Xi'an as the research object, employing questionnaire surveys and SPSS statistical analysis

to comprehensively examine their adaptation. Starting from dimensions such as sociocultural adaptation, psychological status, academic performance, interpersonal communication, language ability, and environmental adaptation, the research explores the following core issues:

- 1) What challenges do international students face in studying and living in China, and what are their primary areas of difficulty?
- 2) What factors have a significant impact on the cross-cultural adaptability of international students?
- 3) How does cross-cultural adaptability influence their academic and daily life performance in China?

The purpose of this study is to provide international students with effective adaptation strategies to help them better integrate into the Chinese educational and social environment. By identifying and analyzing the main factors affecting adaptation, this study aims to reveal the internal rules and patterns of successful integration for international students in China.

Conceptual Framework

Theories related to cross-cultural adaptation offer various models to explain the process for students studying abroad. A widely accepted classification divides cross-cultural adaptation into two dimensions: psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation [19]. However, analyzing adaptability through only two dimensions may not be sufficiently comprehensive for international students. This paper extracts seven dimensions-academic, sociocultural, language, interpersonal, psychological, daily life, and natural environment adaptation-based on the aforementioned literature and frameworks.

In exploring cross-cultural adaptability, the factors influencing this complex phenomenon can be categorized into internal and external factors. External factors involve a wide range of elements, including adaptation to life changes, access to social support, the long-term psychological adjustment process, and the perceived distance from the source culture. These factors constitute the external conditions for international students in a new environment and affect the breadth and depth of their adaptation. Internal factors are more personalized and involve an individual's psychological traits and resources. This includes evaluative coping styles, personality traits, and available coping resources, such as knowledge, skills, and demographic characteristics. These intrinsic traits largely determine how individuals interpret and respond to challenges in cross-cultural environments [20].

Given the uniqueness of each student's background, this study adopts an integrated approach, combining internal and external factors to explore their collective influence on adaptation. The study examines eleven key factors: gender, nationality, age, educational level, major, financial source, Chinese proficiency, duration of stay in China, previous experience living or studying abroad, knowledge about China, and knowledge about the specific university. These factors provide a comprehensive profile of international students and a window into their differences in adaptability.

Furthermore, this study conducts a detailed analysis of the correlation between these factors and cross-cultural adaptability, exploring how they interact to affect the experiences of international students. Additionally, the study examines the relationship between adaptability and the ability of students to achieve tangible results in China, aiming to reveal how adaptation translates into academic and life achievements.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Object and Questionnaire Design

This research focused on the international student community at a high-level university in Xi'an, China, including undergraduate, master's, doctoral, and non-degree students. The questionnaire was designed to comprehensively collect the basic

information of these international students, covering gender, nationality, age, educational level, professional field, scholarship type, Chinese language proficiency, length of stay in China, and their understanding of China and the specific host university. Furthermore, the questionnaire investigated the achievements of international students after their arrival in China, alongside their experiences and feelings regarding sociocultural and academic adjustment. To distribute the questionnaires and collect data efficiently, the study utilized WeChat groups, a convenient electronic communication platform. This approach successfully reached the target group and ensured wide dissemination and efficient recovery of the survey responses.

2.2. Sample Information and Data Analysis Method

2.2.1. Basic Information of the Survey Sample

The sample investigated in this study consisted of 121 international students from a high-level university in Xi'an. As shown in Table 1, the specific demographic and academic details of the respondents are provided.

Table 1. Basic information statistics of questionnaire survey samples in this paper.

Basic information	Data detail
Gender	Male: 79, female: 42
Nationality	A total of 30 countries are involved (Pakistan, Indonesia, Morocco are the most numerous)
Age distribution	16-22 years old: 48 students; 23-26 years old: 31 students; 27-32 years old: 32 students; 33-38 years old: 8 students; over 39 years old: 2students
Education Level	Bachelor's degree: 48 students, master's degree: 40 students, Doctor's degree: 24 students, non-degree: 9 students
Major	Involved in a total of 31 majors (mainly computer science and engineering, aerospace engineering)
Chinese level	Very good:6 students; Relatively good:19 students; Average:48 students; Not Very good :40 students; Not good:8 students
Time spent in China	Less than 6 months: 29 students; 6 months ~12 months: 47 students; 1 year -2 years: 28 students; 2 years -3 years: 2 students; over 3 years: 15 students
Whether students have lived in other countries	Yes: 24 students; No: 97 students

2.2.2. Analysis Method

In this study, the reliability and validity of the questionnaire survey data and subsequent data analysis were evaluated using SPSS software [21]. There are distinct differences between the reliability and validity of a questionnaire, though they remain mutually related and constrained. Reliability primarily addresses the consistency, stability, and dependability of measurement results, while validity focuses on the effectiveness and correctness of those results.

(1) Reliability, or consistency, refers to the extent to which measurement results can withstand repeated testing; that is, whether the measurement tool can stably capture the intended data. Reliability reflects the magnitude of random error in measurement. High reliability indicates that multiple measurements of the same object yield consistent results, signifying that the tool is reliable and stable. Without reliability, results will be inconsistent across different measurement periods, indicating a problem with the

instrument. The reliability calculation results for this questionnaire are shown in Table 2. It can be observed that the reliability of the questionnaire survey in this study is high.

Table 2. Reliability of questionnaire survey in this paper.

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach- α	Number of Terms
0.926	28

Note: The judgment criteria were as follows: a coefficient above 0.9 indicates very good reliability; 0.8 to 0.9 indicates better reliability; 0.7 to 0.8 is acceptable, though some scale content may require modification; below 0.7 indicates that parts of the scale need to be rewritten.

(2) Validity, or practicality, signifies that the measurement tool actually measures what it is intended to measure. High validity indicates that the measurement results accurately reflect the real characteristics of the measured object and ensure that different researchers maintain a consistent understanding of a specific research variable. A lack of validity suggests that the tool is not correctly capturing data reflecting true characteristics. The validity of the sample investigated in this paper was characterized using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO statistic is an indicator used to compare simple and partial correlation coefficients between variables. Bartlett's test of sphericity was used to test whether the variables in the correlation matrix are independent. When the results of the SPSS test show a significance level of less than 0.05 (i.e., $p < 0.05$), it indicates that the variables are significantly correlated. The validity calculation results of this questionnaire survey are shown in Table 3. It can be concluded that the validity of this questionnaire survey is satisfactory.

Table 3. Validity of questionnaire survey in this paper.

KMO Test		0.860
Bartlett Spherical Test	Approximate chi-square	1807.173
	Degree of freedom	378
	Significance/P	0.000

Note: The commonly used KMO metrics are: 0.9 or above indicates a very good fit; 0.8 indicates a good fit; 0.7 indicates a general fit; 0.6 indicates a poor fit; and a value below 0.5 indicates an unsuitable fit.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Analysis of Difficulties in Cross-Cultural Adaptation for International Students in China

The statistical results of the survey regarding the difficulties of living and studying in China are shown in Figure 1. Based on the descriptive analysis of the cross-cultural adaptability of international students at a high-level university in Xi'an, several key adaptation challenges and relatively accessible areas of adjustment were identified. The survey results, as illustrated in Figure 1, indicate that language adaptation, interpersonal adaptation, and academic adaptation represent the most significant challenges for international students. Previous research [22] has similarly found that international students in China generally encounter difficulties in interpersonal communication. These obstacles often stem from language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with the local education system. Specifically, language proficiency directly impacts students' communication skills, academic learning, and daily life adjustment, while interpersonal adaptation involves essential interactions with classmates, teachers, and the local community. In contrast, international students demonstrated higher proficiency in adapting to sociocultural identity, the natural environment, and psychological adjustment. They are generally able to quickly understand and accept local customs, regulate homesickness, recognize Chinese grading systems, and adapt to the polite and sincere

social behaviors common in China. Furthermore, the climatic conditions in Xi'an did not appear to be a major obstacle for the respondents.

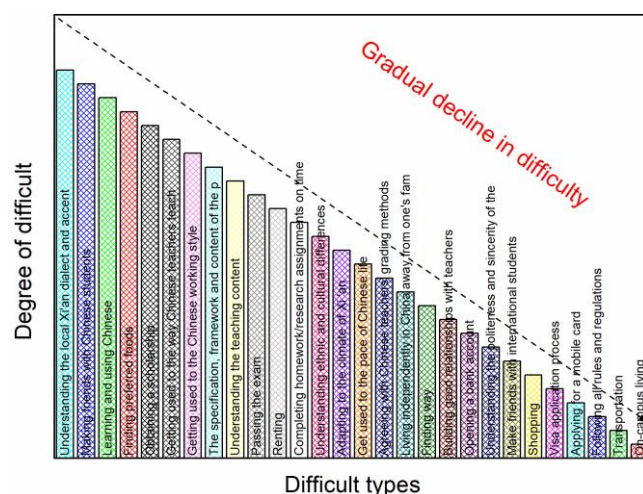


Figure 1. Statistics of the survey results on the difficulty of living and studying in China (adaptation of international students in China).

In particular, adaptability to campus life showed the best performance. It has been noted that university services provided to international students can reduce feelings of uncertainty and anxiety during the adjustment process, thereby facilitating better integration into campus life [23]. This may be attributed to the campus providing a relatively familiar and safe environment that helps students build social networks more quickly. Regarding daily life-including shopping, visa application processes, mobile card registration, and transportation-international students also adapted relatively smoothly. The procedures for these affairs are generally standardized and can be mastered through official guides and peer assistance. Overall, international students exhibit varying degrees of adaptability across different domains. Through in-depth analysis of these data, personalized and targeted support can be provided to help students overcome specific hurdles and integrate more rapidly into the Chinese social and academic environment. These findings also provide a valuable reference for international student services and educational policy formulation at universities.

3.2. Correlation Analysis of Cross-Cultural Adaptability (Difficulties) and Influencing Factors

3.2.1. Significance Analysis

When analyzing the adaptability of international students, previous studies have identified significant differences at the individual level, including personal background, education level, duration of residence, and understanding of the host country and institution [2-18]. This study integrates both internal and external factors affecting cross-cultural adaptability, using variables such as Gender, Nationality, Age, Educational Level, Major, Financial Source, Chinese Skill, Duration of Stay in China, Previous Overseas Experience, Knowledge of China, and Knowledge of the University. The significance of their relationships with cross-cultural adaptability was analyzed, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Statistical analysis of the significance of factors affecting the adaptability of studying in China.

		Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean square	F	P
Gender	Between group	0.006	1	0.006	0.013	0.908
	Intraclass	54.886	119	0.461		
	Total	54.892	120			
Nationality	Between group	14.436	29	0.498	1.120	0.334
	Intraclass	40.456	91	0.445		
	Total	54.892	120			
Age	Between group	1.123	4	0.281	0.606	0.659
	Intraclass	53.769	116	0.464		
	Total	54.892	120			
Education Level	Between group	4.033	3	1.344	3.092	0.030
	Intraclass	50.859	117	0.435		
	Total	54.892	120			
Major	Between group	27.118	69	0.393	.722	0.897
	Intraclass	27.773	51	0.545		
	Total	54.892	120			
Financial Source	Between group	0.058	2	0.029	0.062	0.940
	Intraclass	54.834	118	0.465		
	Total	54.892	120			
Chinese Skill	Between group	3.610	4	0.902	2.041	0.093
	Intraclass	51.282	116	0.442		
	Total	54.892	120			
How long have been in China	Between group	1.376	4	0.344	0.746	0.563
	Intraclass	53.516	116	0.461		
	Total	54.892	120			
Whether lived/studied abroad in another country other than China	Between group	0.393	1	0.393	0.859	0.356
	Intraclass	54.499	119	0.458		
	Total	54.892	120			
How much you know about China	Between group	0.587	4	0.147	0.313	0.869
	Intraclass	54.305	116	0.468		
	Total	54.892	120			
How much you know about university	Between group	4.958	4	1.239	2.879	0.026
	Intraclass	49.934	116	0.430		
	Total	54.892	120			

As shown in Table 4, factors such as the degree of understanding of the university and the education level are found to be statistically significant. This indicates that the adaptability of international students in China is closely related to their familiarity with their specific institution. Students with a deeper understanding of the university likely possess a better grasp of the educational system, campus culture, and available student services, allowing them to utilize resources more effectively and adapt to the environment more quickly. Furthermore, the educational background of students has a significant impact; those with higher education levels may already possess stronger research and self-management skills, which contribute to maintaining excellent performance in a foreign academic setting.

3.2.2. The Adaptation Characteristics of International Students with Different Degrees of Understanding of the University

The study found that differences in the level of understanding regarding the university significantly affected overall adaptability. As shown in Table 5, the relationship between these two variables is detailed. Specifically, international students who were "very familiar" with their school had an average adaptability difficulty score of 1.5952, while those who were "not familiar" scored 2.4770.

Table 5. Cross-analysis of the adaptability of international students and "degree of understanding of the university".

Degree of understanding of the university	Average Value	Number of Cases	Standard Deviation
A. very familiar	1.5952	6	0.47524
B. familiar	2.1471	25	0.73427
C. somewhat familiar	2.0753	28	0.62590
D. a little familiar	2.2605	34	0.72121
E. not familiar	2.4770	28	0.54850
Total	2.2113	121	0.67634

The significance test confirms a significant positive correlation between the degree of understanding of the university and cross-cultural adaptability. Students with higher familiarity perform better in adaptation, highlighting the importance of environment-specific knowledge. Familiarity with rules, culture, and resources helps students integrate into campus life and utilize support systems effectively. This suggests that administrators should strengthen orientation and guidance for new students to enhance their sense of belonging through campus tours and cultural introductions.

3.2.3. Adaptability Characteristics of International Students with Different Education Level

Significant differences in overall adaptation were also observed among international students of different educational levels. As shown in Table 6, the relationship between adaptability scores and education level is analyzed.

Table 6. Cross-analysis of the adaptability of international students and "Education Level".

Education Level	Average Value	Number of Cases	Standard Deviation
Bachelor	2.4256	48	0.66924
Ph.D.	1.9851	24	0.58580
Master	2.1357	40	0.64561
Non-degree students	2.0079	9	0.84114
Total	2.2113	121	0.67634

As shown in Table 6, among degree-seeking students, cross-cultural adaptability tends to increase with the level of education. Undergraduate students had an average

score of 2.4256, while doctoral students scored 1.9851 (lower scores indicating less difficulty/better adaptation in this model). This trend suggests that higher-degree students generally possess more mature mindsets and greater self-regulation abilities. For non-degree students, adaptability was comparable to that of doctoral students, likely due to lower academic pressure and higher Chinese language proficiency. Consequently, universities should provide differentiated guidance: undergraduates may require more psychological and academic support, while graduate students might benefit more from research-oriented resources.

However, factors such as nationality, gender, and length of residence did not emerge as primary influencers. This may be due to the complexity of acculturation as a multidimensional process, individual differences in psychological traits, the specific support systems of the campus environment, and the diversity of adaptation strategies employed by students.

3.3. Correlation Analysis between Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Achievement in China

This section explores the correlation between cross-cultural adaptation difficulty and the enhancement of various competencies. By grouping adaptation difficulty from 1 to 3, as shown in Table 7, it is evident that as difficulty increases, competency scores in language, research, and social engagement decline significantly.

Table 7. Correlation analysis between cross-cultural adaptation and achievement in China.

Difficulty grouping		Chinese language ability	The ability to access information	Ability to research and publish papers	International academic communication ability	Social activity ability	Independent capability
1	Average	4.09	4.24	3.87	3.85	4.09	4.59
	Number of cases	46	46	46	46	46	46
	Standard deviation	0.962	0.766	1.276	1.173	0.962	0.580
2	Average	3.54	3.73	3.41	3.59	3.59	4.29
	Number of cases	59	59	59	59	59	59
	Standard deviation	1.088	1.048	1.146	1.205	1.161	0.892
3	Average	2.81	2.94	2.62	2.62	2.75	3.25
	Number of cases	16	16	16	16	16	16
	Standard deviation	0.911	0.772	1.204	1.310	0.856	0.775
Total	Average	3.65	3.82	3.48	3.56	3.67	4.26
	Number of cases	121	121	121	121	121	121
	Standard deviation	1.093	1.000	1.259	1.258	1.128	0.873

As shown in Table 7, the degree of cross-cultural adaptation directly influences the learning and living experiences of international students. Higher fitness correlates with significant ability improvements across all measured aspects. To promote all-round development, measures should be taken to improve adaptability, encompassing not just language training but also academic research, social participation, and independent living.

3.4. Suggestions

The study suggests that while international students often maintain a positive attitude toward Chinese culture, they face practical challenges in language, daily habits, and educational methods. To address these, targeted solutions are proposed.

3.4.1. Suggestions for International Student Administration

Improve service quality and strengthen communication: International offices should define responsibilities clearly and communicate with students before enrollment. Pre-arrival connection helps build familiarity and enhances the sense of belonging.

- 1) Establish feedback mechanisms for customized support: Administrations should use regular questionnaires and symposia to collect feedback. Differentiated support, such as tailored language training and counseling, should be provided based on education levels and proficiency.
- 2) Conduct entrance and multicultural activities: Continuous academic support, such as writing workshops and course selection guidance, should supplement initial orientation. High-performing students can be invited to share experiences to reduce anxiety among freshmen.
- 3) Leverage student associations and peer help: Associations should act as a bridge between students and management. Senior students can be encouraged to mentor new arrivals through online communities and study groups.

3.4.2. Suggestions for International Students

- 1) Strengthen understanding of Chinese culture and the school: Students should research the university's facilities and local social etiquette before enrollment using official websites and virtual tours.
- 2) Improve Chinese proficiency: Mastery of basic Chinese is essential for effective communication. Beyond regular courses, students should attend lectures and social practices to enhance their professional vocabulary.
- 3) Enhance communication and expression skills: Students should actively interact with teachers and classmates from diverse backgrounds to solve problems and broaden their horizons.
- 4) Cultivate cross-cultural competence: Building friendships with students from different cultures enrich personal experience and improves adaptability to multicultural environments.

In conclusion, the cross-cultural adaptation of international students is a complex system requiring cooperation between universities and students. Through comprehensive support, international students can achieve their academic and personal growth goals while contributing to international educational exchange.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and discomfort encountered by international students during their adaptation to cultural differences and new environments. Through the use of quantitative analysis and individual student interviews, this research investigated the adaptation process across multiple dimensions, including psychological state, sociocultural adaptation, and academic adaptation. The following conclusions have been reached:

(1) Language adaptation, communication with Chinese classmates and teachers, and academic adaptation represent the three primary challenges faced by international students. Adaptation issues in these specific areas are particularly acute, indicating that students require more systematic attention and targeted support in these domains.

(2) Through the cross-analysis of the relationship between the demographics of international students and their cross-cultural adaptation, the research found that the degree of understanding of the university and the education level are the two most

significantly correlated factors. This suggests that familiarity with the institutional environment and higher levels of previous academic training play critical roles in facilitating successful adaptation.

(3) As the difficulty of adaptation increases, the performance of international students in areas such as Chinese language proficiency, information acquisition, academic research, international communication, social activities, and independence shows a corresponding decline. These results demonstrate that the level of cross-cultural fitness directly influences the overall study and life experiences of international students. To promote the comprehensive development of these students, proactive measures should be taken to enhance their cross-cultural adaptability, thereby laying a solid foundation for their future academic and personal growth.

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