Article

A Study on Expatriate Chinese Teachers' Adaptability from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication Theory

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Abstract: the backdrop of the steady advancement of international Chinese-language education, the scale of dispatched Chinese-language teachers continues to expand, and the challenges these teachers face in cultural adaptation within foreign contexts have attracted growing scholarly attention. Grounded in cross-cultural communication theories and the two-dimensional model of cultural adaptation, along with the binary classification criteria for psychological and sociocultural adaptation, this paper constructs an analytical framework for teachers' adaptability covering three dimensions: psychological adaptation, sociocultural adaptation and work adaptation, while taking internal and external influencing factors into account. Drawing on existing empirical research concerning cross-cultural adaptation among dispatched Chinese-language teachers, this paper summarizes their current adaptation status and practical dilemmas, and proposes countermeasures for competence improvement from the perspectives of individual teachers, dispatching administrative institutions and social support networks. The study finds that cultural adaptation is a prevalent practical challenge for dispatched Chinese-language teachers. Among the three dimensions, psychological adaptation and work adaptation represent relatively weak points. Social support can effectively mitigate teachers' adaptation-related stress. Enhancing comprehensive adaptability requires concerted efforts from individuals, organizations and external environments.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; dispatched Chinese-language teachers; cultural adaptation; adaptability; international Chinese-language education

1. Introduction

With the vigorous development of international Chinese-language education, a large number of Chinese-language educators have been dispatched across the globe to undertake teaching assignments. Short-term volunteer Chinese-language teachers, long-term state-sponsored teachers and full-time Confucius Institute teachers alike must accomplish cross-cultural transitions in daily life and classroom instruction. Beyond delivering language courses, dispatched Chinese-language teachers shoulder the mission of disseminating fine traditional Chinese culture abroad. Teachers' personal level of cross-cultural adaptation exerts a direct influence on their mental well-being and work performance, and bears important implications for classroom teaching quality and the effectiveness of international cultural communication. As relevant norms for international Chinese-language education are refined and teacher-building initiatives move forward, the dispatched teaching workforce keeps growing. Cross-cultural adaptation is no longer an individual predicament for a small number of practitioners but has become a shared occupational issue for this group.

Nevertheless, cross-cultural settings bring both opportunities and pressures for dispatched teachers. Language barriers, divergences between Chinese and foreign educational philosophies, conflicts in classroom management approaches, and cultural cognitive biases in daily life may all trigger culture shock and consequently undermine teachers' cross-cultural adaptation. Poor adaptation may lead to emotional volatility and heightened psychological burdens. In severe cases, it can give rise to occupational burnout,

Received: 03 September 2026
Revised: 18 October 2026
Accepted: 28 October 2026
Published: 04 November 2026

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degraded teaching quality, and even premature termination of overseas tenures. Though abundant empirical investigations have been conducted on overseas Chinese-language teachers' cross-cultural adaptation in academic circles, systematic analyses centering on the core concept of "adaptability" and its dimensional architecture remain insufficient. Adaptability, as discussed in this paper, refers to teachers' overall capacity to adjust their states and tackle problems stemming from cultural collisions, and constitutes an indispensable professional quality for educators of international Chinese, alongside cross-cultural communicative competence. Accordingly, this paper mainly addresses three questions: what are the real-world conditions and dimensional characteristics of dispatched Chinese-language teachers' adaptability; what are the core factors constraining the formation of such adaptability; and what feasible approaches can improve teachers' cross-cultural adaptation. Analyses of these questions can provide practical references for the selection, pre-departure training, overseas management and optimization of supporting guarantee systems for dispatched teachers.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Theoretical Context of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Cross-cultural communication studies emerged in Western countries in the mid-20th century. Guan Shijie was among the earliest scholars to introduce this theoretical system into China, sorting out fundamental concepts and theories of cross-cultural interactions from the macro perspective of international communication. Academic research on cultural adaptation has evolved from one-dimensional analyses to multi-dimensional interpretations. Berry's two-dimensional cultural-adaptation model defines individuals' cultural-adaptation orientations along two axes: retention of one's native-culture identity and acceptance of the host-society mainstream culture, identifying four adaptation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. The model suggests that cultural adaptation is not a simple process in which individuals are assimilated by foreign cultures, but a dynamic process of constant adjustment and trade-offs between native and host cultures. Building on this framework, Ward and Kennedy divided cross-cultural adaptation into psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation focuses on individuals' affective-domain mental-health conditions, whereas sociocultural adaptation emphasizes the acquisition of behavioral-domain cross-cultural communicative skills. This binary psychological-versus-sociocultural framework has been widely adopted as an analytical tool in numerous subsequent empirical studies.

2.2. Empirical Research on Overseas Chinese-Language Teachers' Cultural Adaptation

Lv Yuhui and Ru Shuyuan carried out one of China's earliest investigations into overseas Chinese-language teachers' cross-cultural adaptation. Their findings indicated that more than half of dispatched teachers encountered cross-cultural adaptation difficulties to varying degrees, prominently manifested in communication obstacles, heavy workloads and insufficient understanding of target learners. Teachers' adaptation generally followed the U-curve pattern of cross-cultural adjustment. Multiple country-specific surveys have further enriched research in this field. Studies on Chinese teachers at South-Korean Confucius Institutes show that teachers achieved the best performance in work adaptation, followed by sociocultural adaptation, while psychological adaptation scored the lowest. Surveys of Chinese teachers assigned to Egypt reveal that in sociocultural adaptation, teachers reported high satisfaction with social support, with personal safety and basic livelihood guarantees well secured. Synthesizing existing research, dispatched Chinese-language teachers commonly experience cross-cultural-adaptation pressures, with significant disparities in adaptation levels across dimensions and national contexts.

2.3. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Dimensions of Adaptability

Drawing on the foregoing theoretical outcomes, this paper defines dispatched Chinese-language teachers' adaptability as their comprehensive capacity to make psychological, behavioral and occupational adjustments when interacting continuously with people from foreign-cultural backgrounds so as to cope with cross-cultural environments. Three analytical dimensions are thus established: psychological adaptation, referring to stable mental states including emotional experiences and sense of group belonging; sociocultural adaptation, denoting behavioral communicative competences required in daily life and interactions with local residents; and work adaptation, representing the capacity to adjust to overseas teaching contexts in terms of instructional language, teaching modes and teacher-student interaction patterns. Two categories of influencing factors are further distinguished: internal factors including personality traits, foreign-language proficiency, professional reserves and pre-departure psychological expectations; external factors encompassing changes in living environments, external social support and cultural distance. This analytical framework can depict the real-world state of teachers' adaptability and point directions for exploring competence-enhancement pathways.

3. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-method approach combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Participants include overseas Chinese-language volunteers, state-sponsored teachers and in-service Confucius-Institute teaching staff. The questionnaire is adapted from well-established existing scales. It contains items measuring psychological adaptation, sociocultural adaptation and work adaptation, alongside questions on respondents' demographic profiles and relevant influencing factors, all measured with five-point Likert scales. Interviews complement questionnaire data by uncovering adaptation details and real-life scenarios that surveys cannot easily capture. Descriptive statistics, group comparisons and correlation analyses are applied to analyze data, presenting the overall level of each adaptation dimension, group differences and correlations among variables. This research abides by social-science ethical norms: research purposes were explained in advance to all participants, and all respondent information was anonymized. Given objective difficulties in cross-national data collection, the present status analysis is mainly based on publicly-published survey literature, leaving room for future primary-data collection. Sample size and cross-country distribution impose constraints on the generalizability of conclusions.

4. Investigation and Analysis of Adaptability Status

4.1. Psychological Adaptation: Relatively Weak and Easily Neglected

Synthesizing existing survey data, psychological adaptation constitutes a prominent weakness for dispatched Chinese-language teachers. Research on teachers at South-Korean Confucius Institutes demonstrates that scores for psychological adaptation are markedly lower than those for work adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. Difficulty in building stable interpersonal relationships overseas generates loneliness, a major source of psychological stress. Psychological vulnerability often coincides with the trough phase of the cross-cultural-adaptation U-curve: teachers are more prone to emotional swings and occupational burnout in the early-to-middle stages of their overseas assignment. Unlike practical problems in daily life and work, psychological issues are not externally salient and are easily overlooked both by teachers themselves and dispatching authorities. Nevertheless, they subtly affect teachers' occupational stability and teaching engagement.

4.2. Sociocultural Adaptation: Highly Dependent on Social Support

Sociocultural adaptation involves practical competences related to foreign-language communication, local customs and daily-life service access. Existing research shows that teachers frequently encounter obstacles in linguistic exchanges and access to basic daily services. Social support resources provided by dispatching organizations and local host

institutions can effectively alleviate such adaptation difficulties. Teachers receiving adequate social support report stronger perceptions of personal safety and life security and show greater willingness to integrate into local communities. Hence, sociocultural adaptation heavily relies on external resources and represents a dimension where guarantee and support policies can produce tangible effects.

4.3. Work Adaptation: Problems Concentrated in Teaching Scenarios

Most dispatched teachers perform moderately well in work adaptation overall, yet conflicts mostly emerge in real-world classroom contexts. Teachers commonly struggle with instructional-language transitions. Faced with discrepancies between Chinese and foreign educational philosophies, they must abandon ingrained domestic teaching habits and self-role definitions for classroom management and teacher-student interactions. Work adaptation directly determines whether teaching mandates can be fulfilled and bears distinct occupational attributes. Teaching-related pressures may in turn amplify psychological burdens.

5. Analysis of Influencing Factors

Factors shaping dispatched teachers' adaptability fall into internal and external categories. Internal factors cover individual background characteristics, language proficiency, professional preparation and pre-departure psychological expectations. External factors include changes in living conditions, social-support systems and cultural distance between the home and host countries. Pre-departure psychological expectations, the quality of pre-departure training, available social-support networks during overseas tenures, and bilateral cultural distance all significantly affect teachers' adaptability. Greater cultural distance means more cognitive and behavioral differences to overcome, raising adaptation difficulty. Sufficient social guarantees and realistic psychological expectations, however, can buffer negative impacts stemming from cultural distance.

6. Pathways to Improve Adaptability

Based on the above analysis of status and influencing factors, optimization strategies are proposed at three levels. First, at the individual level, teachers should proactively strengthen foreign-language competence, learn about host-country cultures in advance, develop realistic pre-departure expectations, actively build overseas social networks, and prioritize the integration strategy for cultural differences rather than assimilation or marginalization. Second, dispatching organizations and administrative authorities shall improve pre-departure training systems and make cross-cultural adaptation a compulsory training module. In the critical initial phase after arrival overseas, psychological counseling and instructional supervision services should be provided. Third, social support guarantees should be improved. Multi-party coordination channels linking domestic sending universities, Chinese diplomatic missions abroad and Confucius Institutes shall be established to help teachers resolve daily-life challenges rapidly, foster stable social connections and reduce sociocultural-adaptation pressures. Targeting existing deficiencies in psychological, work and sociocultural adaptation respectively, these three sets of countermeasures require multi-stakeholder collaboration and dynamic adjustment according to teachers' real-world circumstances.

7. Conclusions

Drawing on cross-cultural-communication theories, this paper constructs an analytical framework for dispatched Chinese-language teachers' adaptability with three dimensions: psychological adaptation, sociocultural adaptation and work adaptation, alongside internal and external influencing factors. Based on synthesized publicly-available survey literature, it outlines cross-cultural-adaptation realities for dispatched Chinese-language teachers. The study concludes that cross-cultural-adaptation challenges are widespread among this group; psychological adaptation and work adaptation constitute major weak points; social support can effectively ease various adaptation-

related hardships; improving teachers' comprehensive adaptability demands joint efforts through individual initiative, organizational safeguards and favorable external environments. This research has limitations: status analysis relies primarily on synthesizing published literature, with uneven cross-national sample distribution. The generalizability of its conclusions awaits validation by original empirical data. Future research may conduct large-scale multi-country field surveys to further test internal relationships among adaptability dimensions and the practical effectiveness of proposed improvement strategies.

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