

Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Female Undergraduates Studying Abroad

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to investigate the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese female students and the role of academic, psychological, cultural, and interpersonal factors in this adaptation. The semi-structured interview method was employed in this study and five Chinese female undergraduates who study in the United States were interviewed. The results indicated that language competence, identity, leisure activities, and personal relationships reflect the characteristics of female international students. In addition, international students' opinions about the relationship between specific factors with adaptation influenced their subjective feeling about how well they adapt.

Keywords: cross-cultural adaptation, Chinese female international students, study abroad

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of globalization, communication between different cultures and countries has become more and more common. Studying abroad has been a popular trend. In this well-connected world, thousands of students choose to leave their home country and study in a foreign nation. According to the data collected by the Institute of International Education [5], the recorded number of international students in the United States was 1,095,299 in 2018/2019. Specifically, international students are diverse in terms of gender, race, major field of study, and nationality [3]. The top three places of origin of international students in the U.S. are China (34%), India (18%), and South Korea (5%) [5]. Globalization of the 21st century has obviously contributed to this worldwide phenomenon.

People have a desire to explore different cultures and new ways of life than ever before. Studying abroad becomes a beneficial choice to experience something new. One of the biggest benefits of studying abroad is the opportunity to broaden horizons. When international students go to a brand-new nation, they are exposed to new conventions and perspectives. The collision of ideas from different backgrounds allows them to tolerate differences and think creatively and diversely. Another benefit is the chance to improve language skills and experience different styles of education. One of the best ways to practice the language is to dive oneself in that environment. Then, people can practice the new language in their daily life. Good command of the local language allows international students to perform better in academic settings. Studying abroad also allows students to pursue a higher quality of education. This is a good chance to see the different sides of the major and explore the differences from the education system in their home countries. However, as

international students are more likely to experience different cultures and new perspectives, build language skills, or make friends with diverse peers, adapting to a new environment can be a big challenge to them. A study by Liu [2] found that international students face various problems, including heavy pressure from study, eating habits, language barrier, and so on. Chinese international students are already used to Chinese traditions and environment, so they might feel uncomfortable when directly exposed to a different culture and values. The research also showed that language problems make international students lack the confidence to communicate with peers or professors. It also makes them unwilling to participate in activities after class. In addition, Chinese international students sometimes suffer from their parents' expectations of accomplishing academic goals. They miss their family and worry if they can meet the expectation at the same time which causes a lack of emotional support.

To date, several studies have investigated cross-cultural adaptation among international students. Cross-cultural adaptation is defined as the process of dealing with intercultural changes [1]. The study indicated that the bi-dimensional model of adaptation was one of the most influential models, in which two dimensions including sociocultural and psychological adaptation were proposed. The first dimension briefly refers to the efficacy of reaching daily goals in a new culture. Specifically, it means the ability to adapt to the local convention and the ability to communicate with local people. The second dimension refers to individuals' well-being and life satisfaction in the contact of new cultures. For instance, if individuals with the absence of negative emotions such as depression, feeling of loneliness, and anxiety, it means the individual adapts psychologically.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that women outnumber men in the population of studying abroad [3]. For example, female students have accounted for 67% of the total U.S.

students studying abroad. Compared with the data from the past decades, women still continually comprise around two-third of the U.S. study abroad students [5]. However, there is a lack of research studying female international students in the process of cross-cultural adaptation. Qualitative research conducted by Meng [4] has shown that the process of adaptation could be complicated and long-lasting, which can be explained by a wide range of factors in daily life. These factors were separated into academic, life, and psychological adaptation. The current study has extended them into four sections (academic, psychological, cultural, and interpersonal). The impact of interpersonal relationships among cross-cultural adaptation is another focus of this study.

This qualitative study aims to explore the following research questions: 1) How do Chinese female students adapt to different cultures while studying in the United

States? and 2) How do different factors (academic, psychological, cultural, and interpersonal) influence this adaptation?

2. METHODS

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised five undergraduate volunteers (Table 1). All participants are female students at the University of Iowa. The participants were selected from Chinese students who study in the United States. They have all been in the U.S. for more than three years.

Table 1 Participants' demographic information

Participant	Major	Grade	Hometown
1	Psychology	Senior	Beijing
2	Physics & Art	Senior	Tianjin
3	Psychology	Senior	Zhejiang
4	Finance & Business Analytics	Senior	Beijing
5	Actuary	Senior	Jiangsu

2.2. Instrument

Semi-Structured Interview. A Semi-Structured interview consisting of open-ended questions was conducted with five participants to investigate the process and status of their cross-cultural adaptation. It was developed by the researcher in the native language (Mandarin) and used in face-to-face and phone interviews. There were 29 questions in total. Interview questions were categorized into five portions including psychological, academic, cultural, interpersonal, and general. Each interview ranged from 20-40minutes.

2.3. Procedure

The researcher asked surrounding female friends about their willingness to participate in this experiment. Then the researcher collected data from face-to-face and phone semi-structured interviews. The audio of the interviews was recorded with their consent. After the five interviews, the researcher transcribed each interview verbatim for later analysis.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Academic Adaptation

Learning is one of the primary purposes for students studying abroad. It is important for international students to adapt to different educational contexts. Since teaching methods vary from different regions, professors abroad might have completely different ways to provide information. According to participants' responses, education in the U.S. is different from education in China. Participants all agree that the American education system emphasizes more on independent learning and diversified development. It requires students to take responsibility for their own schoolwork. This is a challenge for international students to be acquainted with a different learning style to achieve academic goals. Coming from different cultural and educational backgrounds are related to some study problems. Based on subject 2, it is easy to solve problems related to natural science. If she is confused about a math question, she can easily understand the calculation and apply it to other questions as soon as the professor teaches her the specific process. However, this method doesn't work for other subjects, such as art. Since there isn't a

right or wrong answer in the art field. Sometimes, there might be a barrier between what professors express and what she understands. They come from totally different backgrounds, so it is hard for her to resonate with the class sometimes.

Participants encounter different kinds of study problems while studying abroad. Based on their responses, study problems can be divided into two big categories, universal and individually related problems. Universal problems are quite similar and frequent in terms of all participants. These problems are usually caused by culture as mentioned above. In contrast to universal problems, individually related problems can vary from different people. For example, one participant stated:

One of the biggest problems I have encountered is procrastination. This is my personal problem. I usually start to review course materials only when there is an upcoming test.

Even though they didn't point out a certain strategy to deal with study problems, each participant uses corresponding solutions to solve them. Taking subject 3 as an example, when she starts to procrastinate and keep putting off her studies, she would invite her friends who are taking the same class to attend the lecture and review key points together. When facing problems caused by cultural differences, a participant stated that:

I had trouble understanding the class about health and life insurance. The U.S. has its own independent insurance system, but I knew nothing about it. For American students, they are living in the system as a participant. However, I am new here so it's hard for me to think about problems as deeply as they do. The only way I can deal with this problem is to look up all kinds of relative information online and see how reliable sources explain key points I missed.

Communication with peers and professors is not frequent among female participants in this study. In the classroom setting, participants all think professors are responsible. Even though they don't often talk to professors besides classroom and office, when they encounter problems, professors are happy to answer questions and provide help for international students. They also exchange opinions with peers about schoolwork, but they seldom chat with peers from different countries after class. This situation could be due to various reasons such as having different cultures, majors, and personalities. Specifically, one of the participants said that some classmates she has met are outgoing and friendly, enthusiastic. They would like to chat with her and study with her outside of the class, but some classmates she meets are not very willing to study together.

3.2. Psychological Adaptation

In the early stage of study abroad, international students might need to regulate their state of mind in order to adapt to the new environment. Among Chinese female students being interviewed, most of them did not experience great discomfort or strong emotional mood swings. As they

reflected, they made new friends who were also Chinese students and hung out with friends. Two participants also said that they already got used to living independently so they didn't feel lonely. However, they did experience a lot of stress. The stress mainly came from the course study. Since they were far away from home, they were hard on themselves when it comes to studying. Besides, one participant indicated her family also brought her pressure. She felt stressed out when her family members didn't understand the choice she made. When it comes to negative feelings, the participants were unanimous in the view that they couldn't figure out a technical way to get rid of negative emotions. They usually switch their attention to other activities and let these feelings disappear smoothly. For instance, subject 2 said when she was in a bad mood, she would cry and then go to sleep. She would also play video games, watch sad movies, and eat dessert sometimes to dispel bad feelings.

In all interviews, participants reported that they have a sense of identity with people also from China. Almost every participant stated that they were proud of being Chinese. In a previous study, identity is considered as a kind of mental consciousness, which means it can reveal the issue of belonging between individuals and groups. The sense of identity comes from the feeling about differences or conflicts after the interaction between individuals and groups [4]. Therefore, Chinese identity can be the reason why participants were more likely to make friends with other Chinese. They might feel people from the same country are more friendly, and more comfortable to get along well with.

Moreover, all interviewees generally believed Americans held stereotypes about Chinese. This might explain why participants seldom get on with Americans.

One of the participants said that:

I think some Americans' impression of China still stays in the time in the 1980s when China was relatively less developed. Also, their understanding of China is only based on those large cities. I think they still think about China with their initial stereotypes rather than try to understand the real China.

Another participant also shared her experience that:

There is an American girl in my class. Every time she chats or shares things, she would ignore me and another Korean student.

3.3. Cultural Adaptation

When asking about if they follow local politics, news, or take part in social activities, only one participant indicated her interest in cultural news. She said she was interested in musicals and would follow related news. No other interviewees follow local news, politics or participate in social public activities. As for leisure time, participants spend their time on other activities that do not necessarily involve local culture or follow local trends. Their leisure activities are seldom influenced by the new culture. They give relatively similar responses about leisure activities such as watching videos, shopping (either online or

offline), and hanging out with friends. A typical response is this:

I spend the majority of my leisure time playing video games and watching TV dramas and various shows. I often watch Korean shows. I also watch TV dramas from Japan, Korea, and the U.S. I used to read books written by Japanese writers, and I read Chinese books recently. I rarely read books by American authors.

Every participant has stayed in the U.S. for at least three years, but they still find it difficult to get used to certain life habits. Based on the interview, these unaccustomed life habits are all related to the habits of Americans or their customs. Two of the participants stated that they were not used to American characters. For example, one said:

I am not used to their self-centeredness. Sometimes, they don't care too much about others' feelings. Taking my first roommate as an example, she often uses her aromatherapy diffuser in the room, but the aroma made my head swim. I told her about that, but she kept using it.

Other participants also pointed out the habits they were not used to. As one participant reflected:

I am not accustomed to the behavior of people having parties so often. Like my neighbor who has parties each Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The music is so loud which annoys me. The other habit annoys me is that he also starts to exercise at four AM. He exercises three times a day, once at four AM, once at twelve PM, once at ten PM. I can feel the floor shocked slightly every time he exercises.

Participants hold different opinions about the relationship between the degree of understanding of the culture and adaptation. Some interviewees think that knowing the culture does not have any impact on cross-cultural adaptation. As reflected in one of the responses:

I think adaptation has little to do with knowing the culture. You don't need to understand the foreign culture in advance. You can still live in a new environment because you will always know what you should know after you arrive. For some customs you don't understand, it has no effect on your daily life since you are not exposed to them.

While other interviewees believe adaptation has something to do with understanding the culture no matter what level of strength of the relation is. One of the participants thinks there is a relationship, but it has limitations. According to her:

There aren't too many Americans or local customs around my life. I know it will have some differences in my life if I know the culture more. But I am already used to the way I live, so I cannot point out a specific relation.

In addition, a participant expresses her strong agreement on the statement that there is a relation between adaptation and knowing the culture. She shares her experience in this respect:

In one of my previous workshop courses, the topic of a class was making food. Classmates were all talking about a snack they ate when they were little. I have never heard bars and drink in their spare time. They have invited me to go with them one time, but I don't like to drink so I refused their invitation. They have never invited me to hang out with them again.

of the snack that they were talking about, so it was hard for me to join their conversation. This also happens when they are talking about what video they have watched on Netflix. I feel like I was left out of the conversations.

3.4. Interpersonal Adaptation

Growing up in different cultures can shape the way people view things and interact with others. Living in a country with a different cultural background might have an impact on the way international students interact with people. Participants of this study have different answers to the question regarding the difference in the way of interacting with others in the U.S. and in China. Almost all participants think their interpersonal communication in the two countries is similar. Four interviewees indicated that their interpersonal communication in the U.S. and China had one thing in common, which is the nationality of people they get along with. A typical answer was:

I don't find a difference in my interpersonal communication between when I stay in America and China. At home, all my friends are Chinese; when I am abroad, I still hang out with Chinese. There seems to be no difference in the way of getting along.

Another participant had the same feeling, but she also pointed out that even though they were getting on with Chinese as well, they were dealing with people with different personalities. On the other hand, one participant expresses the view that her interpersonal circle actually becomes smaller. As she reflected:

I knew everyone in my class when I was in middle school and high school at home. Even though I might not have a close relationship with everyone, I communicated and got along well with her. For now, in the U.S., I only communicate with my fixed circle of friends. I am less trying to meet new people. I think my interpersonal skills regress to some extent. For example, I still meet new Chinese classmates every semester, but our communications are only about the course. We would not build a long-term friendship.

People all use a new language to communicate in the country abroad. The language barrier is a huge influence on interpersonal communication for international students. Almost all participants agreed that language is a brake on interacting with local people, with one exception: that subject 3 believed the bigger problem is they don't have common topics. According to her response:

I think language is not the main influence factor. In fact, the way of communication has a bigger influence on interpersonal relationships. We have distinct ways of thinking. So, when I talk with American peers sometimes, it seems like they don't understand what I am talking about. Also, we don't communicate much due to different living habits. For example, some of my peers like to go to

During the study in America, participants still used Chinese social media more often. They seldom use American social media. Their attitudes differ on whether social media have an influence on adaptation. Some

interviewees felt that using American social media can help with knowing what is happening around, but it doesn't have a long-term effect on adaptation. As one participant said:

One of my American friends invited me to download an APP that can track friends' recent updates. We used to get in touch while we were taking the same class. However, we barely contacted each other afterward.

Furthermore, others considered that using Chinese social media can help in the process of adaptation because talking to family and close friends allows them to express their feelings and obtain social support. One of the interviewees expressed that after talking to her family about my depression, she felt a little better. The other interviewee also said talking with close friends in her home country brought her a sense of joy.

4. CONCLUSION

This study tried to figure out how Chinese female students adapt to US culture and how academic, psychological, cultural, and interpersonal factors affected cross-cultural adaptation. Overall, three participants thought they adapted well to the new culture while two participants indicated they didn't. The two participants thought they were used to the way they live in the U.S., but they cannot integrate into the local culture and communicate well with local people. Also, participants would still choose to study abroad if they had a chance to make a fresh choice, except for one participant who refused to make the same choice again due to a personal problem. Her family conflict got intensified because of her previous decision to study abroad.

The small sample size is the main limitation of the current study as only five Chinese female students were interviewed. Therefore, the experiences of these participants might not apply to all Chinese female students in U.S. universities. Despite this limitation, this study still obtained interesting findings. Participants not only faced individual-related problems but also culture-related problems in academic settings overseas. Even though they couldn't propose a technical solution to deal with culture-related problems, professors in their programs were enthusiastic about helping them during the process. They might not feel lonely but did feel stressed in a new culture. Participants rarely join outside activities or follow the current affairs of the U.S. They were not comfortable with some of the customs there, such as partying. They hung out with their Chinese friends most of the time. One of the reasons why they seldom communicate with Americans was the language barrier. Also, they held the idea that Americans had stereotypes about Chinese which could prevent them from talking proactively to American students.

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