

Problems Encountered by Chinese International Students Studying in Australia in Life and Academic Adaptations

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ABSTRACT

The major purpose of this research is to investigate the problems encountered by Chinese international students studying in Australia in their life and academic adaptations. This study utilizes a questionnaire to collect the experience and perception of 30 Chinese international students on their sojourn in Australia. The results indicate that, for life adaptation, international students faced difficulties in diet, transportation, medical system, and social interaction. For academic adaptation, in Australian classrooms with different teaching styles and collapse of cultures, many international students still followed their way of teacher-student interaction and learning in China. Corresponding solutions were provided in this paper for these problems in 6 dimensions.

Keywords: *International students, Life adaptation, Academic adaptation, Overseas education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Universities Australia (2019), since the global financial crisis in 2008, Australia has adjusted the formulation and promulgation of its internationalization policy of higher education. It has achieved remarkable achievements when faced with the decrease of government public education funds and the development of higher education in Asia [1]. In 2019, the number of overseas students in Australian higher education was nearly 400,000, accounting for 21% of the total number of college students [2]. It has become the third-largest international destination for higher education globally, ranking after the United States and the United Kingdom. And a large proportion of these overseas students are Chinese. However, though the results of another survey by Taylor and Ali, we also find that although 80% of the students have successfully get used to the study and life abroad, at the same time, about 20% of the students fail to compromise with the academic and social needs of university life [3]. Even though some Chinese students have already prepared for their study abroad for many years (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL), they will still find it difficult

for them to change as international students. This phenomenon is very confusing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have found that Chinese international students encounter similar challenges during their academic sojourns in Western English-speaking countries [4-6]. Boyer and Sedlacek indicated that the main difficulties encountered by Chinese international students studying in the United States include personal problems, academic problems, and social problems [4]. Sherry and his colleges highlighted a list of problems faced by Chinese international students during their academic transition in The University of Toledo, including barriers caused by language, social exclusion, homesickness, cultural differences, finance, and other issues [5]. Yeh and Inose suggested that problems may occur in racial discrimination, interpersonal relationships, cultural barriers, loss of social support, alienation, and academic difficulties [6].

For life adaptation, Chinese international students' vulnerability is reflected in sociocultural integration and

adapting to another system and lifestyle. The cultural differences between the two sides lead to gaps in behavior and thinking patterns between Chinese students and host members. Individualist culture prevails in Australia, where people regard themselves as independent ones with their unique life track and style [7]. China is a collectivist country where people consider themselves to be members of groups and hope to obtain approval from others and social norms [8]. Chinese students inevitably feel sociocultural isolation in the interactive engagement with the host members [9].

Australia has a completely different academic setting from China. Teacher-centered pedagogy is common in Mainland China. Teachers take control of the class and instill knowledge into students, and students only need to listen and takes notes with little opportunity to present their opinions [10, 11]. Under the influence of the “altruism” in collectivist culture and the emphasis on “respect the superior” in Confucianism, students cannot establish an equal relationship with their teachers, resulting in students’ lack of the initiative to communicate with their teachers [12, 13]. Many schools apply for student-centered education in Australia, concentrating less on teachers but more on students’ mastery and practice [14]. The pursuit of freedom and democracy in Western individualist culture is mirrored in the philosophy of education [15]. Teachers advocate critical thinking and the courage to find questions and assume scarf-folding rather than authority, leading to a relatively equal teacher-student relationship [13]. In the different educational context, some Chinese students are caught in the stereotype of “passive learners who lack thinking ability” due to their inheritance of prior experiences [16]. While some regard overseas transition as an opportunity to adjust the way to acquire knowledge through adapting to academic and social norms [17].

Based on prior studies, this research investigates the life and adaptation problems among Chinese international students in Australia, which focuses on its causes and strategies. The previous findings are based on the perspective of international students, with little attention to the distinctions between China and the host countries based on system, culture and social norms, and education. This present research sheds light on multiple aspects of daily life, such as diet, transportation, and the medical system, and the focus on academic adaptation to teacher-student relationships and pedagogy.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research mainly focuses on two research questions:

1. What problems do Chinese international students in Australia encounter in their academic and life adaptation during their overseas sojourn?

2. What kind of support can be provided to Chinese international students regarding the problems they encounter?

4. METHOD

Thirty Chinese international students who studied in Australia as college students and graduate students aged 20 to 24 were selected to participate in the research through convenience sampling, including 10 males and 20 females. A questionnaire with 25 questions was used to collect international students’ experience and opinions on their overseas sojourns aimed at two sections, life adaptation, and academic adaptation. Multiple-choice questions, open questions, and scale questions were involved in the questionnaire. Quantitative data of multiple-choice questions were analyzed by Excel and presented in the form of charts. Qualitative data obtained by open questions were analyzed through keyword coding. For the scale questions, the average values were calculated as the indicator of the trend of samples’ perceptions.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Life Adaptation

5.1.1. Diet

As Figure 1 indicated, the dietary pattern of Chinese international students mainly includes self-cooking (54%), going to Chinese restaurants (23%), and local restaurants (15%), of which self-cooking is the most important source. Six reasons are accounting for the choice of self-cooking: Low cost (student can control the life expense), convenience (time-saving and easy to cook), a long distance from the residence to restaurants, being able to make their favorite tastes, more freedom, and being lazy to go out. Four reasons were provided to explain the choice of going to a Chinese restaurant: cheap, habitual taste, delicious food, do not want to cook on their own. The average value for dietary adaptation in Australia in the scale question is 3.31, which indicates that the overall adaptation of international students to the local diet.

Comparing to the local diet, Chinese international students generally prefer Chinese food, since 61.54% of the samples expressed their preference for Chinese dishes, and only 7.69% show preference for the local diet. Six reasons are offered for their favor to Chinese food. Chinese dishes are healthier, more accustomed, more diverse with many cooking styles, and nostalgic with the taste of hometown. In China, vegetables and food are cheaper. Western cuisine is unpalatable. The rest, 30.77%, displayed a neutral attitude towards this comparison, expressing their appreciation of diets from both sides.

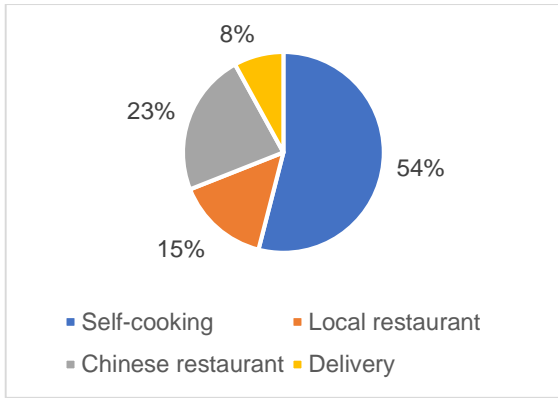


Figure 1. Dietary patterns of Chinese international students in Australia

5.1.2. Transport

Options of traveling of Chinese international studying in Australia are displayed in Figure 2. Bus (including trams) (38%), trains (including light rails) (23%), and walking (23%) are the primary ways of Chinese international students' traveling. In general, international students do not have a high evaluation of the convenience and accessibility of transportation in Australia since the average value of traffic convenience is 2.38.

The international students generally agree that Chinese transportation is more convenient. The majority (61.54%) expressed the convenience and flexibility of Chinese transport. Public transport provides lower prices and more options. The subway covers a wide range and has frequent shifts. Sufficient number and frequency of the bus service can meet the commuting needs. With the springing of taxi-hailing software, taxi service is more convenient and cheaper. On the contrary, 23.08% prefer transportation in Australia. The design of the transportation system is humanized with consideration for the disabled. Bus service is provided 24 hours a day. Transportation is clean and fully equipped. The traffic environment is more friendly with fewer vehicles, and the tram is environmental-friendly. The rest, 15.38%, hold neutral opinions towards the comparison.

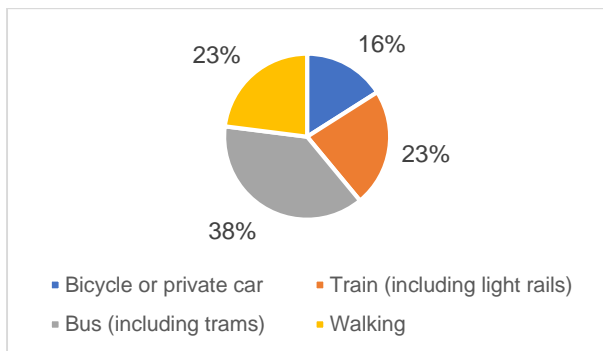


Figure 2. Options of transportation of Chinese international students in Australia

5.1.3. Medical System

Most of the students reported that they rarely use the local medical system. Five of the sample said they have never used the system, but one student stated that she often went to the local hospital for medical treatment and check-ups. Overall, Chinese international students have a negative evaluation of the local medical system. The medical expenses are considered expensive since the average rating for the medical expenses is 3.54, and the local medical system is inconvenient because the average rating for accessibility and convenience is 1.31.

Responding to the comparison on the medical system between China and Australia, most samples preferred the China side and a neutral attitude. Among the samples, 38.46% believed that the Chinese medical system is more accessible and efficient and charges less for diagnosis. Doctors are more experienced, and making an appointment is very easy. Besides, 23.08% reported that the Australian medical system is better. The atmosphere is more friendly with more attentive patient care. The appointment mechanism is timesaving, but the domestic medical system is more efficient for acute illness treatment. The rest, 38.46%, kept neutral in this comparison.

5.1.4. Social Interaction

As Figure 3 suggested, Chinese peer is the main type of friends of the Chinese international students studying in Australia. International students generally perceived the difficulty to socialize with foreign students due to 4 points for the average rating on the difficulty of international socialization. According to figure 4, three primary obstacles to making friends with foreign students include language (69%), cultural differences (69%), and lack of common topics (69%). Unfamiliar with the way of getting along with foreigners (54%), pressure and worries of communicating with foreigners (38%), their introverted and silent personality (31%), and lack of social opportunities (23%) are also common social interaction obstacles.

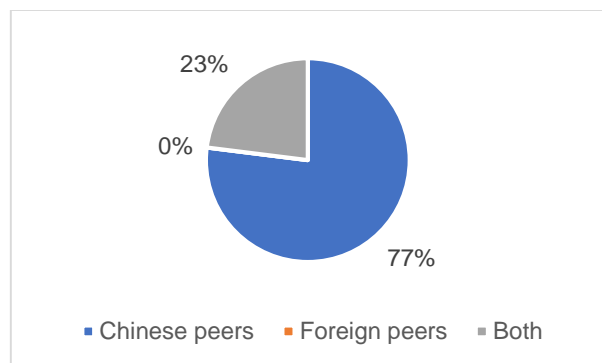


Figure 3. The main type of friends of Chinese international students in Australia

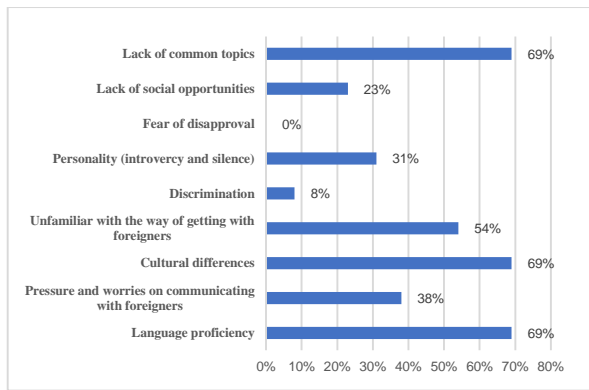


Figure 4. Obstacles to making friends with foreign students

5.2. Academic Adaptation

5.2.1. Teacher-student Relationship

The average value of 2.62 on in-class teacher-student interaction participation and 2.08 on off-class teacher-student interaction participation suggested that the initiative of Chinese international students to interact with the teacher is not high. Data in Figure 5 manifests that language proficiency (61.54%) and whether the way of interaction is polite (53.85%) are the two main considerations on teacher-student interaction of Chinese international students. The pressure of communicating with the teacher (38.46%), whether the interaction takes up the teacher’s time (15.38%), and the teacher’s impression of the student (15.38%) are also common considerations.

Overall, Chinese international students perceived teacher’s care for students from different cultures. The majority (61.54%) listed several examples of their teacher’s care. Some teachers appropriately slow down their speed of speech during lectures and avoid mention of religious and political issues. Terminologies are explained in plain language, and the teachers welcome students to talk about where they feel uncomfortable. Leaflets are printed in different languages for students.

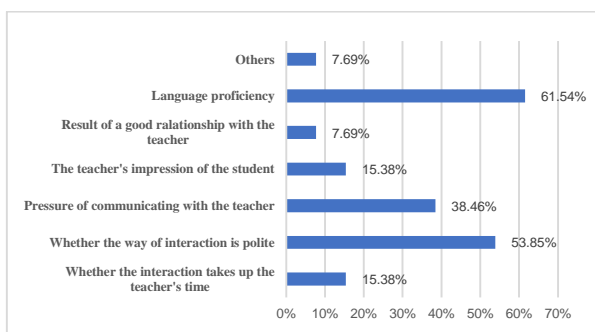


Figure 5. Considerations on teacher-student interaction of Chinese international students in Australia

5.2.2. Teaching Style

Most students lack active participation in classroom interaction since 46.15% of the samples reported that they occasionally expressed their opinions in class, and 38.46% reported that they hardly participated in teacher-student interaction. In comparison, several differences between Chinese and Australian classes were reflected. In China, the number of students in the class is relatively large. The teacher cannot take care of everyone, consequently organizing the class based on the level and reaction of the majority. The pace of instruction is controlled by the teacher, which puts the students in a passive position. Students who have different opinions with the teacher or the majority will be interrupted. This teaching style deprives students of their control of time for self-study because they must follow the teacher’s plan to complete various learning tasks. Australian teaching emphasizes interaction and flexibility. The teacher encourages students to form their ideas. Thus free discussions are common in the class. Without a restricted study process planned by the teacher, students have sufficient time at their disposal to explore the direction of their interest. Still, their learning relies on their initiative and effort.

In comparing the teaching style of both countries, Australian teaching is more favored by Chinese international students. 46.15% of the sample expressed their preference for Australian classes. This teaching style gives more freedom to students, and the classroom atmosphere is more active. Students are placed on equal status with teachers, which is different from the superiority of teachers in Chinese teaching perceived by students. However, 23.08% were reported to be more adapted to Chinese teaching. They are familiar with the Chinese teaching method, and this teaching is more effective than those with poor self-control. The class can be wholly finished with the teacher’s management. The rest, 30.77%, indicated that both teaching styles are acceptable.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Life Adaptation

Among the 30 participants in this research, most Chinese international students cannot adapt very well to their local daily lives. Although the world is in the process of globalization and many Chinese students have had access to know western cultures before they come to Australia to study, the lifestyle in Australia and China differs enormously. For example, western cultures advocate critical thinking, which Chinese students find hard to follow as they are always reluctant to express contrary opinions or direct disagreement in public [18]. Confucian precepts have great influences on Chinese students, which requires them to respect others and

worship harmony. More opportunities are given to students in western classrooms to state their views, while teacher-directed dialogue with fewer students' oral output is more common in China [19]. In addition, studying in Australia, Chinese students always use English as the medium of conversation to communicate with other people, but both "China English" and "Australian English" have their unique characteristics [20], which can cause misunderstandings and confusion during the communication. Therefore, Chinese students might face many difficulties while living in Australia, and support is needed to adjust to the new environment better.

The differences between Chinese and Australian food are huge, which is difficult for the Chinese to accommodate. Most students choose to have Chinese meals either cooked by themselves or in a Chinese restaurant, and most of the participants preferred Chinese food to Australian food. As their competence to cook Chinese food and the diversity of Australian food, Chinese students can generally adjust to the food in Australia. People's eating habits are hard to change once they have formed while growing up, and Chinese food has its own unique culture, which is quite different from Australian food. Many participants indicated that, although the Australian diet has blended various cultures, they still prefer hometown dishes which they have been accustomed to. Due to geographical factors, animal husbandry is one of the predominant industries in Australia, so their food mostly comes from animals. But Chinese diet was influenced by agricultural civilization, which brings crops and vegetables to the main position of the traditional Chinese food structure [21]. Unlike western dishes, one Chinese dish can have many materials simultaneously, and one material can be cooked in various ways such as steaming, braising, stewing, and so on. Chinese international students who get used to Chinese dishes may find it difficult to adjust to Australian ones. Therefore, more markets that sell Chinese food ingredients and more traditional Chinese food restaurants should be opened to provide traditional Chinese meals for students. Various kinds of Chinese food can also be introduced to the school cafeteria to meet Chinese students' needs. Universities or local communities can offer Chinese cookery classes to teach cooking skills for those who do not know how to cook but miss the Chinese dishes.

Transportation in Australia also creates difficulties for Chinese students' adaptation. They do not think the transportation is convenient enough. Most students preferred Chinese transportation to Australian one. China covers 9.6 million square kilometers with a population of 1.41 billion, while Australia covers an area of 7.69 million square kilometers with a population of 25.6 million. The population in China is China has a much larger population thus has more metros and buses for people to commute. In contrast, Australia has a rather

sparse population comparing to its vast area. That is why there are not many subway lines in Australia, and one needs to wait for a longer time if they missed a bus, which causes inconvenience to Chinese students who do not have cars. But the personality factors and the reasons why they go out may influence more than cultural factors. Some Chinese students prefer the traffic in Australia to the Chinese one, which they described as politer. Also, if they are not in a hurry, they may be willing to choose Australian transportation, which has fewer passengers and is more comfortable. There are still 23% of participants who preferred Australian transportation to the Chinese one, as they thought that transport facilities in Australia are cleaner and completer. The disabled are being cared for more. Therefore, if information such as the features of each public transportation tool and how to choose them in different conditions can be provided to students before their arrival to Australia, they can have more mental preparation and can adjust better.

The medical system in Australia is also different from the system in China. In Australia, if students fall ill, they need to see General Practitioner (GP) first, and the GP will give advice and prescription. Then it will be decided by the GP if it is necessary to send them to specialist doctors to obtain a further examination. However, in China, people often go directly to see a specialist doctor. Most Chinese students preferred the Chinese healthcare system to the Australian one, and they may not get used to the local system when they first come to Australia. It is widely acknowledged that Australia has an advanced medical system globally, but the costs are often high. To deal with that, Australia provides international students with special medical insurance called Overseas Students Health Cover (OSHC), which covers the payment of treatment for local GPs, special treatment, prescription drugs, emergency ambulance assistance, and so on. However, according to the data we collected, 38.5% of participants never used the health system, and most seldom use it. They did not think that the Australian medical system is convenient and regarded the medical payment rather high. It is clear that they are not familiar with the healthcare system and did not get much help and instructions about how to see a doctor or how to have international students support in Australia. Therefore, the basic knowledge of the healthcare system in Australia, such as how to call an ambulance, how to see a doctor, and how to get OSHC, should be popularized among Chinese international students before their arrival to Australia. Also, universities in Australia should provide clear instruction for Chinese students.

6.2. Academic Adaptation

In the academic aspect, overseas students also encounter many problems. As regards our statistics, on the one hand, they do not have many initiatives to interact with their teachers. And the top two of their concerns are

1) Their own linguistic skills (61.54%), 2) The politeness of their behavior when interacting with the teacher (53.85%). Also, 38.46% of them say that they feel stressed when faced with the teacher. And also, a few of them say that they will worry about whether they will take up too much of the teacher's free time or whether the interaction will affect the teacher's impression of them. We find that language ability is always the primal problem for international students, whether in study or life. They need to have the courage to speak up and make progress through continuous trial and error. Additionally, just as Taylor and Ali (2016) mentioned in their study, East Asian students seldom bother or challenge their teachers [3]. In China, there is a huge gap between teachers and students. Once Chinese students start school, they have been taught to respect their teachers and be wholly focused on the knowledge imparted by the teachers [13], and such background causes the disacquaintance between teachers and students. This directly leads to the phenomenon that Chinese students cannot put themselves and their teachers equally when they go abroad. However, foreign teachers are not as indifferent as students think, and they do take extra care of those from different countries. As some of the students who filled our questionnaire mentioned, foreign teachers will slow down their speech in class, explain academic terms in plain language, and avoid sensitive topics like religion for the sake of Chinese students. Therefore, students do not have to worry a lot, and they must get used to the more open and equal teacher-student relationship abroad and learn to seek help from their instructors.

On the other hand, most international students tend to be unable to actively engage in-class activities. However, our study shows that most of them prefer courses in Australia for their flexible and active classroom atmosphere, equal relationship between teachers and students, and more discussions and activities in class. Finally, we conclude disparities between Chinese and Australian teaching models referring to their questionnaires: 1) Size of the classroom, 2) Frequency of interactions in class, 3) Role of the teacher. Taylor and Ali stated that "Western pedagogy focuses on critical thinking and encourages discussion and debate" [3]. To generate the burst of distinctive ideas, classes in Australia will include a lot of activities for students to share their ideas, and teachers act as the person guiding the whole process. They have an advantage over their small class size, for it ensures that everyone can be taken into account by the teacher. Chinese education admires high standards and strict requirements and is one of the top-notch education, in which students can never be the master of the classroom. While Western education emphasizes encouragement, creating a relaxed atmosphere and a free environment for students to exchange ideas [13]. After more than ten years of traditional Chinese education, many students cannot

follow the unfamiliar pedagogy in the other country and avoid the complete collision of minds in class. They have to find ways to cultivate their critical thinking, such as reading more materials in the library or talking to classmates after class. Otherwise, the inactive state in class will have a negative effect on their studies.

7. CONCLUSION

To find out if Chinese international students face any difficulties in their academic and life adaptation in Australia and, if they do, what difficulties are those, we researched these aspects. We analyzed what support can be provided to them. On this basis, we conclude that Chinese students do encounter many problems caused by academic and environmental factors in Australia, and thus much support is needed. The main findings are as follows: 1) the difficulties Chinese students encountered during their adjustments are mainly demonstrated as the inconvenience of transportation and healthcare, the language and cultural barriers to social communication with local people, and the differences between Chinese and Australian teacher-student relationship and classroom teaching models. 2) To overcome these difficulties, more instructions should be given to students before their arrival for them to prepare, such as the information on how to have international student medical insurance and the improvement of language skills. In terms of local universities, more traditional Chinese activities can be introduced to enhance the intercultural communication among students, and the knowledge of the typical characteristics of Chinese students is also important for the teacher to offer better classes. As the number of Chinese international students may increase in the future due to the unavoidable trend of globalization, our research can be served as a guide for students and universities to prepare for Chinese international students' academic and life adaptation. With more attention and more support, Chinese international students in Australia can adjust to the local life more smoothly. A better environment for the students to gain knowledge can be built.

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