



# Research on Intercultural Adaptation of International Students in China A Case Study of Shanghai University

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**Abstract.** International students in China are facing the problem of intercultural adaptation, especially for those who are studying in the megacities. Employing semi-structured in-depth interview techniques, this research interviews 12 international students from Shanghai University, who have studied there for at least two years. Based on Black's theory of "three-dimensional" model of intercultural adaptation, this paper proposes a "four-dimensional" model, namely, life adaptation, study adaptation, interpersonal adaptation and China's national image adaptation. Findings reveal that maladjustment is mainly reflected in the inconvenience during Ramadan, Chinese cultural products, overall positive but conceptual perception of China's national image, execution delay, and classmates/lab-mates-centered Chinese friend circle; whereas Chinese cuisine, logistics, and living environment have been well embraced by the international students. Moreover, social media accelerate the intercultural adaptation process and bridge the connection with international students' home countries. In view of the above international students' status quo of adaptation, the study puts forward several suggestions on promoting adaptability and encouraging further mutual understandings for both sojourners and host society.

**Keywords:** International students · intercultural adaptation · Shanghai

## 1 Introduction

In the context of China's The Belt and Road Initiative and international talents' "bring in" strategy, it would be meaningful to discuss international students' intercultural adaptation in China, especially for those who are studying in the megacities, wherein the tension between acceptance and rejection is distinctively displayed. Density and connectedness in megacities have supported a wealth of innovation and productivity, but for the same reason have created ideal conditions for the transmission of alienation and proved vulnerable to the in adaptation.

Therefore, this study will choose Shanghai—one of the most dynamic centers of the modern economy as the research background, and specifically, take the international students of Shanghai University as the research participants to investigate their intercultural adaptation.

## 2 Research Design

### 2.1 Definition of Intercultural Adaptation

When placed in a foreign land and required to interact with culturally different person, it is inevitable that the sense of security, certainty, comfort, and predictability that characterizes communication with culturally similar people is lost, and the ensuing inadaptation requires intercultural adaptability.

According to Ward (1997), foreign researches on intercultural adaptation originated in the late 1950s. American anthropologist Robert Redfield et al. believed that intercultural adaptation is a change of two cultural patterns caused by the continuous contact between groups with two different cultures (Wang, 2011:45) [1]. Intercultural adaptation in a broad sense refers to the process of improving our own adaptation level to meet the requirements of the new cultural environment (Kim, 1988: 273–294) [2]. Intercultural adaptation solves the problem of how sojourners or new immigrants experience frustration caused by the mismatch and incompatibility between the target culture and their own culture. In other words, cross-cultural adaptation is a process of coping with the inadaptability in the target culture (Chen & Starosta, 2007: 164) [3].

Gudykunst & Kim (2007: 358–360) [4]. believe that the process of intercultural adaptation is the process of pushing and pulling between “deculturalization” and “enculturation”. On this basis, Kim believes that intercultural adaptation is a dynamic process, a process of pressure and growth. Pressure is a necessary condition for the generation of adaptive change, an internal driving force for the generation of adaptive change, which can realize the spiritual growth of individuals after entering a different culture (Zhao, 2019) [5].

In conclusion, intercultural adaptation refers to the extensive process of internal change in individuals so as to be able to function appropriately in the target culture. Newcomers learn to make adjustments which involves the deculturation of some of the original cultural habits and the acculturation of new ones, and finally certain degree of assimilation into the mainstream culture of the host society occurs.

### 2.2 Research Methodology

On the basis of Ward and his colleagues’ classification of intercultural adaptation, i.e., two dimensions of intercultural adaptation: psychological adaptation and social adaptation, which has been widely accepted by scholars, Black further refined intercultural adaptation into three dimensions, namely, general adaptation, work adaptation and interact adaptation.

Based on Black’s “three-dimensional” model theory of intercultural adaptation, this study puts forward a “four-dimensional” model theory, namely, life adaptation (dietary experience, living conditions and security), study adaptation (language, different interpretations of “time/deadline”), interpersonal adaptation (classmates/lab-mates-centered friend circle) and China’s national image adaptation.

In this study, the qualitative research method was adopted to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 international students (11 males and 1 female) who have studied in Shanghai University for at least two years.

### 2.3 Research Data

The author contacted several seniors in Shanghai University to gain their approvals and assistances for the study. On the author’s request, they solicited volunteers through several group emails. Since the qualitative approach entails diverse socio-psychological factors that influence individual life and emotional challenges, it is essential to recognize the participants’ subjectivities and acknowledge their positionalities. Thus, among 34 voluntary participants, questionnaire was distributed to select representative subjects. Demographic elements like nationality, major, and expected degree were taken into

Pseudonym	Major	Gender	Nationality	Length of Stay in China	Expected Degree	Living Location	Instruction / Self-reported Chinese Level
A	Mechatronics Engineering	Male	Pakistan	5 years	MA	(previously) Local Community (near campus) (currently) University Dorm	English-medium Instruction (henceforth, EMI) / Spoken: Almost Advanced Reading: Above Average
B	Chinese Sociology	Male	Pakistan	10 years	PhD	(mostly) University Dorm (sometimes) Local Community in Yiwu	EMI / Spoken: Basic Reading: Lowest Level
C	Metallurgical Physical Chemistry	Male	Pakistan	> 15 years	PhD	University Dorm	EMI / Spoken: Very Basic Reading: Lowest Level
D	Mechatronics Engineering	Male	Bangladesh	3 years	BA	University Dorm	Chinese-medium Instruction (henceforth, CMI) / Spoken: Basic Reading: Lowest Level
E	Logistics Management	Male	Papua New Guinea	5 years (Has been in China since high school)	BA	University Dorm	CMI / Spoken: Almost Advanced Reading: Above Average
F	International Economics and Trade	Male	Indonesia	2 years	BA	University Dorm	CMI / Spoken: Almost Advanced Reading: Above Average
G	Telecommunication Engineering	Male	Senegal	3 years	BA	University Dorm	CMI / Spoken: Almost Advanced Reading: Basic
H	Computer Science	Male	Cape Verde	1.5 years (Pandemic, returned to his own country)	BA	(Online class) Home, in his own country	CMI / Spoken: Above Average Reading: Basic
I	Management Science	Male	Somalia	3 years	BA	University Dorm	CMI / Spoken: Very Basic Reading: Basic
J	Management Science	Male	Syria	4 years	BA	University Dorm	CMI / Spoken: Almost Advanced Reading: Above Average
K	Undisclosed	Male	Russia	2 years	BA	University Dorm	CMI / Spoken: Very Basic Reading: Very Basic
L	Undisclosed	Female	Chad	3 years	BA	University Dorm	CMI / Spoken: Very Basic Reading: Basic

**Fig. 1.** Profile of Cohort (N = 12)<sup>1</sup> (drawn by the author)

<sup>1</sup> To protect interviewees’ personal privacy, their identities were treated anonymously and replaced with a code.

account to ensure the general diversity. Since living location—the place where the most interpersonal activities were carried out—was an important variable, the present study deliberately chose students with diverse dwelling places. Other influential variables like the language of instruction (it determines the Chinese language level that international students are supposed to achieve and greatly affects their learning quality in China) and international students' Chinese language ability (not understanding Mandarin makes basic survival difficult) were also considered. Ultimately, 12 interviewees were selected to jointly realize the research (Fig. 1).

All of the 12 interviews were recorded and transcribed<sup>2</sup>. The basic framework of each interview was roughly divided into four parts, namely, demographic information, pre-sojourn experience, post-sojourn experience, and suggestions for intercultural communication. Questions were centered around media exposure, language and study, interpersonal experience, and China's image perception, with follow-up questions added. In order to avoid some possible uncomfortable feelings (e.g., feeling being excluded and discriminated) with specific reference to some psychological concepts, euphemism has been adopted in the interview discourse and the central thematic concept "adaptation" has been obscured and paraphrased in various expressions, with the semantic reference remained. Considering the general language preference among interviewees, the whole interviews were conducted in English. The excerpts quoted in this article were almost word-for-word to maintain their original "flavor" while still being legible to both Chinese and English speakers<sup>3</sup>.

### 3 Findings

#### 3.1 Life Adaptation

Life Adaptation is the very foundation for sojourners to survive in a foreign land. In the present study, in terms of the interviewees' life experience in China (and most of the time, Shanghai), two words were mentioned frequently, i.e., colorful and challenging. In general, the vast majority of international students can adapt to the life in China, and some even consider a long-term settlement for the foreseeable future.

#### Dietary Experience

Food is one of the most fundamental elements necessary for the sojourners to lead a basic life in a different cultural environment. For international students, dining in China is special and memorable, resulting in a coexistence of intriguing and adaptable experiences and some inconvenient and inadaptable episodes.

China is famous for its varied cuisines across geographical span and Shanghai, particularly, boasts a wide range of delicacies from all over the world. In campus's canteens, the food preferences of students from different parts of the world are taken into consideration. Also, kitchens and kitchenware are offered in their dormitory buildings (each building has one communal kitchen), which makes the meal preparation easily available. Therefore, all of the interviewees reported that, on the daily basis, their home food is

<sup>2</sup> Full details of Interview Protocol for Participants are given in the Appendix.

<sup>3</sup> Not all participants are native speakers of English.

accessible on campus and they are equipped with well-maintained cooking facilities, and restaurants with authentic and home-like flavors are also findable in Shanghai. In addition to dietary experience within Shanghai, [7] interviewees also shared with the interviewer about their delightful memories of trying brand-new cuisines with fresh flavors when they travelled to other cities in China. One interviewee commented excitedly, “I am so into spicy food in China those Sichuan cuisine um. [Yibin] Ranmian something...” (Interviewee J).

In conclusion, it is clear that international students have well adapted to the Chinese cuisines and their personal dietary preference have been well satisfied. However, there are some inconveniences and inadaptation.

This part of discussion was specifically centered on 6 interviewees who voluntarily reported that they have to observe Ramadan schedule<sup>4</sup>. According to the fact collected from the respondents, the canteens in Shanghai University don’t provide special meals during the Ramadan, i.e., the flavors and serving time of dishes are the same as usual. The main reason can be explained from the perspective of population size, “I think it’s because of the amount of people are following or doing fasting is less in number ... Muslim students are not many, but at least 40–50 people are fasting as per my knowledge from the international students, let’s not talk about the Chinese students ... (Interviewee D)” When asked about whether canteens should be advised to add a supply window specifically targets at Muslim students during Ramadan (e.g., offering delayed meal service, providing festival-time meals, etc.), the answers divided. One of the interviewees commented, “I think it would be better if the canteen could provide with some more facilities; but it’s okay even [if] they can’t, because canteen runs from schools’ regulation ... (Interviewee D)” Another interviewee explained, “Usually, religion is taken as personal matter of individual... someone in future will ask for vegetarian meal according to their religion, then?” (Interviewee B).

From the above excerpts, it is clear that the canteens’ norm is well-understood by Muslim students though it still causes a certain amount of trouble during the month of food fasting. Notably, one Pakistani interviewee mentioned another easily ignored yet influential variable, “It was just this this time [2022] that people were bound to take food from canteen during Ramadan, if it was not because of the current situation or the lockdown, so no one would have either ever bothered about like the canteen services or canteen food or the timings or anything.” (Interviewee B).

In sum, the special requirement among certain group of students of during Ramadan haven’t been well catered but since it is largely attributed to the temporary lockdown, their inadaptations thus can be justified.

### **Living Conditions and Security**

It is known that international students’ management in Chinese universities has been emphasizing particularly on creating comfortable life surroundings.

All of the interviewees reported a high level of satisfaction and sense of security towards their accommodation environments, including dormitory and other facilities on campus. When asked to describe their general feelings, “safety”, “security”, “relieved”

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<sup>4</sup> In the whole month, Muslims are not allowed to have drink or food intake between sunrise and sunset.

emerged as the top three frequently mentioned words. Some of the interviewees even recorded various videos (content: introduce their dormitory) and uploaded them to channels from home and abroad. For those who have had the experience of living in the local community off campus, they also thought highly of the living conditions and they were already very familiar with the house-renting apps in China. The following comment was made by one of the interviewees who have had the experience of living in the local community outside Shanghai, “I have home-like feeling in Yiwu...sometimes I have a resemblance that Yiwu community is my Chinese hometown.” (Interviewee B).

Taken together, regardless of their exact living places, it can be found that positive feedback towards their living environments is unanimously proposed by international students, which is directly benefited from China’s well-maintained public order.

## 3.2 Study Adaptation

### Language

Most international students embraced the CMI in class including those who is studying the EMI program, though some of them reported difficulties in keeping up with their teachers’ instructions.

Notably, half of the interviewees claimed that the acquisition of HSK certificate doesn’t necessarily link to exact communication ability and are inclined to practice their Chinese language in everyday context. “...they [HSK and real-life communication] are two different things”, said one interviewee, “my training ground was never campus. It was aunts, uncles, shopkeepers, waiters, taxi drivers. (Interviewee B)” Also, there were, however, a minority of interviewees who displayed a distinctive reluctance in learning Chinese language, which was typically seen in the answer given by one respondent (he was asked to give the name of his major, “I don’t know the Chinese name of my major, um, I give you the English name and you gonna [going to] check.” (Interviewee C).

It’s notable that interviewee C, who has come to China for more than 15 years, still display a rather poor performance in Chinese language usage, and the seemingly trivial detail “not knowing the Chinese name of his major (though he is studying an EMI program)” clearly manifests the inertia in language learning (supposedly, with a simple click, the Chinese counterpart can be found immediately).

Though most of the international students embrace Chinese language and are willing to learn more, outside classroom climate and mandatory teaching materials, very few of them incorporate Chinese culture products into their day-to-day culture consumption. Only one-third of the interviewees reported an occasional exposure to Chinese entertaining culture products in their spare time. Even among those who have listened to Chinese music (either traditional or popular) or played Chinese game, they still preferred the translated version and never paid attention to the original Chinese one. None of the interviewees took the initiative of reading serious literature or watching educational documentary in Chinese. Therefore, it is clear that international students’ target language’s culture consumption adaptation is of underperformance and their awareness

of incorporating target language into their spare time as a supplement to curricula needs to be further enhanced.

### **Different Interpretations of “Time/Deadline”**

A major theme that emerged from the data is that international students hold contradictory feelings about the punctuality abide by most Chinese people. On the one hand, many of them are aware the positive side of punctuality, and treat the set (and mostly fixed) deadline as a way to motivate themselves because deadline encourages productivity and self-discipline. On the other hand, some interviewees complain about the more or less stationary schedule as it is an opposite of their home culture.

Perhaps the different interpretations and varying levels of adaptability upon Chinese punctual culture will be less bewildering if we take a look at the concepts of “monochronic (M-time) versus polychronic (P-time)”, which is proposed by American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward T. Hall. According to Hall, cultures around the world tend to value time differently<sup>6</sup>. M-time culture routinely monitors progress toward a goal using a strict timeline and thus requires punctuality and productivity; while P-time is characterized by multitasking, flexibility, and flowing timeline. Therefore, when it comes to the deadline of assignment, different interpretation upon “how late is late” thus can be justified.

Remarkably, besides the difference between M-time and P-time, there are some seemingly irrelevant yet surely influential factors that affect the studying performance, with the specific reference of meeting the deadline. One interviewee, who is studying in his own country through e-learning platform (CMI) because of the pandemic<sup>5</sup>, reported that it was the unfamiliar mode of learning that increased his workload and thus slowed down his learning efficiency. The following remark is made by him, “Computer science is already hard enough, let alone studying [it] in another language through online platform...Uploading photos is troublesome and the network [connection] here [in his home] is not stable so very often the instructions given by the teacher is intermittent...” (Interviewee H).

Therefore, it can be seen that the difficulties in submitting assignment facing international students is realized in the combined action of both subjective factors and objective conditions. Corresponding measures should be taken by both outbound students and teachers to counteract the negative effects brought by e-learning.

### **3.3 Interpersonal Adaptation**

A major theme that emerged from the data is “Classmates/Lab-mates-centered Chinese Friend Circle”.

Based on the author’s observation, on campus, international students (not necessarily from the same countries) often form small groups (e.g., sit together in class or chat in groups after class). When faced with problems, international students tend to seek help from their compatriots or other international students, instead of their Chinese peers. During the interview, the statement that “our interaction with Chinese peers (mostly

<sup>5</sup> A scholarship student with brilliant academic performance, but cannot return to China because of the pandemic.

students) are confined to classmates or lab-mates” has been unanimous proposed by all the interviewees. In their study and life, they still have frequent contact with Chinese peers, while the so-called Chinese friends are only “functional friends” who are made when cooperation is involved in their study (e.g., group work, co-experiments in lab, etc.). Once the studying relationship is over, the friendship and connection are correspondingly fading. As it’s observed by one interviewee, “... because the shared topic of the communication is lost, [and] I’d say [this is a] kind of materialistic relationship... (Interviewee C)” Outside the classroom, how to meet and make Chinese friends is a problem for overseas students, which, deserves our attention.

Although the sentiment of gravitating towards familiarity can be justified among sojourners, as communication across cultures is inherently demanding because it challenges our taken-for-granted assumptions, the longstanding engagement within a certain culture group, which is blocked and exclusive to some degree, can become an obstacle for long-term integration into the host society. While communication across cultures is inherently stressful, the experiences of interactional incongruity and accompanying stress inherent in intercultural encounters, in turn, provides us an impetus for new learning and adaptive change in our cultural habits. (Kim, 2015:4) [7].

### 3.4 China’s National Image Adaptation

Some phenomena among international students are hard to be included into one of the three kinds of adaptations mentioned above. Therefore, it is reasonable to add one new dimension of adaptation, namely, China’s national image adaptation, which is under discussion at both personal and national level.

Since our immediate experience is limited, we rely on media to make sense of the outside world. Kunczik (1990) [8] defines the national image as “an image of a nation constitutes the totality of attributes that a person recognizes (or imagines) when he contemplates that nation.” Joseph Nye states the importance of national image by empowering it as the ability to get what someone want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. In general, national image can be defined as the cognitive representation that a person holds of a given country and its people, which is largely shaped in the mediated-pseudo environment; the affection brought by the national image may affect foreign public’s attitudes towards the country, its people, and its products and even the country’s foreign policy.

When asked about their general impressions of China before coming here, media representation, especially news feed on social media, dominates the main source of informing overseas students; When given the instruction of “using three words to describe your general impressions of China currently”, two-thirds of expressions demonstrated positive while one-third turned out thought-provoking. The booming economy and flourishing employment opportunities in China in the last ten years helped put the Chinese mainland in a spotlight, increasing positive coverage on China and its people, and consequently making it worthwhile the investment for international students.

Despite a significant slack in learning Chinese language appeared, it is gratifying to find that international students demonstrate a strong interest in knowing China as an organic whole, though they still tend to access the related knowledge through their native language. Besides, when asked about which aspect they want to know further

about China, “the key in China’s economic boom” and “important figures in China’s thousands of years of vicissitudes” appear to be the top two frequently mentioned topics. One interviewee even presented his views of *On China* written by Henry Kissinger, the diplomat who has played a crucial role in easing Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations, and requested a further elaboration of “Lin Zexu”, “Deng Xiaoping”, “Zhou Enlai”, along with their contributions, from the interviewer.

In sum, pro-China sentiments prevail and social media accelerates the China’s national image adaptation for it acquaints the overseas students with Chinese affairs. Still, due to the framing nature of media’s representation, mediated reporting is anything but objective. By particularly featuring certain aspects, the construction and interpretation displayed by media may more or less influence international students’ perception of China’s national image.

## 4 Conclusion

The above is the specific description of international students’ intercultural adaptation on four dimensions in China, and they can be summarized as follows. Maladjustment is mainly reflected in the inconvenience during Ramadan, Chinese cultural products, and classmates/lab-mates-centered Chinese friend circle; whereas China’s national image, studying life, Chinese cuisine, and living environment, have been well embraced by international students. Additionally, social media accelerate the process of intercultural adaptation for newcomers in new communities.

The revised model proposed by the present study is different from previous ones, in which the delimitation of adaptation has been refined and national image adaptation has been added. Previously, Black’s classified intercultural adaptation into general adaptation, work adaptation and interact adaptation. In this study, general adaptation has been specified into life adaptation with sub-branch added, whereas work adaptation has been contextualized with study adaptation replaced. While the difficulty in meeting the deadline has often been viewed as lack of learning motivation and an L2 error, the present study highlights the importance of differencing learning modes and going beyond culture stereotypes in relevant studies.

## 5 Suggestions

In view of the above international students’ status quo of adaptation in China, several tentative suggestions are put forward as both sides, international students and host society, need to make efforts.

Firstly, complementarily to their in-class language learning, international students are supposed to develop the habit of incorporating Chinese culture products (especially serious one) into their daily culture consumption. Secondly, instead of constantly seeking familiarity and predictability, overseas students are advised to step out and reach a wider range of friend circle. While a complete deculturalization is impossible and unnecessary, with creativity and resourcefulness, a state of “both-and” that transcends cultural categories, can be found between the home culture and host culture.

In terms of the host society, however, more attention should be attached on recognizing psychological and cognitive inadaptation among newcomers instead of laying an overemphasis on hardware facilities. Also, in the light of overseas students' language learning inertia, the pedagogical method shall be as topic-oriented and interest-driven as possible. In addition to imparting international students in what ways Chinese could be used in their future lives and to further their career development, preparing the international students for potential future opportunities can be achieved by providing them with knowledge of Chinese-speaking communities and Chinese-associated cultures. Teachers can also share their experiences in English communities with the students, (e.g., how mastering a foreign language can benefit individuals by exposing them to new ideas and possibilities), which in turn, may further ignite international students' interest in Chinese language learning.

For future study, larger scale of discourse data and observations in either interview or non-interview context, including data from other provinces, shall be collected and analyzed in order to fully investigate the authentic realization of adaptability in real life. Meanwhile, more attention should be attached to the balance among interviewees, including gender balance, age balance, disciplinary balance, etc. to improve the reliability of research findings.

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