



A Case Study of Foreign Students Participating in Chinese Language Competitions Commonality Analysis Based on Nvivo

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Abstract. With an increasing use of Chinese language worldwide, more international students are learning Chinese language and participating in Chinese language competitions. This case study research investigates the experience of two international students who participated in a Chinese language competition. It employs NVivo qualitative analysis tool to summarize the common characteristics of the two international students during their competition experience. The study pays particular attention to the implications for international students' learning experience in China. Chinese language competition plays a significant role in cross-cultural adaptation of foreign students and its advantageous functions are primarily demonstrated in the following three aspects. Firstly, the Chinese contest enables international students to build self-confidence and intercultural communicative competence as the starting point for nurturing cultural adaptation. Secondly, it aids international students in forming their identity and developing physical and emotional well-being within the host country. The competition also enables them to gain a penetrating and refreshing insight into Chinese culture. The article concludes with feasible recommendations proposed based on the common characteristics, providing a reference value for guiding international students to participate in Chinese language competitions.

Keywords: Chinese language competition · cross-cultural adaptation · NVivo · qualitative research

1 Introduction

With an increasing interest and attention paid to the global East, more learners of Chinese language and culture were attracted. In 2002, the first language competition of Chinese Bridge was held, more than 1.4 million students from more than 150 countries were attached and devoted. Scholars (ref.) confirmed the vital significance on this annual language competition, focusing on its form, content, and communication modes. However, lack of investigations was found into the main subjects and international students of the competition, nor explored participants' perceptions and attitudes towards Chinese contests from the Foreign students' perspective. This leaves a research gap in finding the experience of international students before, during, and after their participation of the

competition. Therefore, this case study research was conducted to listen to the authentic voice of two participants' experience through interviews. With a comparative perspective, I analyzed the common themes found within their interviews and explored the impact of language competitions on the two participants, and further provided suggestions for enhancing the international education especially with such language competitions.

2 Literature Review

After consulting relevant literature, the author found that the research on Chinese competitions can be basically divided into the following three categories:

The first kind of scholars pay attention to the content of the competition. For example, Mao Xiaoqian [3] analyzed the test questions of the 17th and 18th Chinese Bridge Competition and used them as materials for Chinese teaching; Coincidentally, Zhou Yuping [4] also believes that the cultural test questions of Chinese competitions should be applied to Chinese language teaching. Scholars in this direction tend to study and make full use of the substantive content of Chinese competitions. During the 10 years from 2012 to 2022, Fan Xiangxiang, Wang Longyin, Guo Yan and others have all studied the competition questions of previous Chinese competitions such as Chinese Bridge, and this kind of research has dominated the research related to Chinese competitions. The second kind of scholars pay attention to the communication value of Chinese competitions. For example, Xue Jiao [5] discusses the feasibility of applying soft communication to Chinese competitions from the perspective of communication by analyzing the presentation mode of Chinese bridge programs. For another example, Cheng Haiping [6] analyzed the five links of the Chinese language contest, including the communication content and channels, one by one, and used various theories in communication to deeply analyze the communication process of the Chinese language contest for overseas students in China. It can be seen that the communication value of Chinese competitions has been recognized by some scholars. At present, this direction is gradually concerned by researchers, and the number of documents is increasing year by year. The third kind of scholars study the contestants in Chinese competitions, that is, they pay attention to the individual contestants. For example, Liu Xiao [7] analyzed the language ability, cultural knowledge reserve and teaching ability of Chinese and foreign players in his own research, with a view to providing suggestions for the training of international students participating in the competition. Xie Weiping [8] went further, recording the training process of the research object in the form of case study, and analyzing the problems encountered in the training from multiple perspectives. This kind of research appears after 2020. At present, the number of relevant research is limited, and the research on the experience and feelings of foreign students participating in the competition is not comprehensive.

Based on the above research, the author believes that there are two deficiencies in the current research on Chinese competitions. First of all, from the research perspective, the research on Chinese competitions currently focuses on the research on the competition itself, that is, the research on the content and communication mode of the competition. There are obvious deficiencies in both the quality and quantity of the research on the participants; Secondly, in terms of research methods, there are more quantitative studies

than qualitative studies, and few studies focus on the experience and feelings of participants. The Chinese contest is a matter for both the organizers and participants to participate in. It is a lack of perspective to focus on the contest while ignoring the main body of the contest. Therefore, the author believes that it is necessary to conduct a case study of the contestants.

3 Methodology

This case study research explored the experience of the two participants who engaged in a Chinese language competition. It discusses the impact of contests on their experience before, during and after their participation in the competition. In this study, NVivo was employed to organize, analyze, and refine those unstructured or qualitative data. The three primary functions of NVivo analysis tool are utilized. Firstly, with the automatic coding function, the positive and negative emotions can be automatically recognized and encoded in the interview data of the participants so that the generality and individuality enable the researcher to provide a constructive explanation. Additionally, the emerging themes were identified by the function of theme recognition, which renders it convenient for researchers to explore and analyze the relevant corpus theme. The second is its annotation function which can annotate the coded content in real time, record research results, and code the annotated content to further detect problems. Thirdly, its memo function helps researchers to establish research nodes and retain research ideas and results in time.

Purposeful sampling was used considering its meticulous and explanatory understanding of the internal experience of the research participants. Participants of this study were chosen because they were considered to be able to provide the most abundant information for addressing the research questions. Therefore, the author finalized two students, Q and S (pseudonyms). The individual semi-structured interviews were conducted either by face-to-face or online.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Anton's Case

Anton was born in an ordinary family in Siberia, Russia. He left Russia at the age of 18 to pursue his studies in Hangzhou, where he strongly felt uncomfortable with the southern climate, cuisine, and even their speed of speech. Anton faced pressure and frustration due to language barriers and also he was unmotivated owing to a lack of interest in his major of study. Under these pressure, Anton became anxious and irritable, presenting the early symptoms of cultural shock and being on the verge of dropping out of school. However, in an eloquence class, the teacher unexpectedly gave Anton a positive affirmation and invited him to participate in the provincial speech contest for overseas students. After carefully preparing for the competition, Anton won the second prize, which enabled him to regain his confidence and faith. Subsequently, he took part in the Chinese Bridge competition and has progressively developed intimate friendships with teammates, instructors, and various international students due to the lengthy training

period, which laid a solid foundation for Anton to completely emerge from the setback period. Simultaneously, Anton emanated a higher degree of confidence and competency and later successfully transferred to the design major with the help of Mr. Cheng and was admitted to the Graduate School of China Academy of fine arts after graduation.

4.2 Carey's Case

Carey is a Muslim student from Yemen, which is one of the cradles for developing ancient civilizations in the Arab. Due to language barriers and his identity as a Muslim, Carey experienced extreme loneliness after moving to China. Even his eating habits were negatively affected to a certain extent because most Muslims go to a specific restaurant for dinner, which provides a sense of belonging within the community. At that time, Carey considered himself a complete alien in his ordinary life who found it difficult to integrate into school life and felt homesick, which is typically an early sign of entering the frustration period. The foreigners we are discussing here are mainly foreign students coming to China. In order to better explain the impact of Chinese competitions on foreign students, we need to understand the actual state, mood and feelings of foreign students before the competition.

Compared to Anton, Carey's performance is more positive, and he attributed all his psychological problems to his weak language foundation. Therefore, he took actions to actively participate in all Chinese-related school activities and competition and was eventually chosen to take part in the Chinese classic reading competition. In this process, Carey prepared for the competition by studying Luoshen Fu word by word, a well-known piece similarly difficult for many Chinese students to comprehend. After winning the second prize at the national level of the international student group in the reading competition, Carey is becoming more and more confident in Chinese. Simultaneously, Carey gained diverse Chinese friends during this process since international students often seek professional guidance from native speakers to promote their competitiveness. He performed a drama written, directed, and performed by their own team with Chinese friends at the welcome party of Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, which gradually eliminated Carey's loneliness and helped him overcome the state of cultural shock.

4.3 Case Generality Analysis

The bottom-up qualitative research usually summarizes the data obtained by researchers before defining the theme. Therefore, the author input the entire corpus into NVivo software in the form of word files and employed its automated encoding function to screen out the conversational themes and emotions. After the preliminary induction and collation of the corpus, the author decided to take the common characteristics of the two overseas students' experiences as the starting point to determine the theme. According to the analysis of the two cases, the author found that both contestants were in the setback period of cross-cultural adaptation before the competition and achieved a certain degree of cultural adjustment during the contesting process. Therefore, the author decided to analyze the emotional changes of foreign students that occurred throughout the

competition and understand the specific reasons why Chinese competitions encourage them to overcome cultural shock.

4.3.1 Self-confidence: The Starting Point of Cultural Adaptation

The author initially imported the corpus obtained from the interview into NVivo to code the interview records of two participants through the emotion recognition function under the automatic coding function and further identify the positive and negative emotions during the interviews. It was discovered that Anton and Carey both had seven negative emotion corpora, the contents of which were overlapping after examining the encoded materials.

The challenges experienced by the two overseas students are common and relevant. The encoded difficulties can be summarized into the following aspects: (1) struggling with adjusting to Hangzhou cuisine; (2) insufficient knowledge and competence of Chinese; (3) unfamiliar living and studying environment; (4) inconvenient and uncomfortable dormitory situation.

During the interviews, negative emotions appeared in the participants' responses to the questions about their background, which are highly consistent with their performance during the setback period in cross-cultural adaptation. At this stage, the participants started to notice the differences between the new and their previous contexts, rendering it even more challenging for them to integrate into the new culture with the large psychological barriers. The external manifestation of this disparity was the students' maladaptation to the sociocultural environment. For example, their difficulties in adapting to the new environment and eating habits represent cultural maladjustment as well as psychological maladjustment existing at a deeper level, resulting in frustration and loss. During this culture shock stage, international students frequently exhibit restlessness, irritation, trouble sleeping and eating, and a decline in learning efficiency. Therefore, this stage exerts an adverse influence on students' negative evasion, such as skipping class, and loneliness.

International students frequently need chances for change. Concerning the reasons intriguing the change, the author encodes the sentences of positive emotion again after establishing a thoroughly considered node. The word frequency screening function was utilized to screen the positive words with a minimum length of 2. It was discovered that confidence is the word with the highest frequency, accounting for 28.57%. Therefore, confidence plays a particularly crucial role in the cultural adaptation process. It is also worth noting that although self-confidence is an overlapping aspect appearing in the interviews of the two participants, the reasons for their self-confidence are different. Carey believes that winning awards at or above the provincial level in the competition can enhance the self-confidence of overseas students to a certain extent; while Anton affords the author deeper thoughts because he thinks "winning an award is obviously significant, but you should be aware that athletes are typically those who can participate in the games so I am also a fluent Chinese speaker or have the potential to learn it if I can participate in Chinese competitions". According to this point of view, the identity of a Chinese contest participant can enhance self-confidence of students and help them to overcome the setback period. This is another important harvest of the author from his personal perspective in this study. Therefore, Chinese language contests can

provide international students with an opportunity to integrate into Chinese culture on two levels: the encouragement of awards and the encouragement of participant identity. The researchers may learn from the experiences of participants that developing self-confidence favorably supports them to achieve cultural adaptation during the initial stages of cultural shock.

4.3.2 Identity: The Process of Cultural Adaptation

By employing the theme recognition function under automatic coding, the author analyzed the generality contained in the interview materials and found that friend appears to be the most prevalent theme in the interview corpus (Anton 9 times, Carey 14 times). Therefore, the author focuses on this theme to analyze the psychological changes that international students experience in the process of the competition.

The study found that the participants had completely different references to friends. Anton participated in the Chinese Bridge competition and made various friends who are also considered foreigners in the Chinese context. They were fluent in Chinese and created a WeChat group with more than 300 people to keep in contact with each other. On the contrary, Carey became friends with Chinese students who guided him to participate in the competition. They also performed drama together at the orientation party, which enabled Carey to gradually integrate into the Chinese community and make new Chinese acquaintances in the process of the competition.

Although it seems that the two participants form friendships in various groups, they certainly have a common psychological pursuit: a need for forming self-identity. People instinctively look for identities that conform to their own characteristics. As mentioned above, the two participants were experiencing cultural shock before the competition and this emergent emotional damage made it difficult for them to integrate into the new culture. This sense of loneliness prevented them from establishing their identity in the new environment and obtaining the social support. Anton found diverse foreigners who were similar to himself, and this helped him not only realize that he was not an isolated person but also discover and establish a new identity that was consistent with his own traits. Carey eliminates his inner loneliness by making himself appear more Chinese and integrating into a new social environment. During the competition, the participants formed their identity through different paths, recovered their group consciousness, got rid of their loneliness, and finally overcame cultural shock. Therefore, Chinese language competitions serve as a connecting bond; international students are incorporated into a variety of social associations, acquire new identities, and accomplish cultural adaptation.

4.3.3 China: A Constantly Updated Concept

When designing the interview, the author interspersed the contestants' understanding of China at different stages, aiming to determine how their understanding changed and developed. Therefore, the discussion originated from the author's presupposition rather than the theme obtained from NVivo's analysis. The participants were sensitive to the environment that their stereotyped prejudice was altered through direct contact with Chinese people and interaction with Chinese culture.

In fact, China has long been associated with mystery in western society, so it is simple for international students to form stereotypes about this country. It has been a crucial task for Chinese international education to eliminate stereotypes through having first-hand experience interacting with Chinese culture. Also, by personally having close contact with Chinese people and strengthening the understanding of the concrete but not abstract Chinese, the so-called cultural adaptation process will be smooth enough, and international students can also progressively assimilate into their surroundings. The participants mentioned that this competition enhanced their relationships with Chinese students and continuously updated their knowledge of Chinese culture. Therefore, the vital significance of social interactions can never be ignored in the stage of cross-cultural adaptation of international students.

5 Conclusion

This study shows that the Chinese language competitions play an indispensable role in cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China. Participating in Chinese competitions serves as the foundation for cultural adaptation of foreign students by developing their self-confidence. Chinese competitions can help international students find their own identity. Also, participating in competitions can also help international students refresh their understanding of Chinese context and achieve cultural adaptation. Based on this, the author puts forward the following suggestions:

- (1) The organizers of the competition should pay attention to the construction of a vibrant community, thereby integrating international students into a solidary culture, assisting them in defining their identities, and resolving their diverse cross-cultural difficulties.
- (2) The university should launch various forms of Chinese language competitions within the institution to attract international students' attention and provide them with numerous opportunities for changing and improving.
- (3) In the process of guiding students in the competition, instructors should immerse international students in experiencing Chinese culture and interacting with Chinese people, thus motivating them to adapt to Chinese culture from outside to inside.

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