

Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Academic Success: A Case Study

Huijuan Xue

Humanities and Management
Jiangxi Police Institute
Nanchang, China
xuehuijuan1@yahoo.com

Abstract—This paper analyses how Ray, a Bangladeshi student, goes through cultural adaption and achieves academic success in terms of completing the Chinese higher education and continuing to pursue his postgraduate study. It shows how Ray experiences “culture shock” and overcomes the language barrier. This longitudinal study elicits the data from a focus group study and two follow-up in-depth individual interviews. It concludes that a successful cultural adaptation is crucial for international students to complete their higher education and achieve academic success in China.

Keywords—*Cross-cultural adaptation; Academic success; Longitudinal study; Chinese higher education for international students*

I. INTRODUCTION

Against the background of globalisation of economy and the internationalisation of education, a hugely increasing number of students are taking international education worldwide. In China, on one hand, the number of people taking education abroad is growing at a fantastic speed. In 2017, the number of Chinese students and scholars who went abroad for education one way or another reached 608,400 and China continuously remained the No. 1 country that sent most students overseas. On the other hand, the number of those who opt for Chinese education is growing tremendously. According to the official statistics, 489,200 foreign students were studying in Chinese higher education institutions (CHEIs) in 2017, and the expansion scale has persisted at a 10% increase for two years¹. Along with such an inspiring landscape of international education, student experience has intrigued a growing number of researchers. This paper will make a case study of Ray, a Bangladeshi student, namely, it will analyse how Ray undergoes cultural adaption and achieves academic success in completing CHE and continuing his postgraduate study. Through examining Ray’s acculturation process, it aims at giving a deep insight into student experiences and providing implications for international students at CHE.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Culture is all-embracing and it means the total body of tradition borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation. It refers to the norms, values, rules, role expectation and standards by which people act, covering dressing, eating, living, talking, judging and behaving themselves. Because of diverse focuses, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and linguists have reached no universally-accepted satisfactory definition so far. Among hundreds of definitions, Murphy states that culture refers to ‘the norms, values, standards by which people act, and it includes the distinctive ways each society orders the world thus rendering it intelligible’ [1]. Culture is a set of mechanisms for survival, the matrix into which we are born, and the anvil upon which our persons and destinies are forged. Different societies incubate and breed differing cultural orientations, for example, Hofstede analyses the national culture from the dimensions of ‘Power Distance’, ‘Collectivism vs. Individualism’, ‘Uncertainty Avoidance’, ‘Masculinity vs. Femininity’, ‘Pragmatic vs. Normative’ and ‘Indulgence vs. Restraint’ [2]². Based on Bourdieu’s theoretical concept of ‘habitus’, if one knows the expressed and hidden rules that govern human behaviour, communication and evaluation in society, one is able to live as a ‘fish in water’, hence having ‘a feel for the game’ [3], and such an advantageous position makes the person doomed to win from the start. On the other hand, one unfamiliar with the social and cultural environment dooms to have a bad start and face unfair competition due to the incompatibility with the surroundings.

When students with diverse cultural backgrounds move across to take education overseas in a different culture, they most probably will encounter ‘culture shock’ and face great challenges in the course of learning in a different educational culture. Accordingly, researchers take an increasing interest in such issues as the challenges students face while taking international education, including language barriers, different teaching and learning styles and coping strategies. Issues of cultural adaptation and identity changes embodied in how international students override different forms of barriers equally intrigue researchers. Past studies have revealed that factors shown in language deficiency, lack of professional

¹ <http://news.china.com>; <http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn>

knowledge, inadaptability to the host culture and educational system all fundamentally affect students' experiences in international education [4-6].

The longitudinal study by Xue explored the experiences of 23 Chinese students who took UK HE through a joint international collaborative programme, focusing on the correlation between cultural adaptation and academic success. It proves that Chinese students' adaptation to the host culture and its educational culture is the key to their success in completing UK education [7]. Xue made another study of 12 Chinese scholars with a successful completion of their UK HE and it showed that their acculturation and new cultural capital formation in the form of internationally-recognised UK degrees and improved English language proficiency underpin their subsequent success in career development [8]. With Chinese education becoming increasingly popular for students overseas, this paper will explore how Ray experiences cultural adaption and achieves academic success in completing CHE and smoothly progresses to his postgraduate study in the same university. The study of Ray's learning experience aims at providing implications for international students at CHE.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

A. Subject

Ray is a Bangladeshi student, and he came to NHU for an undergraduate programme in Aeronautics at the end of March, 2013. Ray came from an intellectual family in a town, his father being a principal and his mother, an accountant. He went to boarding schools since young. He had never learned Chinese

language before coming to take CHE. Although the vast majority of his classmates came for CHE through agencies, Ray went through the application procedure helped by his Bangladeshi friend who was studying in a neighbouring HEI then. Ray sent all the documents required by NHU to his friend, and the latter helped with the application. When interviewed, Ray expressed his idea that he had always been dreaming of becoming an aeronautical engineer, and in fact he had already started his undergraduate study at home, a Level-1 student in aeronautics then, but because there was no Bachelor's degree in his home country, he decided to take CHE. At the group interview, he explained the reasons why he chose CHE, saying that for one reason there was no degree programme in aeronautics at home and for another it was not expensive to get a degree in the subject he liked in China. Ray graduated with a Bachelor's degree in the summer of 2017, and remained to take his postgraduate study in the same area in the same university.

B. Research Method

To understand how Ray encountered the 'culture shock' and overcame the Chinese language barrier, the author took a longitudinal study, spanning across 4 years (April, 2014 – March, 2018). A longitudinal study is a research design involving repeated observations of the same variables, in this case person, over short or long periods of time. This paper is based on the empirical data from 3 interviews, including one focus group study in 2014³, and two in-depth individual interviews in 2015⁴ and 2018 (see Table 1).

TABLE I. A LIST OF INTERVIEWS WITH RAY

Date	Research Type	Length	Place
2014. 4. 17	Focus Group Study (8 students)	125 minutes	In a classroom in the International College, NHU
2016. 1. 7	In-depth individual interview	75 minutes	In a coffee shop on campus, NHU
2018. 3. 11	In-depth individual interview	135 minutes	In the author's sitting-room

The content of the focus group study includes four aspects: a) how international students apply for CHE and complete their visa application, b) to explore the students' educational experiences centring on aspects of campus life covering their study and completion of Chinese education, c) to scrutinise their social experiences via analysing their off-campus life, including how they integrate in the Chinese society and interact with the locals, and d) to examine and investigate their cognitive development and formation of new identity. Ray's learning experience from this group study is drawn on as empirical data.

In 2015, the author successfully won the research fund for a key project sponsored by Jiangxi Provincial Department of Education and started to conduct a follow-up study. To be more exact, the author took Bangladeshi students as a sample and focused on exploring the formation of "culture shock" for

the batch. It mainly utilises the qualitative research method of focus group study and individual interviews, including one follow-up in-depth interview with Ray.

On March 11, 2018, the author had a third individual interview with Ray, for the purpose of knowing how he was getting along after graduation. To the author's amazement, Ray is undertaking his Masters in aeronautics. Thinking it would constitute a good longitudinal study, she contacted Ray for a 3rd interview. In all studies, group or individual, the author recorded each interview and then quickly transcribed and translated it for subsequent references, analysis and interpretation, hence revealing the features of rich empirical data in this paper.

³<http://geert-hofstede.com>

IV. CASE STUDY

A. *Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Academic Success: The Educational Dimension*

As past research shows, students encounter great challenges while taking international education, covering conflicting educational culture, diverse teaching styles, differing learning styles and strategies, and language barrier in particular. English language problems were revealed as the most mentioned by Asian students [9]. Kinnell articulates that an IELTS score ‘is of little value in itself when coping with an academic higher education course’, with his study showing 30.3% international students regarding English as a major problem during their overseas stay [10]. “Testing of international students’ English must be more rigorous to better prepare them for academic study” because it is quite common “for those with high marks to flounder when they get to university” [11]. Harris continued to comment that “despite the students’ best efforts, their language ability often doesn’t enable them to flourish on degree-level courses”. Xue reveals the deficiency of English language as most challenging for Chinese students while taking UK HE, with different accents being an even acuter issue [5]. She argues that English language proficiency is the transforming point in the “Capital-Identity Transformation” theoretical mode.

Like other international students, Ray experienced ‘culture shock’ and faced an immense challenge from the Chinese language barrier. Because CHE currently focuses on attracting more students overseas, most institutes hardly set any entry requirements in Chinese language proficiency. When the author had the first group interview with Ray and his schoolmates, each expressed that they had never previously learned any Chinese whatsoever (except 1 with a short learning history of 3 months). Upon arrival, they were totally at a loss. The “dual language barrier”, namely they could not speak Chinese and they could not understand Chinese teachers’ English [12], made learning so difficult. In a normal case, students could go to the library to catch up via self-study, but the computer language system turned out to complicate the situation even more. As a consequence of the Chinese language system in the library computers, these students did not understand a thing. While they carried their own PCs, they were not even able to access the internet in the library. When interviewed, Ray and the group showed great concern for the language issue. “The language barrier is even greater than the Great Wall” is the simile Ray used, which very vividly depicted the insurmountable barrier they encountered.

As it is, the institute did run a Chinese language training programme for international students, but unfortunately no one can actually improve their proficiency overnight. Besides, Ray, like other foreigners, was utterly devastated at the 4 tones in Chinese ‘*pinyin*’. The other thing worth mentioning is because of the shortage of teaching staff, some lecturers switch to teach subjects other than their own majors or research interests, which similarly constitutes a quality issue. Encountering such problems as “dual language barrier”, Ray was really worried that such an educational experience would affect the learning outcomes which in turn would make it difficult for him to find a job in future or pursue further study. At the group interview,

³The focus groups study was conducted to complete the key project in the “12th Five-Year Plan” of Education Science in Jiangxi Province in 2013, entitled “On the Cultural Adaptation of International Students in Chinese Higher Education”.

⁴The in-depth interview was conducted to complete the key project in the “12th Five-Year Plan” of Education Science in Jiangxi Province in 2015, entitled “A Study on the ‘Culture Shock’ of International Students in Chinese Higher Education”.

Ray only expressed his wish to complete the first degree and return home to get a good job.

When interviewed for the second time about 2 years later (see Table 1), Ray’s Chinese language problem seemed to have disappeared. He was confident and helpful. In fact, Ray was then helping other international students on campus, principally his compatriots, with cultural adaptation by picking them up upon arrival and acting as a student ambassador. At a 3rd interview over another 2 years later, Ray had already obtained his first degree and was taking his postgraduate programme in aeronautics in the same university. Looking back, Ray commented that the “dual language barrier” during his undergraduate study did not seem so much a big issue as at a postgraduate level because it was really high-demanding to read so extensively in Chinese language for a Master’s degree. In contrast, undergraduates mostly focused on textbooks and learning was easy. Luckily Ray got married with a Chinese girl after his first degree, which benefits him in improving the language proficiency fundamentally. This part investigates Ray’s educational experience in CHE by scrutinising his Chinese language proficiency, the computer language system and the teaching arrangement. The next part will examine Ray’s social experience, focusing on his communication and integration with the locals and friends-making.

B. *Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Academic Success: The Social Dimension*

This research shows that Ray’s social experience in CHE was not as pleasant as expected. Unlike Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, N, an inland city, is not so open even in the new century. Because the local people do not see foreigners often, it is self-evident that they are not so open-minded or friendly, or tolerant, neither have they acquired much cultural intelligence. In other words, the locals still need to raise their cultural awareness in the global age when things are internationalised. Although coming from Bangladesh, Ray has not encountered racial discrimination, which posed a huge issue for the Africans in the group, he was not happy to be viewed as an “Alien”. When asked, Ray and the group came to the consensus that Chinese hold an unfriendly attitude to foreigners, lacking a global vision. Ray remarked as below:

“..... if I go out with my Chinese friends, and meet with their other friends, I feel like they just look at me as an alien. You know this is very uncomfortable. You know if somebody looks at you like ‘oh, you are a foreigner. Where are you from? Why did you come to China? Why do you study in China?’ so many questions, it’s really terrible.”

Past research has shown that it was difficult for international students to make friends with home students [5] [13]. 15% of Chinese students said they had British friends [14]. This study shows that international students lack a sense of belongings. When asked, Ray and the group expressed a great pity that they could not participate in various activities organised for Chinese students exclusively, for that reason they lost a good opportunity to integrate. In the two follow-up in-depth individual interviews, Ray repeatedly commented that the international students lacked opportunities to be engaged in the events organised by the university. Besides, because of the

“dual language barrier”, Ray stated that he and his classmates never saw lecturers elsewhere but only in class. With academic problems and integration issues, Ray had to sort out himself just as all the other international students.

Ray is easy-going and sociable and he likes to make friends with Chinese. However, he believed that Chinese students made friends with him mainly to study English, detailed in the following remarks, an opinion shared by his group:

“I have some Chinese friends, but the main problem is most of them just say, ‘ok, teach me English’. They just want to learn English. But after a few days, it’s just not their interest.”

As a consequence, Ray’s majority of friends are Bangladeshi and other international students. They stay together and do things together, eating, shopping, chatting, seeing movies, going to the concert, go sightseeing and so on. As a Muslim, Ray also goes to pray with his compatriots. He believes they understand each other more because of the shared experience of being foreign, distanced from homes. Consistent with past research findings [5] [13] [15], this study once again reveals it difficult for international students to integrate with the locals and make friends with Chinese students.

C. Cultural Adaptation and Academic Success

Despite all the challenges he faced while taking CHE, Ray is the one who managed to adapt himself well to the host culture. When the author conducted a follow-up interview with him, he was taking his postgraduate study in aeronautics sponsored by the Chinese government funding, the only one among the whole batch. In the 3rd interview, Ray related his experiences in CHE with pride despite the fact that he once firmly said that he would complete his BA and return home to work. Apart from doing his postgraduate study, Ray is also helping his compatriots interested in CHE by providing them with recruitment information. He helps those on campus in their acculturation starting from pickup at the airport, registering with the police and hospital and subsequent adaptation to the Chinese culture and educational system. In his opinion, he has gone through all the challenges and learnt how to handle difficulties and his compatriots can avoid unnecessary troubles with his personal experiences in CHE.

When asked about his benefits from CHE, Ray showed his delight in making progress in Chinese language and his major which culminated in his being awarded the Bachelor’s degree. In his case, Ray even secured the Chinese government scholarship for his postgraduate programme. He is pleased to have acquired much Chinese cultural knowledge. Ray loves Chinese culture deeply and revealed that shortly after his arrival he got to know his girlfriend, whom he married after being offered a place for his Master’s. He considered himself very lucky to know his wife, who proved helpful in his subsequent study. At the 3rd interview, more than once he talked about his wife who played a critical role in improving his Chinese language proficiency and acquiring Chinese cultural knowledge. Ray was ambitious, thinking that he would pursue his doctoral study in USA after being awarded his Master’s. Still, he is somewhat worried about the language proficiency due to much reading and autonomous learning, deeming it very strenuous to complete his postgraduate.

As for the language system in the Chinese computers, Ray, like others from overseas, is using mobile / machine translation software, which solves the problem to a great degree. On the other hand, he also gets help from his Chinese friends. Most conveniently, Ray has installed proxy server, which makes it easy to access and download English reading materials. Through independent learning, Ray enriches his knowledge to complete his CHE.

To acclimate himself to the Chinese educational system and culture and to improve his social experience as an international student, Ray, on one hand, offered to be a student ambassador in helping pickups at the airport, registrations, making arrangements for new international students and settling-in. In qualifying himself to do so, Ray has to learn more himself. On the other hand, Ray endeavoured to make contacts with Chinese students by helping them learn English and befriending them. It should be noted that Ray’s personality of being friendly and easy to get along with works in this regard. As it turned out, Ray was somewhat smug about his engaging and integrating with the Chinese students and locals, Bourdieu’s so-called “a feel for the game” [3].

V. CONCLUSION

Along with the internationalisation of education in the global economy, CHE for international students has entered a new era. This paper examines how Ray, a Bangladeshi student, underwent cultural adaptation and achieved academic success in CHE and stayed on for his postgraduate with Chinese government scholarship. In other words, it scrutinises Ray’s educational and cultural experiences in CHE. This longitudinal study integrates the data from a focus group study and 2 follow-up in-depth individual interviews, revealing the richness and uniqueness in combining both qualitative and quantitative data. Ray’s love for Chinese culture and language and his coping strategies in adapting to the host culture and educational system all contribute to his successful acculturation, which provides implications for other international students. It concludes a successful cultural adaptation is crucial for students overseas to complete their education and achieve academic success in China.

REFERENCES

- [1] Murphy, R. 1986. *Culture and Social Anthropology: An Overture*, 2nd ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 14.
- [2] Hofstede, G. 1980. *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, 1st ed., Beverly Hills, Calif., Sage.
- [3] Bourdieu, P. 1990. In *Other Words. Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Translated by M. Adamson, Polity Press.
- [4] Arthur, N. 2004. *Counselling International Students, Clients from Around the World*, Kluwer Academic / Plenum Publishers, New York.
- [5] Xue, H. 2011a. *Cultural Adaptation and Personal Capital Formation: The Experiences of Chinese Students in UK Higher Education*, Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, China.
- [6] Xue, H. 2012. ‘Cultural Adaptation and Personal Capital Formation in the International Education — A Study of Chinese Students Undertaking UK Higher Education’, *Education Research Monthly*, China, 12, 44-48.

- [7] Xue, H. 2010. 'Acculturation and Academic Success in International Education — A Study of Chinese Students Undertaking UK Higher Education', *Education Research Monthly, China*, 12, 50-53.
- [8] Xue, H. 2011b. 'On International Education and Career Development — A Study of the Chinese Students Undertaking UK Higher', *Education Research Monthly, China*, 3, 27-31.
- [9] Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. 1984. *Study Abroad: A Manual for Asian Students*, Longman Malaysia.
- [10] Kinnell, M. 1990. *The Learning Experiences of Overseas Students*, SRHE and Open University Press: 21.
- [11] Harris, K. 2014. 'Degree-level Study without Language Competency Is Absurd'. *Times Higher Education*, 3-9 July, 26-27: 26.
- [12] Xue, H. 2016. 'On the Acculturation of International Students in Chinese Higher Education: an Educational Experience', *Education Research Monthly, China*, 7, 81-87.
- [13] Bochner, S., Hutnik, N. & Furnham, A. 'The Friendship Patterns of Overseas and Host Students in an Oxford Student Residence', *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1985, 125, 6, 689-694.
- [14] UKCOSA. 2004. *International Students in UK Universities and Colleges: Broadening Our Horizons. Report of the UKCOSA Survey*.
- [15] Xue, H. 2014. 'Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students in Chinese Higher Education — From the Perspective of Social Experience', *Education Research Monthly, China*, 11, 75-81.