

Original Paper

Acculturation and Social Competence of Chinese Students Studying Abroad: A Comprehensive Perspective

Yiyin Xu¹ & Yuan Cui¹

¹ Xi'an Tieyi High school, Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China

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Abstract

The research examines the acculturation of Chinese students studying abroad from a social competence perspective. The author developed a new concept “Cross-cultural socialization panic” to better understand and analyze the socializing problems that students meet in the process of acculturation. Drawing on 6 in-depth interviews, the article examines students’ level of acculturation from three aspects: Cross-cultural living experiences, cultural richness, and academic social ability. The article finds that it is common for students to have difficulty socializing well with foreign students. What’s more, the composition of an international student’s social circle depends largely on the number of Chinese people they have access to, as Chinese people have a strong sense of cultural identity and collectivism that prevents them from interacting with the local culture. However, when Chinese students engage in academic exchanges with professors, the more successful ones are generally purposeful and methodical. Theoretically, the article further discusses the application of this finding both theoretically and practically. This research can lead to a deeper exploration of both acculturation and social competence, as well as guidance for acculturation education in schools and students themselves.

Keywords

acculturation, social competence, cultural exchange, international students

1. Introduction

As China rises as one of the major economies in the world, it has become increasingly involved in the wave of globalization and its citizens are seeking opportunities to receive a western education (Institute of International Education, 2014b). According to the ICEF monitor, the record of Chinese students studying for a degree abroad in 2021 is a staggering 1,061,511, On top of which another 200,000 students are taking part in exchange programs. Chinese students have become an important part of the international student population, and each year more and more Chinese students choose to study abroad

for their undergraduate degree. The international student body, as is made up of so many Chinese students choosing to go abroad for further studies, is worth our attention. The state and society are obliged to take care of the level of physical and psychological well-being of these international students, which is to some extent determined by acculturation. This finding makes effective acculturation particularly important.

Previous studies have uncovered that the students reported various levels of frustration and misunderstanding arising from the mismatch between their own culture and that of the host country (Malcolm Lewthwaite, 1997). It is worthwhile to pay attention to how to adapt to the foreign cultural environment as soon as possible and get into the academic learning mode quickly. Reviews of the literature on the adaptation of international students emphasize the importance of social contact both in person and online. It is shown that the use of Social Networking Sites' contact with host country relations has a positive impact on online social support and host country participation, and appears to enhance the well-being of sojourners (Hofhuis, 2019). However, few researchers have paid attention to the socialization of the Chinese international student population on campus. To fill this research gap, a question about the acculturation of Chinese students studying abroad from a social competence perspective is raised.

There are two key concepts in the research, acculturation, and social competence. The cultural changes themselves are described as acculturation and their consequent psychological changes are termed adaptation (John, 1997). Social competence is defined as effectiveness in social interaction. Effectiveness is broadly considered and includes both self and other perspectives. It is also viewed as an organizing construct, with transactional, context-dependent, and goal-specific characteristics (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

Student perceptions of the institutional environment and dominant norms and values influence how students think and spend their time. Taken together, these properties influence student satisfaction and the extent to which students take part in educationally purposeful activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 1995). It is conceivable that a higher degree of adaptability to other cultures is conducive to academic success.

The three perspectives delineated by the author can be effectively applied in practice to help three groups: parents of international students, international high schools, and Chinese students preparing to study or already in the United States. From the perspective of international students' parents, the intercultural experience before going abroad contributes significantly to the student's adjustment, and they can then plan and provide their children with the opportunity to have an intercultural residential experience to help them better adapt to life abroad. For international high schools, this research can also clarified some of the directions of the acculturation courses offered and can give students some guidance from a professional perspective in advance. They can also help students and their parents have a better understanding of the acculturation aspects of choosing a school. For international students themselves, they can get more support from the outside about socializing with their peers. And also

better understand how to effectively build deep relationships with their professors in order to help them with their studies and gain more opportunities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Acculturation

With the steady progress of globalization, cross-cultural adaptation has gradually gained importance in various fields. There are studies based on cross-cultural adaptation in psychology, anthropology and philosophy. And researches focus on sociology integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization based on the attitude of sojourners. For example, Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) defined the concept of “acculturation” as something that when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups. And also categorized the related research topics and methods in the study “Memorandum on the Study of Acculturation”, which is regarded as the basis of future research on acculturation.

There are also many models established to help people understand acculturation. The representative ones are “U-curve hypothesis” (Lysgaard, 1955) and “W-curve hypothesis” (Gullahorn, 1963). What’s more, Colleen Ward (1999) put forward the “‘two-dimensional’ model”, which describes the process of acculturation and summarizes the influencing factors from the individual and social levels. And Danckwortt also developed the “Theory of Adaptation to Unfamiliar Cultures”, which comprehensively summarizes and analyzes the characteristics, domains, processes, and stages of acculturation. In addition, Adler (1975) proposed a five-stage theoretical assumption of acculturation from the perspective of intercultural communication. Previous research models primarily focused on understanding cultural conflicts and adaptation between colonizers, immigrants, and local cultures, with relatively few studies examining international students. This is particularly evident in China, where the cross-cultural research started later compared to other countries, resulting in a scarcity of analyses regarding the adaptation of students studying in the U.S. and their social competence.

2.2 Social Competence

In terms of social competence, research has been fruitful and various theoretical models exist. Among them, the ICC theoretical model proposed by Byram (1997) is one of the most influential models in this research field. It has four dimensions: attitude, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness. Research on this model is mainly based on the educational curriculum direction, focusing on knowledge and criticality, but less on attitudes specifically regarding intercultural adaptation and the application of specific skills. There is also research focusing on linguistic perspectives such as the concept of teaching English as a foreign language (ELF). The main focus is on helping overseas practitioners to acquire communicative competence that can be quickly adapted to the language and culture of other countries. There is a gap in the analysis of the Social Competence of student populations.

2.3 Accultuation and Social Competence

Synthesizing these two key defining aspects of research in the direction of acculturation, many scholars have encompassed socialization as a direction in their research. For example, one of the dimensions in Collen Ward and Antony Kennedy's Sociocultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS) is socialization, and the intrinsic structural dimensions of international students' sociocultural adjustment also include interaction adjustment. However, there are still few articles comparing and relating acculturation and social competence together. The article is going to explore these two important concepts for a group of international students together.

The author has subdivided the study into three aspects. First, the presence or absence of cross-cultural living experiences. Previous research has focused on the effects of cross-cultural experiences on various groups, such as the style of artworks, and there are also studies on the assessment of intercultural competence that use the length of residence as an important indicator. There are also studies on the assessment of acculturation that use length of residence as an important indicator. However, studies combining the two aspects are rather limited. Second, cultural richness (defined as the number of Chinese students in the school). While numerous cross-cultural adaptation studies have considered environmental factors, there is a noticeable lack of articles focusing on the number of students of the same culture in the school as the main subject of the study. The third one is about academic social ability which should be categorized as internal factors of individual students and is one of the most important branches of cross-cultural research, but few articles focus on the communication between students and professors as a distinct area of study. The purpose of this paper is to focus on specific factors and refine them based on previous research models to bring more insights into the understanding of acculturation development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Method

To address the research question, this article will check the differences in cross-cultural living experiences, cultural richness and academic social ability. The author will conduct in-depth interviews with six Chinese students aged between 18 and 25 who are studying in the United States. Their experiences will be categorized from each of the above three perspectives, and their social skills will be assessed. Interview questions will also be developed from these three areas, supporting the interviewees' freedom of expression. This can help to explore whether these three aspects have an impact on cross-cultural adaptation in terms of socialization. Below are definitions and modes of inquiry specific to these three areas.

Cross-cultural living experiences refer to whether they have lived or studied in the United States for a certain period before going there, and have accepted and learned about the United States to some extent. The author will categorize the respondents in this area into two groups: those who have intercultural life experience and those who do not. Exploring their social competence in acculturation by comparing

their socialization with local students.

Cultural richness refers to the likelihood of the respondents being exposed to Chinese students in their daily lives. The author will categorize the respondents into two groups, high and low likelihood, and explore the differences in their social circles and social competence. Particular attention will be paid to how the most socialized friends around the respondent were made and the background of their identity. Finally, it is about academic social ability. It means the communication between the respondents and their instructors that is used as a point of departure to determine the respondents' ability to utilize a variety of avenues to build an effective relationship with their professors. The author will focus on respondents who have close relationships with specific professors and explore how they utilize the avenues available to them to build relationships with their professors. This can be a very effective way to assess the respondents' ability to socialize with people who are not their peers and come from different cultural backgrounds.

3.2 Sampling

6 Chinese college students studying in the U.S were interviewed in this paper. They were chosen because all of these students had spent their high school years in Chinese international schools, and their primary contacts at home were Chinese, heavily influenced by Chinese culture. While some of the students had cross-cultural exchange experiences, most had earlier or shorter exposure and still adhered to traditional Chinese culture. However, they all chose to study in the U.S. in college, away from their native cultures and possessed a lot of their perceptions and discoveries in the process of accepting American culture. The students were between the ages of 18-25, four females and two males, one of whom was of American nationality and the rest of whom were of Chinese nationality. Only one interviewer was in the United States during the interviews, the rest were in their home countries (Table 1).

Table 1. Information of Respondents

Number	Gender	Age	University	Grade	Major	Cross-cultural experiences
1	Male	19	Johns Hopkins	Freshman	Engineer	Yes, 8 years
2	Female	19	Cornell	Freshman	Economy	Yes, 0.5 year
3	Female	19	Wake Forest	Freshman	Neurology	No
4	Female	19	Texas at Austin	Freshman	Math	Yes, 1 year
5	Female	19	UC Berkeley	Freshman	Environmental Science	No
6	Male	23	UCLA	Senior	Economy	No

The reason for highlighting the respondents with or without intercultural life experience in the table is that when selecting the respondents, the author intentionally chose the two categories of having

intercultural life experience and not having intercultural life experience. Because when people think of acculturation, the presence or absence of prior experience is one of the most directly influential factors. There is also a statement that the author needs to make: the materials used in this investigation were all in-depth interviews based on the three aspects the author divided.

3.2.1 Data Analysis

A codebook was created to analyze all data. Codes included: Cultural richness of the composition of the social circle, the presence or absence of close ties with professors, level of need for socialization and satisfaction, level of difficulty in adaptation compare with their first living experiences (if they have), willingness to initiate socialization with peers and non-peers, positive effects from previous intercultural experiences and methods for socializing.

3.2.2 Interviews

The text of the interviews was written by the author herself, and a semi-structured interview approach was adopted, with ten interview questions based on the three areas of inquiry delineated by the authors (presence of cross-cultural experiences, number of Chinese people in the school, and utilization of resources). Interviewees were mainly asked about their overall life, their relationship with their housemates, the composition of the social circle around them, and their socialization with professors and people outside the school. A guided interview was used to go deeper and deeper into the interview, based on the base of the interview questions but not limited to a stereotypical pattern, and try to make the interviewees be in an honest and pleasant chatting mode with the author, to obtain further and more realistic information from the interview.

3.2.3 Procedure

The author contacted international students who had already gone to the United States, mainly through study abroad organizations and the interview club she founded, and received a very positive response. One of the interviews was conducted in a café, and the rest of the interviews were conducted using the Tencent Meeting, which was recorded and claimed to be verbatim, and the author also took some notes. The market for each interview ranged from 20-80min, generally salty interviewees to exchange pleasantries, understand the overall university life and feelings, cut from the perspective of the blood, layer by layer, to explore different segments of the research content.

4. Findings

4.1 Background Information

The author completed efficient and harmonious interviews with six interviewees and also gained a better understanding of the definitions of Acculturation and Social Competence. In this paper, the understanding of Acculturation is mainly based on whether international students have a certain sense of belonging and comfort in their study and life abroad, and the author believes that acculturation is mainly determined by the external environment and internal personality. The first two of the three levels in this paper focus on the respondents' original and current foreign environments, while the last

one focuses on the respondents' behaviors. Since the six international students interviewed are all more outgoing, they are willing to take the initiative to socialize, but the degree of outgoingness is slightly different. Regarding Social Competence, this paper mainly focuses on whether the social circle meets the social needs of the interviewees. Since each interviewee has different social needs, it is most important for them to socialize according to whether they feel it is the most important thing for them to maintain a comfortable environment. This paper will focus on three main areas: the components and size of the social circle, whether one or two people are close, and how successful they are at socializing with people who are not their age.

The connection between acculturation and social competence also became clearer during the interviews, as the respondents' social lives became enriched, and their level of acculturation relatively stabilized as they developed relationships with specific individuals with whom they could confide their emotions. Socialization is one of the biggest parts of an international student's life besides academics and is essential to the process of cultural adaptation. Almost all the respondents interviewed encountered social barriers to a certain extent and reported that it was slightly difficult to socialize with local students in the U.S. The reasons for this difficulty will be elaborated on in the following section. Four of the six interviewees felt that they had fully adapted to living abroad, while two indicated that they still needed to explore.

4.2 General Findings

After interviewing these six students, the author found a commonality among them. All six students said that it was difficult to socialize with foreigners, three of them said that they had broken their assumptions about how easy it is to integrate into foreign social circles, and that the profound experience of cultural integration had also changed some of their thoughts. The author concluded this into a new concept "Cross-cultural socialization panic". For example, interviewee 3 said, "But what I felt this year was that I no longer wanted to "fit in" like that. In this melting pot of the universe, where everyone has their cultural background, the obsession of 'becoming more like those people no longer exists. Years of living in a different background also made me feel hard to understand some things in American culture." The author summarized the interviewees' responses to these difficulties into three areas: having a strong sense of personal space, unfamiliarity with popular culture, and the college environment. Since they all entered the university as international school students with a good foundation in the English language, the problems in language communication were not prominent. However, due to the difference in upbringing and family background, and also due to the prominence of Western individualism, it is difficult to establish long-lasting friendships as defined in traditional Chinese culture.

When there were opportunities to chat with foreign students, popular culture and unfamiliarity with the local environment made it difficult to carry on a long conversation, and academic topics were almost the only ones that could be explored in depth and for a long time. Interviewee 4 stated that "My school is a public university, he takes more local students, maybe they all met in high school friends high

school and then went to college together, and they already formed this social circle, it's hard for others to fit in." Another important impression factor is the university environment. The physical nature of university courses without a class system made respondents say that it was difficult to organize many classmates' outings on their own as they used to do in the past. For example, Interviewee 6 stated, "I just found that the first thing is that it's hard for you to get everyone together because everyone has a schedule of their own and they just do not want to get everyone together to do that."

4.3 Cross-Cultural Living Experiences

Three of the interviewees had cross-cultural living experiences before college, with their cross-cultural living time-frames being primarily during kindergarten and elementary school hours, one had up to eight years of U.S. residency, and the remaining two had residencies ranging from six months to one year. They uniformly felt that they only had an advantage in the language area because they all laid the foundation for their English learning at a younger age. Interviewee 1 stated, "I think the main time gap is too long, the communication of the foreigners they sometimes have some words that I don't understand, but I feel like I don't have as much trouble communicating with them, it doesn't sound as strange, that's the only thing that helps."

However, two of the interviewees said that Chinese people who attended middle school and high school in the United States would have an easier time integrating into the local culture because their level of understanding of the local culture would allow them to have more in common with the locals and their familiarity with the dating patterns would also help. For example, Respondent 2 said, "But I think they (US high school students) at least have their plans for the language and culture, and for their dating patterns, and their own recreational life." This tells us that mastery of language skills is not the more important condition to form social competence, rather it is more practical adaptive skills to ensure that students can integrate into the campus rules. Such as familiarity with the classroom environment, campus environment, etc.

4.4 Cultural Richness

Three of the students in this interview are in schools with a high percentage of Chinese students, and they meet many Chinese classmates in their daily lives, and their social circles are largely filled with Chinese students. The Chinese philosophy is one that of collectivism, where a group of people is more important than a single person, so a family, a class at school, a team at work, and the country as a whole are the really important units. Plus, in an unfamiliar environment, if there are familiar elements around, people will tend to move closer to gain a sense of security. Therefore, in the United States, Chinese students are more inclined to congregate, and if conditions permit and Chinese students fulfill their individual social needs, they are less inclined to actively reach out to foreign students. Interviewee 1 clearly stated that "maybe there are too many Chinese in our school, and we don't have many foreign friends, just very few because communicating with Chinese people in a group already satisfies our daily needs".

On the other hand, the other three interviewees, who have a relatively small percentage of Chinese in

their university, have all stated that it would add some difficulties to their socialization, but also because of the limited number of Chinese, they have to be forced to interact with foreign students. Respondent 4 had a positive attitude towards the small number of Chinese in his school and said, “we don’t have that many Chinese people in our school, so basically if that group work is always assigned, you will be grouped with foreign students, which on the one hand forces you to communicate with them.” Respondent 5 felt the same way but was significantly more frustrated with making friends and said, “I feel like our school is one of those schools where there are fewer Chinese. I think it will take some time to become close friends with foreigners.”

This finding does not necessarily mean that students in schools with more Chinese students will not have foreign friends, but that they will need to break out of their comfort zone more often. However, in schools with fewer Chinese students, it would be natural for students to reach out to foreign students and try to form friendships with them.

4.5 Academic Social Ability

Communicating with professors who are not their peers is also somewhat indicative of whether or not students have good communication skills with non-peers. Three of the six students interviewed developed very close relationships with specific professors, and all made efforts to get the professors to recognize and notice them. Because my interviewees usually had large class sizes, between one hundred and two hundred students, developing a close and effective relationship with their professors, required a lot of effort on the part of the students themselves.

All three students who had close relationships with their professors reported that they socialize with their professors on purpose. Spending time with professors who are not of the same age and who have a high level of academic authority is not only about being attracted to academic excellence, but it also involves needs that can be met for one’s benefit. Respondent 5 clearly stated, “And then after I got to know his [the professor’s] resume, I was very excited about his research, and maybe you’d want to be in his lab.” The channels of communication with the professors were relatively regular, including OH, email, and class time. What stands out about these three interviewees is that they would cut people in different directions, trying to find any way to get in touch with their professors. For example, sitting in the front row in class, participating in every OH of a specific professor, etc. However, the other three students who did not establish a close relationship with their professors did not mean that they were not willing to interact with their professors, but rather they did not take good chances because of some concerns about their professors’ attitudes and their personalities. Respondent 1 then said, “Just do not approach people in private, it just falls into the category of disturbing.”

5. Results and Discussion

This paper explains the acculturation of Chinese students while studying in the United States from the perspective of social competence and divides into three perspectives to be studied through interviews with innovative perspectives. To a certain extent, it breaks the stereotypical thinking that people with

cross-cultural experiences will later adapt better to the culture and analyzes whether cross-cultural experiences help people adapt to the environment more concretely and intuitively. The analysis of the number of Chinese people in students' social circles also innovatively combines the inherent ideology and group consciousness in psychology, which comprehensively analyzes the influence of specific people in specific environments on international students. The perspective of academic communication with professors also deepens the understanding of social competence by including professors who do not belong to the same peer group but also have a significant influence on students' lives and play an important role in the student's lives, to have a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the social situation of Chinese international students on U.S. campuses.

6. Conclusion

From a theoretical point of view, this study provides more specific dimensions and information about the social aspect in the dimension of acculturation, which helps to investigate acculturation and social competence in depth. The study refines the connection between the two definitions and creates a novel understanding through practical interviews, providing much theoretical guidance and direction for research in both dimensions. From a practical application point of view, this research not only provides space for international schools to explore intercultural adaptation programs but also facilitates international students themselves to analyze their behaviors and confusion. Since many international students experience a lot of anxiety caused by their inability to adapt to the new environment after going abroad, psychological problems may arise if they are not properly intervened. This study will help to prevent these problems from happening, so that more universities can see the importance of acculturation and more students and their parents can look at these social problems properly. What's more, it can also provides international students information about how to choose university that will fit their personalities more and better considerations will be taken.

Due to the limited time and resources, the number of people interviewed and the diversity of respondents are limited, the results of the survey are not well covered, the author will try to get more data in future studies to summarize more comprehensive results.

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