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Article Title: Chinese Students' Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustments to Britain: An Empirical Study

Year of publication: 2006

Link to published version:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07908310608668753>

Publisher statement: This is an electronic version of an article published in Spencer-Oatey, H. et. al. (2006). Chinese Students' Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustments to Britain: An Empirical Study. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, Vol. 19. pp.37-53. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* is available online at: <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/0790-8318>

# **Chinese Students' Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustments to Britain: An Empirical Study**

Helen Spencer-Oatey and Zhaoning Xiong

(To be published in *Language, Culture and Curriculum*)

## **Abstract**

This paper reports an empirical study of the psychological and sociocultural adjustments of two cohorts of Chinese students taking a foundation course in English language at a British university. Using Zung's (1965) Self-Rating Depression Scale and a modification of Ward and Kennedy's (1999) Sociocultural Adaptation Scale, quantitative data were obtained on the students' adjustment experiences, and these were correlated with other variables such as grade point average, age and length of stay in Britain. Interview data provided a richer picture of their experiences. The study found that the majority of students had few psychological or sociocultural adjustment difficulties. Nevertheless, social interaction with non-Chinese was consistently identified as problematic and this, as well as difficulties in adjusting to daily life, were very highly correlated with psychological stress. End-of-course grade point average was found to be negatively correlated with the psychological stress experienced near the beginning of the academic year. The paper calls for further research to follow up these findings, and concludes with a list of suggestions for universities to help address overseas students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment needs.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Chinese Students, Culture Shock, International Students, Psychological Adjustment, Sociocultural Adjustment

## **1. Introduction**

A recent survey report by UKCOSA states that "it is a major concern that two of the largest national groups on campus (Greek and Chinese students) mainly socialise with fellow nationals or other international students on campus." (UKCOSA 2004: 67) Unfortunately, very few studies have explored in detail the experiences of Chinese students or, in fact, those of any overseas students at British universities; most research has been conducted in the USA, Australia and New Zealand. This study is an attempt to start redressing the balance.

The paper focuses on the psychological and sociocultural adjustment experiences of two cohorts of Chinese students at a British university. It reports quantitative and qualitative data and discusses the practical implications of the findings. No assumptions are made as to whether the Chinese students are similar or different to other international students; further research is needed to ascertain this.

## **2. Models of Cultural Adjustment**

A number of different models of cultural adjustment (e.g. Bennett, 1986; Berry, 1990; Kim, 2001) have been proposed, but one that we have found particularly helpful is that developed by Colleen Ward and her colleagues (e.g. Ward, 1996; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). Ward maintains that there are two main types of adaptation outcome, psychological and sociocultural, and that these outcomes are influenced by a range of individual level variables and societal level variables. Psychological adaptation concerns people's sense of physical and psychological well-being;

sociocultural adaptation concerns people's sense as to how well they can 'fit in' to the new environment.

Psychological adaptation is best understood from a stress and coping perspective. Naturally, everyone is subject to stressful events and circumstances; it is not unique to overseas students, let alone just Chinese students. Going to university can often be a major adjustment for British students, in that they may be leaving home for the first time, sharing accommodation with comparative strangers, learning to cook, dealing with financial pressures and debt, and finding out what is expected of them at university. All of these adjustments can take their toll in terms of general psychological well-being, and so the students can become stressed, anxious and maybe depressed. However, the number of significant life changes that overseas students experience is typically higher than for home students, so their risk of psychological ill-health is even greater.

Sociocultural adaptation is best explained within a social skills or cultural learning paradigm. Several authors have identified different domains of sociocultural adaptation; for example, Black and Stephens (1989), who have researched intercultural adjustment in the management field, specify the following three domains:

- General adjustment (managing daily life)
- Interaction adjustment (relating effectively to host nationals)
- Work adjustment (accomplishment of work-related objectives)

For overseas students, academic adjustment is clearly one of the main domains, although work adjustment may still occur if they have a part-time job. Their interactional adjustment also involves getting on well with other overseas students, from a range of countries, not just with British students.

### **3. Previous Research on Overseas Students' Adjustments**

A number of studies have attempted to identify the problems experienced by overseas students. Crano and Crano (1993) developed the *Inventory of Student Adjustment Strain*, which requires respondents to consider if a particular item represents a personal strain for them and, if so, the extent to which they are affected by the problem. They administered this 60-item questionnaire twice to more than 220 students, from five different South American countries, who were studying in the USA for a year. A factor analysis of the results yielded six sub-scales: education, host family, language, 'culture shock' problems (e.g. dietary concerns, health), personal welfare (e.g. homesickness) and social (e.g. dating). They report that the problems associated with language and 'culture shock' precipitated significantly more strain than difficulties in other areas.

UKCOSA (2004) have recently announced the results of a survey of overseas students studying in Britain. They received 4796 valid responses from students at higher education institutions and further education colleges in Britain. Their report identifies social integration as a key problematic issue.

The difficulties of ensuring that international students integrate – socially and in classes – with home students is a recurring theme both in our study and in many others, raised by both students and staff. The lack of opportunities to mix with a wider cross-section of British society is also widely noted. ... We found that international students were much more closely integrated with co-national and other international students, with 59% counting most of their friendships in one of these categories. Only 32% counted their friends as a mixture of UK and international students, and only 7% were friends mainly with UK students rather than international students.

UKCOSA, 2004: 66–7

The psychologist Stephen Bochner has studied the friendship patterns of overseas students (e.g. Bochner, McLeod & Lin, 1977) and has found that people tend to belong to three distinct social networks that each serve important but different psychological functions. The networks, their memberships and their typical functions are shown in Table 1.

<b>Network</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Typical Function</b>
<b>Primary Monocultural</b>	Co-nationals	Provide close friendship (compatibility of cultural and ethnic values)
<b>Secondary Bicultural</b>	Significant host nationals, such as academics, fellow students, advisors and officials	Help the student succeed at university and adjust to the new culture
<b>Tertiary Multicultural</b>	Other friends & acquaintances	Provide companionship for recreational and non-task-oriented activities

Table 1: Bochner *et al.*'s (1977) Functional Model of the Friendship Patterns of Overseas Students

Bochner' *et al.*'s functional model maintains that overseas students use social networks in different ways. For example, they prefer local students for help with language and academic difficulties, but co-nationals for emotional support. Nevertheless, Ward and Kennedy (1993) found that a greater amount of interaction with host nationals was associated with fewer social difficulties, improved communicative competence and facilitated general adaptation to life overseas. Moreover, other research studies have found that social integration and having local friends is linked with lower levels of stress (e.g. Redmond & Bunyi, 1993), fewer psychological adjustment problems (Pruitt, 1978), and that satisfaction with host national relations predicts better psychological adjustment among international students (Searle & Ward, 1990).

#### **4. Research Procedure**

This study collected two types of data: questionnaire data and interview data.

##### **4.1 The Respondents**

The research was carried out at a new university over two academic years. It involved two cohorts of Chinese students who were taking a one-year foundation course (IFC) in (academic) English language prior to starting a degree course. The university itself was concerned about the welfare of the Chinese students on this foundation course, since they formed such a high proportion of the students. The research was funded by the university.

A questionnaire was completed by all the Chinese students on the foundation course in the academic years 2000–1 and 2001–2; there was a total of 126 respondents. They all had an English proficiency level of IELTS 5.0–5.5, but they were very heterogeneous in terms of background. Some were mature students with work experience, others were new university graduates, and still others were middle school leavers. Some were planning to proceed to a bachelor degree course, whilst others were planning to take a master's degree course. There were roughly equal numbers of men and women (56%:43%), they varied in age from 17 to 37, and 68% of them had been at the university for 3 months or less.

Interviews were conducted with some of the respondents and with the teaching staff.

## 4.2 Cross-Cultural Adaptation Questionnaire

As explained in section 2, Ward and her colleagues propose that cross-cultural adjustment may be meaningfully divided into two domains: psychological and sociocultural. The former refers to people's psychological well-being, and the latter relates to their ability to 'fit in' to the host culture. Furthermore, Black and his colleagues (e.g. Black & Stephens, 1989; Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991) indicate that there are three distinct facets to sociocultural adjustment: adjustment to work, adjustment to interacting with host-country nationals, and adjustment to the general environment of the host country. Yet another vital factor is motivation because "[I]f a goal is not perceived as a goal and an obstacle as an obstacle, no purposeful (goal-directed) movement and no obstacle-related (coping) behaviour will occur" (Anderson, 1994). The Cross-Cultural Adaptation Questionnaire was thus designed to achieve the following objectives:

- to assess the extent to which students were experiencing psychological adjustment problems;
- to assess the extent to which students were experiencing sociocultural adjustment problems;
- to assess the importance that students attached to sociocultural adjustment;
- to identify which of the domain(s) 'university academic life', 'contact with people' and 'daily life', and which specific issues were perceived as (a) most/least difficult and (b) most/least important to adjust to;
- to explore whether demographic and other variables had an impact on the above measures.

Zung's (1965) Self Rating Depression Scale was used to probe psychological adjustment. This scale has been found to have cross-cultural reliability and validity, and it is frequently used in the field of cross-cultural adaptation, including the adjustment of international students (e.g. Ward & Kennedy, 1999). It comprises 20 items describing various symptoms of depression, and respondents have to rate them on a four-point scale to show how frequently they are currently experiencing them.

The Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS), which has been developed by Ward and her colleagues (Ward & Searle, 1991; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward & Rana-Deuba 1999), formed the foundation of a questionnaire to probe sociocultural adjustment. The SCAS is a reliable, valid and flexible instrument that "can be easily modified according to the characteristics of the sojourning sample" (Ward & Kennedy, 1999: 662). Using their items as a foundation, a 36-item scale was designed to probe the three domains of university academic life (14 items), contact with people (15 items) and daily life (7 items). Respondents had to rate these items on two 5-point scales, one to show the extent to which they were currently experiencing difficulty with the items, and the other to show how important they regarded them to be. The latter was used as an indication of their motivation to adjust.

Altogether, the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Questionnaire was a 7-page document. The cover sheet explained the purpose of the research and assured respondents of the confidentiality of their responses. Respondents were asked to provide the following background information: nationality, gender, age, length of stay at the university, previous overseas experience, future field of study, type of residence (e.g. university hall, English home) and general impression of the university. The respondents' grade point average was obtained from the course co-ordinator at the end of the academic year.

The English version of the questionnaire was translated into Chinese with the help of several bilingual Chinese people. However, instead of just administering a Chinese-version of the

questionnaire to the IFC students, it was decided that a bilingual version should be used. This was because it was more natural and convenient to administer the questionnaire in class, and it would have been awkward to omit the small number of non-Chinese students present.

The questionnaire was piloted with a sample of Chinese students who were not going to take the IFC course the following semester. The internal reliability of each of the scales was found to be very high, and so no major changes were made to the questionnaire. However, following some verbal feedback, some minor adjustments were made to the instructions and to some of the items, in order to improve the clarity of the wording.

The final version of the questionnaire was administered in class to all students about three months after the beginning of the academic year. One of the researchers went to each of the classes, briefly explained the purpose of the study and reassured them about the confidentiality of their responses. Both researchers were members of the department and familiar by sight to the students (one was an applied linguistics lecturer and the other was a PhD student who had previously been an EFL teacher in China); however, neither of them had any teaching or pastoral responsibility for the foundation students.

### **4.3 Interviews**

Interviews were conducted in Chinese with twenty of the respondents, who were assured of the confidentiality of their comments. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher who conducted the interviews sat in on the classes, and got to know the students during the breaks. In this way rapport and a sense of trust was built up.

In selecting students for interview, the aim was to include an appropriate range and balance across the following criteria: age (young and mature), field of future study (physical science, social science, business) and type of accommodation (university hall, host family, house shared with Chinese, house shared with UK/non-Chinese students). Two of the interviews were conducted with a pair of students; the other interviews were conducted individually.

The interviewees were asked about the issues probed in the questionnaire; namely to talk about their experiences of daily life, their social interaction with others (Chinese, British and other nationalities), and their academic studies. In addition, they were asked about issues that could affect their anticipatory adjustment, such as their reasons for studying abroad, factors affecting their choice of destination country and institution, how the arrangements were made study, and their prior knowledge of Britain, their chosen institution, and their course of study. The interviews were semi-structured, so that all the issues were covered in each of the interviews, but not necessarily in identical orders. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

## **5. Questionnaire Results**

The internal consistency of the three scales was very satisfactory. The alpha coefficients were as follows:

- Psychological adjustment: 0.79
- Difficulty of sociocultural adjustment: 0.93
- Importance of sociocultural adjustment: 0.91

This indicates that the scales were highly reliable measures.

## 5.1 Psychological Welfare

Scores from Zung's (1965) Self-rating Depression Scale can range from 20–80. Below 50 is regarded as within the normal range; 50–59 is regarded as evidence of minimal or mild depression; 60–69 is regarded as evidence of moderate depression; and a score of 70 or above is regarded as evidence of severe to extreme depression (Fountoulakis, *et al.*, 2001).

The distribution of scores for the respondents is shown in Table 2.

Score on Zung Scale	Frequency	Percentage
< 50 (normal range)	116	92.1
50–59 (minimal/mild depression)	8	6.3
60–69 (moderate depression)	1	0.8
70 and above (severe to extreme depression)	0	0

Mean = 38.09, SD = 7.50, n = 125 (1 missing case)

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents' Scores on Zung's Self-Rating Depression Scale

As can be seen, the vast majority of the respondents showed no undue psychological stress, but 7.1% of them showed signs of clinical depression, including one case of moderate depression.

## 5.2 Sociocultural Adjustment

The mean item degree of difficulty in sociocultural adjustment was 2.31 (s.d. = 0.6) (1 = no difficulty; 5 = extreme difficulty) and the mean item degree of importance in sociocultural adjustment was 3.62 (s.d. = 0.54) (1 = no importance; 5 = extreme importance). Mapping these mean item scores onto the scale labels on the questionnaire indicates that most respondents attached moderate to great importance to sociocultural adjustment, and that they only had slight to moderate difficulty in achieving it. Looking at the distribution of scores, it was found that 65.9% of the respondents rated their overall difficulty as slight or minimal, 32.5% rated it as moderate and 1.6% rated it as great.

Tables 3–6 show the items that were rated as most difficult, least difficult, most important and least important respectively. These were identified as follows: the percentage of respondents rating a given item as 'difficult/important' (scale rating of 4–5) and as 'not difficult/not important' (scale rating of 1–2) was calculated; then the top 9 (upper quartile) and the bottom 9 (lower quartile) were selected.

Rank	Items	% of Respondents rating it as of 'great difficulty'
1	Understanding jokes and humour in English	46.4
2	Making friends with British people	41.6
3	Dealing with physical closeness and touching in social settings	35.5
4	Carrying on with your favourite leisure activities	34.9
5	Writing up papers that can earn you good grades	31.2
6	Dealing with the staff working in the finance or accommodation office	30.2
7	Talking about study issues with students of other nationalities after class	28.8
8	Making friends with people of other nationalities apart from British	26.4
9	Starting a conversation with people of other nationalities and	25.6

	keeping it going	
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Table 3: The Nine Items rated as of 'Great Difficulty' by the largest number of respondents

Rank	Items	% of Respondents rating it as of 'little difficulty'
1	Contacting your families or friends through email/telephone	90.5
	Buying daily necessities	90.5
3	Making friends with your own countrymen	88.8
4	Completing coursework on time	83.2
5	Getting used to living independently from your parents	81.7
	Getting used to the local climate	81.7
7	Getting used to the teaching methods	80.8
8	Using computers to do your coursework	78.4
9	Getting used to the pace of life in [name of town/city]	77.4

Table 4: The Nine Items rated as of 'Least Difficulty' by the largest number of respondents

Rank	Items	% of Respondents rating it as of 'great importance'
1	Writing up papers that can earn you good grades	91.9
2	Expressing clearly your ideas in class	84.8
3	Understanding lectures	83.7
4	Taking notes of key points of lectures	79.8
5	Reading and understanding materials recommended by your tutors	78.4
6	Getting gused to being grouped with students of different nationalities	77.4
7	Obtaining the books and journals you want in the university library	77.2
8	Participating in the discussions in class	76.8
9	Getting used to the teaching methods	76.6

Table 5: The Nine Items rated as of 'Great Importance' by the largest number of respondents

Rank	Items	% of Respondents rating it as of 'little importance'
1	Getting used to the local climate	54.4
2	Getting used to the local food	47.2
3	Being with other nationalities of the opposite sex	45.6
4	Being introduced to new people of different nationalities	39.5
5	Buying daily necessities	35.2
6	Taking part in local social events	33.1
7	Dealing with physical closeness and touching in social settings	30.6
8	Getting used to the pace of life in [name of town/city]	29.6

9	Carrying on with your favourite leisure activities	29.0
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Table 6: The Nine Items rated as of ‘Least Importance’ by the largest number of respondents. As can be seen from the tables, the 9 items judged to be of greatest importance were all concerned with academic adjustment, whilst the 9 items judged to be of greatest difficulty were nearly all to do with intercultural contact, either with British people or with people of other nationalities. The items rated to be the least important and the least difficult were mostly to do with daily life.

When the scales measuring difficulty and importance of sociocultural adjustment were constructed, they were designed to probe three different aspects: daily life, academic life, and social interaction. So factor analyses were carried out on each scale, and in both cases, three factors emerged which, judging from the content of the items, corresponded very closely to these three categories. The factors accounted for 45.4% of the variance for the sociocultural difficulty scale and 43% of the variance for the sociocultural importance scale. The factor loading of the items was then used to construct sub-scales for sociocultural difficulty and sociocultural importance. Not all the items were retained for this; only those with a minimum primary loading of .40 and with a secondary loading of at least .20 less than the primary loading. Each of the six sub-scales (three for sociocultural difficulty and three for sociocultural importance) showed high internal consistency, with alpha scores of between 0.75 and 0.90.

Table 7 shows the mean item scores for the six sub-scales:

	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Difficulty of Sociocultural Adjustment</b>		
Social Interaction	2.68	.88
Academic Life	2.24	.72
Daily Life	1.89	.66
<b>Importance of Sociocultural Adjustment</b>		
Academic Life	4.25	.66
Social Interaction	3.46	.73
Daily Life	3.02	.83

1 = no difficulty/importance; 5 = extreme difficulty/importance

Table 7: Mean Item Scores and Standard Deviations for the Sub-Scales of Sociocultural Adjustment

As can be seen from Table 7 the respondents attached importance to all three domains, with adjustment in academic life being regarded as particularly important. In terms of difficulty, social interaction was judged to be the most difficult and daily life the least difficult. These results are consistent with the ranking of items shown in Tables 2–5.

Correlations were then calculated between each of the scales and sub-scales and also with the students’ end-of-course Grade Point Average (GPA), age, length of stay at the university, and previous overseas experience. Tables 8 and 9 show the results for variables that yielded one or more significant correlations.

	Psychological Stress	Perceived Importance of Sociocultural Adjustment	Perceived Difficulty in Sociocultural Adjustment	Grade Point Average	Age
Psychological Stress		n.s.	.495**	-.237*	n.s.
Perceived Importance of Sociocultural Adjustment	n.s.		.250**	n.s.	.198*
Perceived Difficulty in Sociocultural Adjustment	.495**	.250**		n.s.	n.s.
Grade Point Average	-.237*	n.s.	n.s.		N/A
Age	n.s.	.198*	n.s.	N/A	

Table 8: Correlations between the Scales and the Variables that yielded one or more significant associations

	Perceived Difficulty in adjusting to:		
	Academic Life	Social Interaction	Daily Life
Psychological Stress	.315**	.409**	.519**

Table 9: Correlations between Psychological Stress and the Sociocultural Adaptation Sub-Scales

s can be seen from Table 8, psychological stress was significantly negatively correlated with end-of-course GPA. In other words, the greater the stress people experienced, the lower the marks they tended to obtain at the end of the course. Furthermore, psychological stress was very significantly positively correlated with perceived difficulty in sociocultural adjustment. As Table 9 shows, this correlation was strongest for daily life and weakest (but still strongly correlated) for perceived difficulty in academic adjustment. A multiple regression analysis, using standard method of entry, showed that only perceived difficulty in daily life was a significant predictor of psychological stress.

## 6 Interview Comments

This section focuses on the comments that the student interviewees made about their daily lives and social interaction experiences. It does not include their comments about academic matters, partly because of space limitations in this article, and partly because these two factors were so strongly correlated with psychological stress (which in turn was negatively correlated with academic success).

It was originally hoped to explore the interviewees' experiences in relation to three groups of people: British (staff and students), Chinese co-nationals, and non-Chinese overseas students. However, the interviewees had a strong tendency to use just two categories, Chinese and 'foreigners'. They did not systematically distinguish between local and overseas students, and tended to refer simply to 'foreigners' unless they were talking about specific individuals.

## 6.1 Daily Life

### 6.1.1 Accommodation Issues

The main aspect of daily life that people wanted to talk about was their accommodation. Presumably financial pressures were a problem for many, but this was not explored in the interviews.

Most of the interviewees were very satisfied with the physical conditions of their accommodation, and many talked about the sharp contrast with the conditions they had experienced in China. However, almost all of them found the social environment of their accommodation to be problematic, particularly the noise (loud music and shouting by people who are drunk) and the mess in the kitchen.

*They played rock music or had fun very crazily. I couldn't understand them. I think they are old enough to behave in a more mature way. But no, they were chasing each other in the corridor or slamming doors loudly. The kitchen was a total mess. The used plates were piled up for a week unwashed in the sink.*

YQ, Mature female student

The interviewees held somewhat different views about how to handle this. Some felt that their complaints to the 'offenders' were ignored, and negative feelings towards the other nationalities began to develop, as can be seen from the following comment:

*Comparatively speaking, when you complain to Chinese students, they will behave themselves somewhat better, but the non-Chinese students will almost ignore you. They don't care.*

YQ, Mature female student

Others felt a more assertive approach was effective:

*To me, or in fact, to all other Chinese, we are unhappy about the noise made by the non-Chinese, who tend to play music very loud. I mentioned this to them several times. I have complained to some guys in our flat. Actually, they haven't been too bad, normally turning down the volume a bit after 10pm. The key is you need to talk to them. If you don't, they won't change. Normally they will listen, at least, they will be more careful, making less noise closing the window or the door.*

GL, Mature male student.

Those who lived with a local family reported other difficulties: lots of constraints, and difficulty in holding interesting conversations with British hosts. As a result, many of the interviewees preferred to share a house with co-nationals rather than live in a hall of residence. They were aware that this reduced their opportunities for speaking English, but felt they gained more psychologically.

### 6.1.2 Coping with an Independent Lifestyle

For the younger students, learning to live independently in Britain was a challenge.

*There's more pressure from daily life because you've got to handle everything properly. You can't afford to have things go wrong. Sometimes, you feel you simply can't cope. Letter after letter, all of them come to you. ... Some of the letters are really important, others are just junk mail. But when you first come here, whether they are important or junk mail, they all rush into your mind and overwhelm you. Particularly, when your English is not very good and you can't understand the letters well, for instance those coming from the bank, then you get very anxious.*

ZB, Young male student

Coping with part-time work was also a challenge, especially the psychological impact of working in a very different environment.

*When you first look for a job, you've got a kind of strong feeling. It's not because you look down on the job, after all it's a job. But you know when you enter that kind of environment which is totally different from your previous work experience and lifestyle, you feel tense. You think you are dependent on them and you need this job, but then you worry they are not satisfied with you and then you think you are a pre-Master student of a certain calibre.*

YQ, Mature female student

## 6.2 Social Interaction

Social interaction is important for several reasons. For example, it can provide friendship and thus help meet people's social/affective needs; it can be a source of practical help; it can help improve language proficiency when the interaction is with speakers of other languages; and when it occurs across cultures/nationalities, it can provide opportunities to learn about other cultural groups. Yet according to our questionnaire data, social interaction was the aspect of sociocultural adjustment that the respondents perceived as the most difficult.

### 6.2.1 Social Interaction with British People

Most of the respondents commented that they had little opportunity to meet and mix with British people. Since all of them were taking a foundation course in English language, there were no British students within their classes. So those students who were sharing a house with other Chinese students had extremely limited opportunities to meet and interact with British people.

Those living in halls of residence or working part-time had more opportunities. However, some were reluctant to interact because of lack of confidence in their English language ability. Many others maintained that they found it difficult to make true friendships because of the differences in lifestyle and values.

*There are some chances for general interaction. We often have some chats when we meet. But you can't take the initiative to get into their lives. The interaction is relatively superficial, not deep. No, it's not lack of chance. For me, I find it hard to accept many of their customs.*

GL, Mature male student

Many of the interviewees complained about the superficiality of their interaction with British people, and some objected to the negative comments that were sometimes made about China.

### 6.2.2 Social Interaction with Overseas Students of Other Nationalities

Compared with their experiences of interacting with British people, the interviewees appeared more satisfied with their experiences of interacting with overseas students of other nationalities. There was a tendency to mix more with Asian students than European students, because of the smaller amount of cultural difference, and some respondents also commented that they were less intimidated speaking in English with other overseas students.

*Although other international students don't speak English as well as English native speakers, they can express themselves and we are at the same level. It is different from speaking with English native speakers – their English is so good that they are impatient with your poor English. I feel under less pressure when I talk to other international students.*

YD, Young male student

### **6.2.3 Social Interaction with Chinese Co-Nationals**

For all the interviewees, their most developed social network was with Chinese co-nationals. Some emphasised how effective it was in providing them with emotional support; others pointed out that Chinese friends were much better at providing practical help. However, despite the emotional and practical benefits of having sufficient Chinese friends, many interviewees commented on the disadvantages that arise when the proportion of Chinese students is very large.

*Too many Chinese students is no good, because it's not like living abroad. It's like being at college in China. Given the choice, I would choose a university with less Chinese students.*

DS, Young female student

### **6.2.4 Institutional Provision and Support**

The interviewees reported that they had very rarely used the support services at their university. This was partly because they were unclear what services were available, and partly because they were dubious of their value to them.

Several complained that there were not enough activities to help overseas students mix with home students, and one person (a mature female student) was particularly critical of the student union for failing to play a more facilitative or supportive role in helping students from different cultures get to know each other. She argued that a pub culture predominated, and that the student union ought to arrange a wider variety of activities that would be of interest to international students.

## **7 Discussion**

The findings from this study can be summarised as follows:

- The majority of the respondents were not experiencing undue psychological stress, although a minority reported symptoms of minor depression;
- The majority of the respondents attached considerable importance to sociocultural adjustment;
- The majority of the respondents reported little difficulty in sociocultural adjustment, especially in their daily lives. Adjustment in social interaction emerged as the most problematic;
- Interviewees reported clash of values and lack of things in common as reasons for their low level of social interaction with British people;
- The respondents' level of psychological stress (3 months after arrival) was significantly negatively correlated with end-of-course GPA; no other variables were significantly correlated with GPA;
- There were highly significant positive correlations between psychological stress and all three sociocultural sub-scales; they were highest for daily life and lowest for academic life.

Further research is now needed to ascertain whether similar findings emerge with other cohorts of Chinese students (at different levels of study and at different universities) and whether other nationality groups show similar or different patterns of adjustment. In addition, it would be helpful to carry out more longitudinal studies, in order to map over time students' motivation to adjust and perceived difficulties in doing so. It would be particularly helpful to explore the interrelationship between psychological stress and academic performance. Intuitively it seems that each could influence the other; however, the fact that difficulties in daily life and social interaction were more highly correlated than academic difficulties with psychological stress suggests that non-academic factors need to be considered very carefully.

Clearly, it is important for universities to do all they can to ease the daily life adjustments that students need to make. Further research is needed to explore how much impact social interaction with other nationalities has on psychological adjustment, particularly for students on relatively short courses and with a substantial number of co-nationals. Nevertheless, it seems sensible for universities meanwhile to do all they can to promote all aspects of sociocultural adjustment.

The issue of cultural values is something that needs to be reflected upon carefully. It is very hard for people to form genuine friendships with those whose lifestyles are extremely different from their own, especially when they are living together in close quarters and are personally affected on a daily basis. The drinking culture in the UK and the lack of social considerateness shown by some students can be particularly problematic for those brought up with different traditions and values. However, as Bochner *et al.*'s (1977) model of friendship networks makes clear, there is a need for different types of relationships that fulfil different functions. For healthy social integration, students need monocultural, bicultural and multicultural friendship networks.

What practical steps, therefore, can universities take to address these issues? The following are a few suggestions.

- a. We need to be realistic in acknowledging that monocultural networks play an important role in providing a small number of close friendships. We need to facilitate the formation of monocultural networks, especially for minority nationalities who may have difficulty finding co-nationals and who may feel offended at being mistaken for another nationality (e.g. when someone assumes that a Japanese person is a Chinese). One way of helping this would be to set up online 'compatriot clubs', where people can register if they wish, and through this can search for other students of the same nationality (or other variable). However, we need to remember that the most important function of monocultural networks is for close friendship, not necessarily for recreational purposes. If too many social activities are organised for specific dominant nationalities, students of minority nationalities can feel very left out.
- b. We need to promote effective interaction between overseas students and university staff (one component of a good bicultural network). This entails providing good documentation on the host environment and support systems available, and ensuring that both academic and support staff are equipped to offer appropriate help and support. Part of this involves intercultural awareness training, but perhaps even more importantly, it means recognition by university authorities of the demands that this makes on academic and support staffs' time and emotional energy. Universities need to commit financial resources to ensure that their staff can give the support to overseas students that they need and deserve.
- c. We need to offer orientation programmes for overseas students that help to promote sociocultural adjustment, and to carry out research into their effectiveness. The University of

Portsmouth, for example, is just starting a study of this kind. The programmes should be offered not just at the very beginning of the year, but at regular intervals, partly because many students arrive after the initial orientations, and partly because their adjustment needs vary over time.

- d. We need to encourage British students to take an interest in other cultures and to learn more about intercultural issues. The University of Luton, for example, offers an introductory module in intercultural communication as an elective to all Year One students. Up to now, more overseas students and Asian and black British students have taken it than white British students, but greater efforts could be made to promote it across the whole student body. Again, it would be useful to monitor the effectiveness of such programmes.
- e. We need to find more ways of promoting contact between overseas students and the local British community. Students could be informed about opportunities for voluntary work in the community, and encouraged to take part in them at some point during their studies. Similarly, more local people could be encouraged to befriend overseas students, pointing out that the benefits are typically mutual rather than one-way. One possibility would be to hold some 'open' cultural events where people can be put in touch with each other.
- f. We need to facilitate multicultural networks, by organising activities such as sightseeing excursions, cultural evenings and so on. Many universities are already doing this very effectively, but it is particularly important that bodies such as the Students' Union take cultural diversity properly into account, and promote more social activities that are not so closely linked with the pub and with drinking.

Needless to say, this is not an exhaustive list. As with the UKCOSA (2004) report, we hope that this study will provide "a starting point for all concerned to review and develop the many processes, procedures and services which affect the experiences of international students in the UK" (UKCOSA 2004: 78).

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