

International Students' Acculturation in China

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Abstract: With the development of globalization, more and more international students are pursuing their studies in China. The adjustment issues faced by these students should be explored in order to ensure the students' successful transition to the host country. This study aims at exploring the cultural adaptation of international students studying in China and their interests in the Chinese culture.

Keywords: International students; Acculturation; Chinese language; Chinese culture; Intercultural communication

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1. Introduction

The international mobility of students has a long history. However, it was not until the 21st century that the number of international students began to increase rapidly. With the rapid development of globalization, internationalization of higher education enables student exchange to flow in all directions, not just from the east to the west, but also from less developed areas to the more developed ones. China began accepting international students from 1950, and from 1950 to 1978, when China started to adopt reform and opening policies, the country hosted 128,000 international higher education students, most of whom came from socialist and developing countries ^[1]. Since then, international enrollment in China has been rising consistently. China is now hosting 7% of the 3.9 million international students worldwide, falling only behind the United States, the United Kingdom, and France ^[2]. In 2018, 1,004 Chinese universities, colleges, institutes, and other educational organizations hosted 492,185 international students from 195 countries and regions ^[3].

Studies on international students in English-speaking countries are abundant, but minimal attention is given to foreign students in China. With the number of international students on the rise, their adjustment to the Chinese culture becomes an important issue. International students and their adjustment issues should be explored as it is essential to ensure their successful transition to the host country. This study aims at exploring the cultural adaptation of international students studying in China and their interests in the Chinese culture by interviewing two international students who are learning the Chinese language in a university in Beijing.

Two research questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the major differences between the Chinese culture and their own national culture?
- (2) How do they adapt to the host culture, and in their opinion, what are the positive and negative aspects of the host culture?

2. Literature review on international students' acculturation in China

In recent years, China has grown from an insignificant player to a major destination in the global market

for international students. A recent study conducted in 2003 used Shanghai as an example to examine the experience of international students in China. The author found that their satisfaction level with their studying and living experience in China is low (Xiaojiang Ding, 2003).

International students (n = 330) from 57 countries participated in a survey, which was designed to measure their adaptation to the Chinese sociocultural and educational environments through five aspects: (1) cultural empathy; (2) open-mindedness; (3) emotional stability; (4) social flexibility; (5) language proficiency. The authors concluded that the first year is the critical period for cultural adaptation as there are significant changes in some adaptation indicators over the first year but thereafter, the changes in these indicators are less significant ^[4].

A qualitative study engaged five international graduate students from four different countries who were studying at a university in Shanghai for a period of 1 year. Factors such as language proficiency, engagement with the culture, and the power of native language in relation to their sense of belonging were discussed ^[5].

This study explores the experience and interaction of two international students studying in China. The purpose of this study is to explore international students' intercultural transformation, adaptive personality, host communication competence, and interpersonal communication in the host culture.

3. Research method

3.1. Context

The author works at the International Student Affairs Office of F University (a pseudonym) in Beijing, the capital city of China. With the rapid growth of international students in China, this university has also witnessed a considerable expansion. Different cultures come together and collide with each other. In view of that, all kinds of issues arise, some might be caused by cultural differences, not only the differences between their ethnic culture and the host culture, but also the clash among different ethnic cultures. In order to reveal how international students adapt to the Chinese culture and to determine if their background affects the acculturation process, two international students from different countries with very different cultures were interviewed in this study.

3.2. Participants

Dan and Su (pseudonyms) were invited to an interview on cross-cultural communication. Dan is from France, while Su is from Egypt. Both of them have been staying in China for one semester (about 4 months). They came primarily to learn the Chinese language; however, they had learned the language for some time in their home countries. Dan had passed HSK 4 and is preparing for HSK 6 (HSK is short for "Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi," a Chinese language proficiency test with six levels); he is very confident with his language proficiency and had decided to skip HSK 5. Su had sat for HSK 3, 4, and 5, in which he passed all the tests; however, he is not satisfied with his HSK 5 results, so he intends to retake HSK 5 in a few months' time. Both of them chose to stay in F University during the winter vacation, in order to learn more about the Chinese language and Chinese culture.

3.3. Interview

In order to explore their acculturation process and problems, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the two participants at the same time to find out their experiences in cross cultural communication. The interview lasted for about 20 minutes; it was conducted in English and was tape-recorded and later transcribed by the author. Some details were further clarified via WeChat after the face-to-face interview.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Dan and his obsession with traditional Chinese culture

Dan is definitely a “xueba” in his Chinese friends’ eyes. From the day he set foot in China, most of his time was spent on learning the Chinese language and Chinese literatures. He is extremely obsessed with traditional Chinese culture. He was a teacher who taught French to foreigners when he was in France. Being asked the reason of why he chose to learn Chinese, he replied by saying that he thought it was a natural process. It began when he befriended a few Korean people. From there, he started to learn Korean and found that there are some Chinese characters in the Korean language, which seemed beautiful to him. He was mesmerized by the beauty of the Chinese characters. In order to gain more knowledge about the mysterious characters, he started to learn Chinese in one of the Confucius Institutes in France. There, he met his girlfriend who was an exchange student from China; she was of significant help in his journey of learning the Chinese language. His interest in the language and its culture grew every day, so he decided to visit China to explore the culture from a firsthand experience. Since he has a lot of Chinese friends in France, he was able to adapt to the life in China smoothly.

Dan is a member of the calligraphy club in F University. He is an excellent amateur calligrapher, and after only four months, he has written in brush calligraphy, played guqin, and composed a Chinese poem. His obsession in traditional Chinese culture and his rapid improvement surprised everyone. A famous media in Beijing even had a two-day follow-up shot of his university life. Unlike most of his classmates, Dan studies Chinese history and traditional Chinese culture in addition to the Chinese language. During the interview, he mentioned, “I am the kind of person who likes advanced stuff; I would ask my teacher what the most beautiful Chinese sentences are, and I would look for Chinese idioms and learn the stories behind those idioms.” Dan spends a lot of time reading Chinese classical works as he said, “I think it is interesting, I can learn Chinese culture and Chinese language at the same time; as I learn more, I become more attracted by the traditional Chinese culture.” He argues that it is a pity that complex-formed characters are not used anymore. He plans to apply for a master program in ancient Chinese at another university in Beijing to further his studies. He also intends to work in China after he obtains his master’s degree.

In fact, in his eyes, most things in China are not much different from those in France. One distinctive issue he mentioned during the interview was the different understanding of politeness. In China, when meeting a friend, it is common to say, “Let’s have dinner together next time,” but in fact, the day never comes; it is just a courtesy expression, but to Dan, he thinks it is impolite to make an appointment that would never happen. Another major difference between Chinese culture and French culture is in their education. In Chinese culture, it is well-recognized that teachers have the authority in the classroom and are expected to be revered and obeyed ^[6]. Dan was aware of the cultural differences and tried to adjust himself to the new environment. In French universities, they usually do not have textbooks; teachers would find their own teaching resources, and after lessons, students would read the books recommended as they hardly have any homework. In regard to time, undergraduate students spend about 20% of their time learning from teachers, another 20% practicing in order to use the new knowledge, and 60% for self-learning, while for graduate students, time for self-learning occupies up to 90%. This shows that students have enough time and freedom to learn based on their interest. In Chinese universities, undergraduate students still use prescribed textbooks, and there are piles and piles of homework. It takes Dan almost an hour to complete his homework every day. He mentioned, “I have never seen my Chinese friends learn by themselves, they just learn for the sake of the test. Sometimes they just recite contents from textbooks, and no matter what their opinion is, there is only one correct answer to the test questions, so they may not have enough critical thinking. In fact, critical thinking is very important, if an individual’s argument is reasonable, there are unlimited answers. In France, it is impossible for students to obtain high grades by reciting from books, you must have your own thinking.”

Modern China is not very different from France, so conflict seldom occur, and acculturation is seemingly not an issue for Dan. However, Dan's concern is quite unique. Since, in China, international students have a separate dorm building, Dan lives in a double room with an Italian student. He came to the International Students Affairs Office once and asked if it is possible to stay-in with a Chinese student instead because he wants to improve his Chinese and his roommate is always speaking to him in English. Moreover, he found that most international students in F University do not study as hard as Chinese students; he feels more comfortable with Chinese students because they love learning as much as he does. Unfortunately, according to the regulation, universities are required to arrange separate dormitories for international students; thus, the university was unable to meet his requirement. Despite that, it may change in the future, currently international students do not have enough opportunities to communicate with Chinese students. If they live together, it might help them to learn more about the Chinese culture and allow them to use the Chinese language more frequently, especially for those who really want to learn.

4.2. Su and his understanding of the importance of Chinese language

Su came from Egypt; he was a tour guide in Egypt, and he came across many Chinese tourists before. He thought if he could understand Chinese, it would be helpful for his work. Therefore, he started to learn Chinese by himself for five months, and thereafter, he applied to a Confucius Institute in Cairo University and studied for a year. He received a scholarship from the institute for a one-year Chinese language program in F University. His teachers in Cairo University are Chinese; they helped him a lot, and he is very grateful to what they have done for him. From his viewpoint, Chinese people are very friendly and warm-hearted. He lived with a Chinese friend in Cairo for a few months and found that Chinese people are easy to get along with. Alike Dan, studying in China has been a pleasant experience for him with barely any issues in adaptation.

Su believes the Chinese culture is very similar to his own culture, but he had the same confusion as Dan about making appointments that would never come through. While his understanding is different, he pointed out it might be because of the busyness in China. Chinese people are always busy with their studies or work; as a result, they seldom have time for recreation. Chinese people have too much pressure, while in Egypt, people have a lot of time to do what they want to do. In regard to education, comparing with Dan, his opinion is just opposite, where he claims that the education in Chinese universities is much more positive. In Egypt, students only push hard before the final exam, but in China, students have to work hard throughout the whole semester. In view of the amount of tasks they have to face on a daily basis, they do not feel stressed out approaching the final exam. Students do learn more in this kind of teaching system.

Su wants to further his studies in F University by applying for the master program in Chinese language after he finishes the current program. He plans to return to the tourism industry or become a Chinese language teacher in Egypt.

5. Conclusion

The research synthesized above corresponding to the two research questions suggests that first, there are only very limited differences between Chinese culture and the national cultures of the two participants. Second, the acculturation of international students into the host culture is seemingly not a big problem as some studies have stated. It might be the result of a combination of different factors. First, comparing with international students in western countries, international students in China receive very specific orientations and services upon arrival at their universities. These consist of a large number of responsibilities and activities. In view of the careful and thorough services, international students feel that it is much easier to integrate into the new environment. Second, since the rapid progress of globalization, the world is a global

village, people from all over the world have diversified channels to communicate, and different cultures are colliding and fusing. International students have the opportunity to learn about the host culture before they begin their learning journey in the host country. Moreover, the assimilation of worldwide cultures help international students feel that the host country is not a strange world. In addition, with the rapid development of China's economy and modernization, life becomes more convenient. International students even marvel at the "four great inventions" (high-speed train, mobile payment, shared bikes, and online shopping); this came from an interview of several international students from 20 different countries. Finally, some international students who come to learn Chinese are really interested in the language and culture, others believe it would be helpful for their future career and development. Their feelings toward Chinese culture are mostly positive, and their proficiency in Chinese language indeed contributes to their acculturation.

Both participants felt that education is one of the major differences, but their perspectives are quite opposite. It gives an implication that when universities design their teaching systems, adopting different teaching methods to teach students from different cultural background may improve the teaching quality. There are still some limitations in this study. There are only two participants from two different countries; hence, their experience may not be enough to prove the conclusions. In addition, the two students were interviewed together; their response to the questions may have affected one another.

Despite the limitations, the present study may have some practical significance for international education in China. The rapid influx of international students into Chinese universities should draw educators' attention to the importance of intercultural communication. As shown above, the participants' learning of Chinese culture is mostly voluntary and experiential. Therefore, it is imperative for university educators in China to incorporate intercultural understanding into the curricula for international students. Besides, traditional Chinese culture may be the key that attracts international students; hence, it might be valuable to offer more courses on traditional Chinese culture.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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