

# Problems and Strategies: A Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Undergraduates in the Philippines

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**Abstract:** Investigating the intercultural adaptation of Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines provides an effective example of bridging the gap between theories of intercultural adaptation. A questionnaire and interviews were conducted to explore the problems and challenges faced by Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines, thereby providing some first-hand information for subsequent studies on cultural adaptation. Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines faced four main challenges, namely interpersonal communication, living environment, social services, and course study. As coping strategies, four suggestions are presented, including cultural integration, life experience, bridge building, and rational docking.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural adaptation; Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines; Problems and strategies

**Online publication:** November 24, 2022

## 1. Introduction

Research on intercultural adjustment in mainland China began in the 1950s, and as the number of international undergraduates from various countries continued to grow, researchers began to focus on the social and cultural adjustment problems that undergraduates encounter in foreign countries. What is cross-cultural adaptation? Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the process of adapting to foreign culture that results from successive exposure to individuals and groups <sup>[1]</sup>. Since the 1980s, researchers have begun to use empirical research to study the various scenarios that international undergraduates encounter when adapting to changes in their cultural environment <sup>[2,3]</sup>. Research on the cross-cultural adaptation of international undergraduates in China has primarily focused on developed countries. For example, Yan Kun <sup>[4]</sup> and Xiao Wenyue <sup>[5]</sup> have investigated the cultural adaptation of Chinese international undergraduates to the United States and put forward a series of practical suggestions; Huo Chunyan *et al.* <sup>[6]</sup> have proposed several coping strategies for undergraduates with regard to their adaptation ability in light of current education methods; Yao Jinan <sup>[7]</sup> have conducted a comprehensive study on Chinese international undergraduates in Japanese universities from three dimensions: psychological adaptation, socio-cultural adaptation, and academic adaptation. Recent studies have started to focus on cold countries abroad. For example, Tian Lina and Zhang Hongli <sup>[8]</sup> have investigated the life adjustment ability of Chinese undergraduates in Russia, while Pei Haiyin <sup>[9]</sup> has conducted an empirical study on their academic adjustment ability. However, only a few studies have focused on the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese undergraduates in Southeast Asian countries. As one of the countries in Southeast Asia, the Philippines has become an emerging and strategic educational research group for international undergraduates. In the context of promoting international

communication strategy between China and the Philippines, Tagalog undergraduates have become an important talent pool for cooperation and development between the two countries. Since 1937, Tagalog has been recognized as the official language of the country and is spoken by the majority of Filipinos<sup>[10,11]</sup>; it pushes cooperation in the three pillars of security, development, and humanities to a deeper level<sup>[12]</sup>. Since then, humanities have become a new platform for the development of friendship and commonality between China and the Philippines. Many higher education institutions in China and the Philippines have responded positively to the country's call to attract more Chinese undergraduates to the country. The study of the cross-cultural exchange experiences of Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines has important practical and theoretical significance for economic construction. The cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines was investigated using questionnaires and interviews, the problems and challenges were identified, and effective and constructive suggestions are proposed in this paper.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Research questions**

- (1) What challenges do Chinese undergraduates encounter in the Philippines with regard to cultural exchange?
- (2) What are the feasible measures to develop the cross-cultural adaptation skills of Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines?

### **2.2. Participants**

Fourteen Chinese undergraduates majoring in Tagalog, studying in the Philippines, were selected for the study. The average age of the undergraduates was 19.8 years, with a male to female ratio of 3:11. 64% of the undergraduates were from Beijing, Shandong, Hebei, and Liaoning, while 36% were from Sichuan, Hubei, and Hainan. Prior to studying in the Philippines, 54% had more than one week of overseas experience (in developed countries, including Europe and the United States), 90% had pre-trip training, and 81% of the undergraduates reported some understanding of the Philippine culture.

### **2.3. Questionnaire and interview**

Firstly, 14 questionnaires were distributed through Wenjuanxing, of which 11 valid questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic information, social-cultural adjustment scale, and feedbacks. The socio-cultural adjustment scale was composed of 22 questions, covering six domains, including living environment, interpersonal interaction, service patterns, civic awareness, social support, and language adaptation. The third section comprised an open-ended question: "What challenges have you encountered with regard to cross-cultural adjustment in the Philippines?". All questionnaires were submitted anonymously to ensure the authenticity of the data. Secondly, three undergraduates (male to female ratio of 1:2) were randomly selected for a semi-structured interview. The interview questions were based on the results of the questionnaire with the aim of testing the findings and filling in certain gaps.

### **2.4. Data acquisition**

For the questionnaire section, all data were downloaded via Wenjuanxing. The first section concerning demographics was sorted by hand. Taking into account the rating results from the socio-cultural adjustment scale, difficulty analysis was conducted with a 5-point Likert scale, ranking from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The difficulty factor was calculated by dividing the score by the total score. When the difficulty factor was  $\leq 0.20$ , it was considered not difficult; when the difficulty factor was  $> 0.20$  but  $\leq 0.40$ , it was considered slightly difficult; when the difficulty factor was  $> 0.4$  but  $\leq 0.6$ , it was considered

moderately difficult; when the difficulty factor was  $> 0.6$  but  $\leq 0.8$ , it was considered difficult; when the difficulty factor was  $> 0.8$  but  $\leq 1.0$ , it was considered very difficult. The third part, consisting of the open-ended question, was subjected to thematic word frequency analysis. Meaningless conjunctions and prepositions were excluded, but thematic nouns with real meanings were retained and analyzed for their frequency and proportion. For the interview part, all data were professionally transcribed and manually decoded and sorted; the results were fed back to the subjects for effective corroboration.

### 3. Results

The socio-cultural adjustment scale was analyzed. **Table 1** presents the subjects' ratings of cross-cultural adaptation in terms of living environment, interpersonal interaction, service patterns, civic awareness, social support, and language adaptation, as well as the difficulty coefficients for each domain.

**Table 1.** Summary of cross-cultural adaptation

Domain	Survey items	Full score	Score	Average score	Difficulty factor
Interpersonal interaction	Daily life communication	55	32	2.91	0.58
	Maintaining friendships	55	36	3.27	0.65
	Participation in the community	55	39	3.55	0.71
	Understanding of conversational humour	55	42	3.82	0.76
	Cultural and human understanding	55	31	2.82	0.56
	Intercultural exchange	55	32	2.91	0.58
Living environment	Climate	55	19	1.73	0.35
	Diet	55	31	2.82	0.56
	Accommodation	55	22	2.00	0.40
	Rhythm of life	55	31	2.82	0.56
	Means of transport	55	37	3.36	0.67
	Shopping	55	28	2.55	0.51
Social support	Administrative aspects	55	31	2.82	0.56
	Legal aspects	55	28	2.55	0.51
	The issue of religious activities	55	34	3.09	0.62
Service model	Restaurant and shop services	55	22	2.00	0.40
	Government and public sector services	55	29	2.64	0.53
	Related medical services	55	29	2.64	0.53
Language adaptation	English adaptation	55	17	1.55	0.31
	Tagalog adaptation	55	25	2.36	0.45
Awareness of public morals	Obeying traffic rules, <i>etc.</i>	55	12	1.09	0.22
	Adaptation of the health environment	55	26	2.36	0.47

According to **Table 1**, Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines faced moderate difficulty in adapting to their living environment in general and showed weak adaptation in interpersonal communication (0.64). The subjects were moderately adaptive in daily life communication (0.58), understanding of culture and people (0.56), and communication with different nationalities (0.58), with the most difficult adaptations being maintaining friendships (0.65), participating in club activities (0.71), and understanding of conversational humor (0.76). In their daily interpersonal interactions in the Philippines, Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines had average challenges in simple daily communication with the Filipinos. The main challenge is the difficulty in establishing and maintaining deep friendships with the Filipinos and

participating in club activities together. This is reflected in four main areas. The first is the different ways of getting along with each other. Undergraduates from China are reluctant to express their opinions, but they have a keen sense of time and work well independently, whereas Filipinos are enthusiastic by nature, but they lack a keen sense of time and prefer working in teams. As an example, in group work, Chinese undergraduates have to be pushed into participating by Filipino undergraduates; therefore, Filipino undergraduates mistakenly believe that Chinese undergraduates are lazy. Secondly, some of them still hold prejudice against China, maintaining that China is a closed market and can only produce products of low quality. Due to this prejudice, when communicating, they also involuntarily substitute such stereotypes, causing unnecessary misunderstandings on both sides. Thirdly, their social habits and common topics differ greatly. In China, people tend to use social media such as WeChat, Tencent, and Weibo, whereas Filipinos prefer using Twitter, Messenger, and Facebook to communicate, receive important notices issued by universities, and keep up to date with trending news in their country. Fourth, they are tired of coping with schoolwork and lack motivation to initiate conversations. As reported by the respondents, they are usually under pressure from schoolwork; they do not have the time and energy to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural background and personality traits of their Filipino friends.

The overall adaptation in terms of living environment was moderate (0.50), with international undergraduates being less adaptable to means of transportation (0.67); moderate in terms of food (0.56), pace of life (0.56), and shopping (0.51); and more adaptable to accommodation (0.40) and climate (0.35). According to the results from the interviews, there is a significant difference between China and the Philippines in terms of basic transport facilities, environment, and choice of transport. During peak traffic hours, traffic jams are common and tend to affect travel, causing delays in studies and everyday tasks. The Filipino university canteen does not provide Chinese food, so undergraduates often have to make their own food or eat out if they wish to eat Chinese food. Due to cultural influences, the pace of life in the Philippines is relatively slow, which is a significant contrast from the efficient and fast-paced life in China. In terms of shopping, the overall response was that there are too few options. Chinese undergraduates have complained that shopping in the Philippines is polarized, with either high-end brands or low-end products. Chinese undergraduates are more adaptable to and less affected by the climate and accommodation.

In terms of social support, the undergraduates' adaptation to administration (0.56) and law (0.51) was moderate, but their adaptation to religious activities (0.62) was weak, mainly because Chinese undergraduates do not practice religion and are somewhat lost due to their lack of understanding of religious practices and cultural taboos. In terms of service patterns, their overall adaptation was good (0.51), specifically in relation to medical services (0.53) and government public sector services (0.53); however, their adaptation to restaurant and shop services (0.40) was even stronger. During the interviews, the respondents felt that the content of the pre-trip training was somewhat limited as it only covered instructions on the process of going abroad, safety precautions, *etc.* There was a lack of guidance on social services, such as administration; moreover, the culture learnt was mainly about traditional culture, with a lack of introduction to current trends and popular culture.

Their strong language adaptation (0.39) and civic awareness (0.34) did not affect the overall intercultural adaptation experience. In terms of language, their adaptation to English (0.31) was better than that to Tagalog (0.45), mainly reflecting the fact that undergraduates often do not understand when they are taught in Tagalog. In terms of civic awareness, international undergraduates were more adaptable to traffic rules (0.22) and slightly less adaptable to a hygienic environment (0.47).

The above figures indicate that Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines are less adaptable in areas where there are significant political, economic, and cultural differences between China and the Philippines, such as interpersonal communication, living environment, and social services.

The responses to the open-ended question and interviews were decoded, categorized, and subjected to word frequency analysis, which in turn revealed the characteristics of the challenges of cross-cultural adjustment to life in the Philippines, as shown in **Table 2**.

**Table 2.** Word frequency analysis of the open-ended question on cross-cultural adaptation

Keyword	Word frequency	Ratio
Tagalog (Filipino)	9	25%
Culture	7	19%
Study	7	19%
Interpersonal	4	11%
Thinking	3	8%
Diet	2	6%
Life	2	6%
Society	1	3%
Climate	1	3%

**Table 2** shows that the most mentioned factor was Tagalog (25%), in which international undergraduates are weakly adapted to. There are communicative barriers with Tagalog as their main communication tool for both learning and living, which largely affects their cross-cultural adaptation. This study found that culture (19%), learning (19%), interpersonal (11%), and thinking (8%) were moderately weighted, indicating that Chinese undergraduates were able to cope. In terms of academic learning, the sum of the percentages of Tagalog, culture, learning, and thinking was 71%, indicating a weak adaptation. The low percentages for food (6%), living (6%), society (3%), and climate (3%) indicate good adaptation. Their cross-cultural adaptation is also challenged by course work. The interviews revealed that the challenges related to course learning related have a close association with the development of language skills and the structure of course knowledge, academic language, and learning activities. Firstly, the curriculum is different. The Philippine curriculum is arranged as an undergraduate course for local university undergraduates. It includes the society and culture of the Philippines as well as its history, literature, linguistics, and feminist studies. In China, its curriculum focuses on the development of language talents. There are significant differences between the two. Secondly, the goals of the knowledge structure are not clearly articulated. While the Chinese mainly focuses on the three elements of language, namely phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar, the Filipino side develops undergraduates' linguistic competence and analytical assessment skills. As a result, Chinese undergraduates tend to struggle with classroom activities, including discussions and after-class assignments. Again, the academic language adaptation process requires a considerable amount of time. In the Philippines, Filipino is the primary language used in classroom, with English as a secondary language. Foreign teachers' speaking speed and the use of jargon in class may make it even more difficult for international undergraduates to understand. Furthermore, the discussion learning model is difficult. The differences in cultural backgrounds and knowledge structures as well as the lack of academic terminology awareness among international undergraduates lead to collaborative learning with Filipino undergraduates with equal demands, thus making it difficult for Chinese undergraduates to cope, especially with writing.

The results of the questionnaire (**Table 1**) and the interviews (**Table 2**) were generally consistent, with slight differences in language adaptation. The difficulty in language adaptation as reflected in the questionnaire was lower than that reflected in the interviews. The reason for this is that the language adaptation reflected in the questionnaire referred to the difficulty of applying English and Tagalog together

in life, whereas in the interviews, the interviewees emphasised more on the difficulty of applying Tagalog in life and academic scenarios.

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of the questionnaires and interviews showed that Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines are generally weakly adapted to cross-cultural exchange. Specifically, Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines are strong in terms of service mode, civic awareness, and language adaptation, but weaker in terms of living environment, social support, course study, and interpersonal interaction.

First, it is difficult for the undergraduates to adapt to interpersonal interactions in terms of maintaining friendships, participating in clubs, and understanding Filipino; Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines adapt well in terms of daily communication, understanding of culture and people, as well as communication between different nationalities. The main reason for this is that there are differences in cultural, linguistic, and social habits between Chinese and Filipino undergraduates. These factors do not affect the basic life communication among Chinese undergraduates, but they pose various challenges to building and maintaining deeper friendships. In order to address these challenges, both sides should strengthen their cultural integration. On the one hand, Chinese undergraduates who are going to the Philippines should learn about the culture there and gain as much information through as many channels as possible before they arrive in the Philippines by chatting with Filipinos through the internet, so as to adapt to the communication mode in advance. After arriving in the Philippines, they should take the initiative to communicate and express themselves, rather than avoiding problems or closing themselves off. On the other hand, they should learn about and attempt to use the social media platforms that Filipinos use, so that they would be able to synchronize the information obtained. In addition, Filipino universities should educate their undergraduates about the basic national conditions of both countries, eliminating biases and misunderstandings during communication.

Second, in terms of living environment, Chinese undergraduates are more adaptable to the climate and accommodation. The year-round temperature in the Philippines ranges from 23°C to 34°C, which is comparable to the temperature in China during summer and autumn. In addition, there are no significant differences in the accommodation environment. What they find difficult to adapt to is the food habits, the pace of life, the means of transportation, and the shopping options. The reasons for this are the different cultural backgrounds of the two countries, the state of economic development, and the infrastructural development. Knowing how to resolve these uncontrollable factors in advance is an effective way to deal with them. In order to gain a quick and realistic understanding of Filipino life, undergraduates should consider taking a short trip to the Philippines before beginning their studies. In this way, the undergraduates will be able to adjust psychologically to their new environment once they arrive at their universities in the Philippines. In terms of transport, undergraduates should plan ahead and avoid travelling during peak traffic hours. In terms of food, undergraduates can cook on their own based on their own needs, and the school should also consider providing Chinese food in the canteen to make up for the shortfall. In terms of shopping, undergraduates can seek help from the locals to find a shopping center that is able to meet their demands.

Furthermore, the undergraduates are not able to adapt well to their social environment in terms of social support. Chinese undergraduates are moderately adaptable in dealing with administrative and legal issues. As university undergraduates who have not yet ventured out into the society, Chinese undergraduates have little exposure to administrative and legal matters, and they do not have a good understanding of the Filipino political and legal system. Therefore, Chinese and Filipino universities should build bridges for their undergraduates. It is important for the sending and receiving universities to improve their guidance systems and to arrange for dedicated and experienced staff to guide undergraduates through relevant issues. On the other hand, pre-departure training courses should be up to date. In addition to introducing the process of

going abroad and the “Dos and Don’ts” in the pre-departure training courses, the popular culture of the Philippines at the present times should also be introduced while taking into account of real-life scenarios, rather than limiting it to traditional culture. Moreover, an introduction to religious culture is essential; the characteristics, etiquette, and taboos should be clearly stated in the cultural adaptation sessions. In short, the training should be highly relevant, professional, and practical.

Fourth, the overall adaptability of the undergraduates to the curriculum is weak. The main reason for this is the lack of articulation in the curriculum and learning patterns between Chinese and Filipino universities. The challenges are mainly reflected in capacity building, knowledge structure, academic language, and discussion learning. Firstly, pre-departure training undergraduates are provided with curriculum resources and teaching materials on the Filipino side of the curriculum for targeted training and discussions. Furthermore, language knowledge and language skills are quickly addressed in accordance with the requirements of the Filipino curriculum. International undergraduates are trained in Tagalog through audio-visual materials to help them overcome the hurdle of academic language adaptation. It is also possible to develop comprehensive language skills in Tagalog through reading. Chinese undergraduates should also be provided with the Filipino teaching model. However, it has also been suggested that Filipino universities should adjust their curriculum design to satisfy the needs of Chinese undergraduates.

In terms of interpersonal interaction, Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines reported significant cultural differences between China and the Philippines. The latter has long been under Western colonial influence and is very different from the typical Chinese culture. The international undergraduates are more adaptable to the environment because the climatic conditions are largely comparable, but they are less adaptable to social support, mainly because of the significant differences in the political and social systems in China and the Philippines. The differences in their adaptation to course study are attributable to the differences in the education system, teaching philosophies, language skills, and religious cultures between China and the Philippines. Therefore, the cultural differences can be narrowed by strengthening cultural exchanges and promoting deeper integration through cross-cultural adaptation.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study selected Chinese undergraduates studying Tagalog in the Philippines as the research subjects and conducted an extensive analysis of their cross-cultural competence, including interpersonal interactions, living environments, social support, and academic study, through questionnaires and interviews. The results of this study indicate that Chinese undergraduates in the Philippines are having difficulty adjusting to their new culture. The differences in the political system, religious culture, language ability, and curriculum between China and the Philippines have contributed to the challenges that Chinese undergraduates face in terms of cross-cultural adaptability. Therefore, China and the Philippines should strengthen political, economic, and cultural exchanges to achieve deep cultural integration, with an aim of reducing the cultural differences between them. The limitations of this study are the small number of participants, the small number of questionnaires, and the single method of data collection. Future studies should ideally involve in-depth research that is supported by sufficient data.

## **Funding**

Support received from Humanities and Social Science Research Project of Higher Education in Anhui Province (No. SK2020A0248) and Research Fund Project of Anhui Medical University (No. 2022xkj015).

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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