

Research on the Cultural Identity of International Students

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Abstract: With the deepening of educational internationalization in China, an increasing number of international students are choosing to pursue their studies in China. The training of international students should be based on the management mode of “convergence management.” Convergence management is a process involving multicultural exchange and interaction, and its essence lies in strengthening the cultural identity of international students. In this paper, the current status of international students’ cultural identity is summarized, and several coping strategies are explored, with the goal of fostering outstanding international students possessing sound professional knowledge, global perspective, and Chinese feelings.

Keywords: International students; Cultural identity; Coping strategies

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1. Introduction

In 2010, the Ministry of Education initiated the “Study in China Program”^[1]. The year 2020 marked the achievement of China in “becoming the country with the largest number of international students in Asia.” According to the 2018 statistics by the Ministry of Education, there are currently 492,200 international students from 196 countries and regions studying in 1,004 universities in China. International student education has entered a critical transition period of “improving quality and efficiency.” The training quality of international students needs to be further improved, the cross-cultural adaptability of international students needs to be further strengthened, and the cultural identity of international students needs to be further enhanced^[2]. Convergence management is essentially the exchange and integration of diverse cultures, inflecting mutual respect and inclusiveness of different cultures and ideas^[3]. International students are the witnesses of China’s image and Chinese value. We should guide international students to identify Chinese culture, gradually understand and grow in love for China, and voluntarily become the spreaders and spokespersons of Chinese culture.

2. Current status of international students’ cultural identity

A number of studies have shown that the cultural identity of most international students, on the whole, is positive. The research results of the Research Group of the Institute of Cultural Innovation and Communication of Beijing Normal University have indicated that cultural identity is related to an individual’s Chinese proficiency and learning time. The longer the learning time and the better the proficiency, the stronger the cultural identity^[4]. According to the findings of Qingdao Social Science Planning Project “Enhancing International Students’ Exploration of Chinese Cultural Identity,” international students aged between 20 and 23 have the highest recognition of Chinese culture, while those

aged under 19 have the lowest recognition of Chinese culture, with males outnumbering females. In addition, studies have shown the recognition of Chinese culture from high to low: Chinese food, scenic spots, historical sites, calligraphy and painting, Chinese characters, geographical overview, regional culture, etc. [5]. Besides the individual factors above, the cultural identity of international students is also influenced by teaching factors (textbooks, teachers, and schools), social factors (system and environment), and so on [6].

3. Concept and significance of cultural identity

3.1. Concept of cultural identity

The concept of cultural identity belongs to the field of social psychology. Cultural identity is a subjective judgment. An individual, in a different cultural context, may accept or reject the new culture. This judgment is based on the individual's own value. The greater the degree of acceptance or even love for a new culture, the higher the level of cultural identity, and vice versa. As a psychological concept, cultural identity must have individual difference and contingency. The specific factors of each individual and the contingency of psychological activities lead to the quantification of cultural identity into cultural identity degrees, and the influence of individual differences on cultural identity must be considered in future research [7]. Cultural identity and profound cultural background are inseparable from cultural soft power [8]. The cultural identity of international students discussed in this paper is cross-cultural identity. The subject is international students, while the object is Chinese culture. International students need to integrate different cultures into their own culture, that is, international students' recognition of Chinese culture in terms of cognition, emotion, and behavioral tendency [9].

3.2. Significance of cultural identity

3.2.1. Helpful for international students' physical and mental health

International students come from different countries and ethnic groups, with different cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and language abilities. They study far from their native lands. Due to unfamiliar environments, language barrier, and cultural differences, some negative emotions accumulate, and in severe cases, they may experience deep anxiety, which may lead to an inability to adapt and engage in the new learning environment. There are certain obstacles in interpersonal communication, and their participation in campus activities is poor. There is an urgent need for universities to improve international students' cross-cultural adaptability, enhance their cultural identity, shorten their psychological distance, enhance communication between Chinese and foreign students, and ensure their physical and mental health.

3.2.2. An inevitable requirement of internationalization of universities

The education for international students in China is an important part of the internationalization of higher education. Assistance should be given to those receiving education, so that they can learn and understand the relationship between various cultures and civilizations and thus develop cross-cultural communication ability [10]. This is an important goal for many countries in order to promote internationalization. The number of international students accepted by universities in China indirectly reflects their degree of internationalization and international influence. International students are an important component of China's higher education institutions moving toward internationalization and building world-class universities [11]. Universities are bound to strive to attract and retain more high-quality international students and aid the early integration of international students into the university. The recognition of Chinese culture is a necessary condition for retaining international students.

3.2.3. A necessity for promoting China's international status and image

In addition to relying on economic hard power, the role of cultural soft power cannot be neglected when promoting China's international status and establishing its international image ^[12]. Strengthening the cultural guidance of international students can help them gain a deeper understanding of China's history, politics, and economic system. As China grows closer to the world stage, there is an urgent need for countries around the world to better understand, recognize, and trust China, as well as work together with China to build a better future. For five thousand years, the splendid culture of China has been the source of Chinese cultural confidence and an important basis for attracting the world to recognize China. Students from all over the world are indeed the best media to spread Chinese culture.

4. Ways to strengthen cultural identity

4.1. Stress on entrance education for international students

The entrance education for international students is of great significance for these students to understand and adapt to the study and life in China as soon as possible. The entrance education for newly enrolled students should include policies and regulations, school disciplines, China's national conditions, life guidance, *etc.* Relevant staff of the university should interpret policies on visa application, dormitory management, student activities, disciplinary punishment, *etc.* We should also inform students of matters needing attention and the taboos of living in China, help students familiarize themselves with the city where the university is located and the environment inside and outside the campus, as well as encourage them to learn to use various public facilities. Through the above methods, we can strengthen their awareness of abiding by the law during their stay in China ^[13]. At the same time, we should guide international students in such a way that they understand the diversity and richness of cultures, respect different cultures and customs, and engage in friendly exchanges with other people and countries with a non-discriminatory attitude ^[14], with the purpose of enabling everyone in the university to understand the inevitability of cultural differences and create a learning and living environment full of understanding and tolerance for international students.

4.2. Expand teaching and management teams for international students

A good international teaching and management team is a powerful organizational guarantee for improving the cultural identity of international students in China. High-quality competent teachers and administrators directly affect the quality of education and the process of cultural adaptation. Teachers should modify their teaching methods based on the type of class, the nationality of students, and students' language proficiency. Teachers should balance the proportion of language teaching and cultural teaching as well as integrate the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation into the whole process of teaching. International student administrators should clarify the management objectives, improve service awareness, and master diplomatic management. On the one hand, universities should provide more opportunities for teachers to communicate, learn, and discuss; encourage teachers to conduct cross-border exchanges and participate in teaching activities; broaden their international vision; and deepen their understanding of cross-cultural teaching ^[15]. On the other hand, universities also need to strengthen their reinforcement on scientific research and encourage the teaching and management staff of international students to effectively combine practical work with theoretical research, so that theory can be used to guide practice and deepen practical results.

4.3. Strengthen classroom teaching and improve training system for international students

In order to supplement and improve existing Chinese as a foreign language courses and textbooks as well as optimize the methods of acquiring knowledge about Chinese culture, universities can offer extended or

supplementary courses such as “Chinese Tradition,” “Confucius Culture,” and other elective courses to help students gain a deeper understanding of the long history of China and the practical application of Chinese philosophy. In addition, this will effectively promote the integration of information technology with teaching, thus providing more suitable and high-quality Chinese culture education. By making good use of digital learning and new forms of education such as massive open online course (MOOC) and flipped classrooms, we can spread Chinese aesthetics in a new perspective; in that way, international students can sense the beauty of Chinese culture while learning^[16].

4.4. Enrich campus cultural life

Characteristic cultural activities can be organized to enrich campus cultural life^[17]. Since traditional festivals are an important carrier of excellent Chinese culture, we can make full use of traditional festivals to promote the excellent traditional Chinese culture. Actively carrying out second classroom activities at various levels and in various forms during traditional festivals would not only help international students expand their horizons, improve their professional abilities, and enable them to successfully pass the period of cultural adaptation, but also help them better understand China.

We can also organize enterprise visits and practical training. By participating in internship and practical training, international students can deepen their understanding and application of professional knowledge, transform theoretical knowledge into intrinsic ability, and constantly improve their professional level. These methods increase their opportunities for experiential learning and further improve the quality of international talent training^[18]. At the same time, they are also excellent opportunities for international students to contact and perceive the Chinese society, which are conducive to helping them deepen their understanding of the Chinese society, as well as experience and understand modern China, and to training international talents who know China, are friendly to China, and are able to integrate China with foreign countries^[19].

5. Conclusion

Vigorously developing the education for international students in China has become an important component of higher education in China and an essential part of China’s reform and opening-up^[20]. Guiding the cultural identity of international students is an important guarantee for the sustainable and healthy development of international students’ education, resolving the learning and living difficulties faced by international students in a foreign country, and improving the development of education internationalization.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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