

Research on the Adaptation Status and Optimization Strategies of International Students' Second Classroom in China from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Case Study of Ningbo University

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Abstract: With the advancement of the internationalization of China's higher education, the second classroom, as a core carrier for international students' cross-cultural adaptation, has become increasingly prominent in importance. Taking Ningbo University as a case, this study systematically explores the current situation, challenges, and underlying causes of international students' participation in the second classroom from the perspective of cross-cultural adaptation theory through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The research finds that international students at the university have a high participation rate in the second classroom, achieving remarkable results in improving language proficiency and deepening cultural understanding. However, there are four core problems: one-way cultural display, lack of language support, imbalance between universalization and personalization in activity design, and fragmented information dissemination. The root cause lies in the failure of activity design to fully reflect the two-way, complex, and process-oriented characteristics of cross-cultural adaptation. Based on this, this paper proposes optimization strategies for constructing a "two-way integration" second classroom model, including promoting the transformation of activity content from "cultural display" to "cultural co-creation", establishing a hierarchical and classified language support system, implementing customized management based on precise demand profiling, and building a multi-dimensional collaborative support network. It aims to provide theoretical reference and practical paths for universities to optimize the second classroom system for international students.

Keywords: International students in China; Second classroom; Cross-cultural adaptation; Activity design; Ningbo University

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1. Introduction

Driven by the "Belt and Road" Initiative and the education strategy, China has become an important global destination for international students. The education of international students in China has entered a new stage

of quality improvement after scale expansion. As an extension and supplement to the first classroom, the second classroom is a key field for international students to perceive the real China, integrate into campus life, and achieve cross-cultural adaptation. Its quality directly affects international students' academic experience and identification with Chinese culture^[1].

However, existing research mostly focuses on international students' academic adaptation, and systematic research on their adaptation in the informal learning context of the second classroom is still insufficient. As an important university in the coastal area, Ningbo University has admitted a large number of international students. Although its second classroom activities are rich and diverse, it still faces practical challenges in practice. Therefore, using cross-cultural adaptation theory as the analytical framework and Ningbo University as the research object, this study aims to answer three core questions:

- (1) What is the basic status and characteristics of international students' participation in the second classroom at Ningbo University?
- (2) What are the key problems and underlying causes affecting their adaptation effect?
- (3) How to construct a more culturally inclusive and adaptively effective optimized model of the second classroom?

Through empirical research, this study strives to fill the research gap in this field and provide a reference practical plan for similar universities.

2. Research background and significance

In 2018, the Ministry of Education's Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China (Trial) clearly proposed that universities should encourage and support international students to participate in second-classroom activities to promote their understanding of Chinese culture and the cultivation of cross-cultural adaptation capabilities. This policy orientation provides clear guidance for universities to optimize the service system for international students. As a key university in a coastal open city, Ningbo University has attracted more than 2,000 international students from over 100 countries around the world, forming a multicultural campus ecology. Although the university has organized a series of second-classroom activities such as "Winter Solstice Folk Culture Experience" and "Sino-Foreign University Students Music Exchange Competition", preliminary research shows that existing activities still have room for improvement in cultural inclusiveness, language support, and promoting in-depth interaction between Chinese and foreign students. Some international students have low participation and slow adaptation processes, which directly affect their satisfaction with campus life and academic performance.

Although the second classroom itself has become a mature research field, the combination with the group of international students in China is seriously insufficient both in theoretical discussion and empirical research. Existing research on international students' second classroom mostly focuses on the description of activity types and the elaboration of significance, lacking in-depth analysis of the micro-mechanisms and structural obstacles in their adaptation process from the perspective of international students themselves. In particular, critical research from the perspective of "cross-cultural adaptation" is rare. This study will take this as an innovation point, regard the education of international students in China as an important part of university construction^[2], and deeply explore how activity design can better serve international students' cross-cultural adaptation strategies, providing a useful model for similar universities to promote the construction of international campuses and serve the national "Belt and Road" education initiative.

3. Literature review

3.1. Cross-cultural perspective

As an academic concept, “cross-cultural communication” was first established by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his book *The Silent Language*^[3]. Academic circles generally believe that it refers to communication and interaction between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds^{[4][5]}. With the deepening of research, its connotation has expanded from initial communication behavior to the focus on communication competence. Cross-cultural communication competence covers multiple dimensions such as language, culture, society, and psychology^[6], and its core lies in overcoming obstacles caused by cultural differences^[7]. At the level of cross-cultural adaptation, the landmark document *Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation* published by Redfield et al. in 1936^[8] defined “acculturation” as the changes in cultural patterns caused by continuous contact between different cultural groups. This classic definition laid the foundation for subsequent research. Sun Qianhui pointed out that cross-cultural adaptation manifests as changes in cultural patterns at the group level and psychological and behavioral adjustment at the individual level^[9]. Domestic scholar Bi Jiwan, from the perspective of educational practice, emphasized that adaptation is a process of adjusting to a new cultural environment^[10], and its ultimate goal is to achieve effective communication. Although there are discussions on its precise definition in academic circles, the framework of Redfield et al. is still widely cited, showing its continuous theoretical influence.

3.2. Second classroom

3.2.1. Concept

The “second classroom”, an educational concept with Chinese characteristics, was officially proposed by Zhu Jiusi in his 1983 book *Higher Education Management*, defining it as various organized healthy extracurricular activities outside the teaching plan. In general, contemporary research tends to believe that the second classroom is a practical education activity systematically organized by schools to achieve talent training goals^[11], whose essence is campus cultural activities^[12], and its core feature is emphasizing practical education effectiveness^[13]. In recent years, relevant policy documents such as *Guidelines for College Students’ Second Classroom* have systematized it into a “second classroom transcript” system covering nine modules, including ideological and political learning, cultural and artistic activities, and social practice.

3.2.2. Policy support

The national policy attaches great importance to the construction of the second classroom. Both the 2016 National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities and the 2018 Opinions on Implementing the Communist Youth League’s “Second Classroom Transcript” System in Colleges and Universities emphasized its importance. In particular, the Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China (Trial) (2018) clearly requires that the second classroom should help international students in China understand China, integrate into society, and develop their cross-cultural competence^[14]. This provides a clear policy basis for universities to carry out second-classroom activities for international students.

4. Research design and methods

This study adopts a mixed research method combining quantitative research, qualitative research, and comparative analysis.

- (1) Quantitative research. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 100 international students at Ningbo University, covering different grades from 7 colleges and 12 countries including India, Morocco, the United States, Turkey, and South Korea. The content includes participation frequency, activity type preferences, adaptation level (five dimensions: language, social, academic, emotional, and cultural), and satisfaction. SPSS was used for descriptive statistics and cross-analysis.
- (2) Qualitative research. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 international students with different participation experiences (high-frequency participants, low-frequency participants, non-participants) to obtain their in-depth feelings about the activities, faced difficulties, and specific suggestions.
- (3) Comparative analysis. Through online searches and alumni connections, textual analysis was conducted on the frequency, scale, and influence of second classroom activities in five domestic universities (Ningbo University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Fudan University, Zhejiang University, Zhejiang University of Technology) to compare the characteristics and deficiencies of activities at Ningbo University.

5. Research findings

5.1. Current situation: Structural characteristics under high participation and significant benefits

The questionnaire survey shows that the participation rate of international students at Ningbo University in the second classroom reaches 76.67%, indicating strong attractiveness. Those who participate 2–3 times per semester account for the highest proportion (52.17%), showing the characteristics of “extensive participation and moderate frequency”.

In terms of activity preferences and benefits, international students prefer cultural experience activities the most (86.96%), followed by volunteer services (47.83%) and academic lectures (39.13%). Their main participation motivations are “understanding Chinese culture” (56.52%) and “expanding social circles” (56.52%). More than 65% of participants believe that the activities are significantly helpful in improving language proficiency, deepening cultural understanding, and enhancing social networks. Interviewee Insaf stated that the activities “stimulated interest in learning traditional Chinese medicine”, reflecting the positive transfer effect of the second classroom on academic interest.

In terms of cultural adaptation dimensions, international students perform best in social adaptation and emotional adaptation (more than 90% feel supported), while facing greater challenges in language adaptation (82.61% believe they can basically communicate, and 52.17% clearly state that language barriers affect the experience) and cultural conflict handling (52.17% have encountered cultural misunderstandings). This indicates that the activities are successful in providing emotional comfort and social opportunities, but insufficient in supporting in-depth and high-demand cultural exchanges.

5.2. In-depth phenomenon analysis

Specifically, it can be systematically analyzed from the following perspectives:

- (1) Imbalance between one-way cultural display and two-way integration

Most current activities focus on Chinese cultural display, such as making zongzi, writing calligraphy, and learning the Three-Character Classic. Although they can promote the dissemination of Chinese

culture, they do not provide international students with an equal space to display their own cultures. In the interview, Pakistani student Nofal said, “I hope the school can hold cultural activities familiar to us like Eid al-Fitr”. Behind this appeal is the international students’ expectation of the identity of “cultural participants”. They not only want to understand Chinese culture but also hope their own cultures are seen and respected. However, the current model easily reduces some international students to cultural “spectators”, making it difficult to achieve the integrated balance and adaptation of maintaining their own culture and accepting the host culture ^[15].

(2) Disconnection between superficial coverage and an in-depth lack of language support

Although most activities are accompanied by Chinese-English bilingual notices, problems such as no on-site translation, lack of bilingual guides during activities, and even academic activities conducted only in Chinese are common. Questionnaire data show that 42.39% of international students believe that language barriers affect their participation experience, and interviewees also mentioned that “they try to speak Chinese but mostly need translation assistance”. This current situation of “bilingual in appearance but difficult to communicate in practice” is the main obstacle to international students’ in-depth participation in the second classroom, making it difficult to achieve effective communication.

(3) Tension between universalization of activity design and personalization of needs

The design model of the second classroom ignores the diversity of international students. Muslim students face the problem of lack of halal catering, international business major student Anatha expects professional-matched mock negotiation activities, and new student Shiza needs a peer guidance mechanism. This design lacking refined consideration marginalizes some needs and is difficult to match the individual strategy choices of cross-cultural adaptation.

(4) Fragmentation of information dissemination and injustice of participation opportunities

Problems such as scattered information acquisition channels and “first-come, first-served” quota allocation lead to unfair participation opportunities. Interviewees generally reported that “they do not know where to get information and quotas are full”, and WeChat group notifications are often overwhelmed. The shortcomings of this management mechanism in “accessibility” and “fairness” may exclude international students who are willing to participate.

6. Cause analysis

The root causes of the above problems are not omissions in a single link but systematic deviations from concept to execution, which can be summarized into three points:

(1) Solidified design concepts. The traditional design of second-classroom activities has always centered on the one-way goal of “integrating international students into Chinese culture”, ignoring the two-way value of international students as cultural communication subjects. The development of activities does not fully take international students’ cultural backgrounds and interests as the core basis for activity design, but instead places them in a passive acceptance position, making it difficult for the activities to arouse emotional resonance and active participation.

(2) Fragmented support system. Services such as language support, cultural guidance, and psychological assistance are fragmented. Language support only stays at the level of notice translation, cultural adaptation lacks professional guidance, and new student adaptation has no exclusive assistance. A full-process support chain of “pre-event guidance, in-event assistance, and post-event feedback” has not been

built, which cannot meet the multi-dimensional and dynamic needs in cross-cultural adaptation.

(3) Imperfect management mechanisms. From activity planning to effect evaluation, there is a lack of refined operations based on data. There is no systematic collection of international students' dynamic needs (such as differentiated demands of different majors, religions, and grades), nor is there an efficient information dissemination channel and a fair quota allocation mechanism. The response to international students' feedback is slow, leading to repeated problems.

7. Strategy Proposals

In response to the above contradictions and causes, a new ecology of the second classroom, adapting to cross-cultural adaptation needs, can be built as follows.

7.1. Content innovation

Construct the practice of two-way cultural mutual learning, breaking the traditional model of "one-way display of Chinese culture". Through monthly themed international cultural salons, international students take the lead in sharing their own characteristic cultures, and Chinese students participate in in-depth interactions, forming a two-way mutual learning model of "Chinese cultural experience + international students' cultural sharing". Deepen the "major + culture" integration path, and customize academic cultural activities such as "comparative practice of pharmacy and traditional medicine" and "international market research workshops" for international students of different majors, realizing the synchronous improvement of cultural exchange and professional competence.

7.2. Optimization of support system

In terms of activity guarantee, meet the special needs of different groups by flexibly setting multiple sessions and online participation channels. In terms of the activity process, establish a full-process support model of "cross-cultural mentor system", with Chinese students or senior international students serving as mentors, responsible for full-process support such as activity information push, participation guidance, and cultural difference interpretation, focusing on helping new students and low-participation groups.

7.3. Management optimization

Construct a database of international students' demand profiles, integrate multi-source data such as questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, and realize precise push and differentiated matching of activity information. Build a unified online platform for the second classroom, integrate channels such as WeChat official accounts, college notifications, and international student communities, and release activity information 1-2 weeks in advance. Establish a dynamic feedback mechanism of short-term feedback and regular forums, taking international students' opinions as the core basis for activity optimization, and continuously improving the management mechanism.

7.4. Mechanism guarantee: Building a multi-dimensional collaborative linkage system

Clarify the overall coordination function of the International Exchange College, take the lead in integrating resources from various secondary colleges, student unions, and associations, avoid activity duplication and resource waste, and form a three-level linkage mechanism of "university-college-association". Promote cross-college and off-campus cooperation, encourage business schools, foreign language colleges, medical colleges,

etc. to carry out interdisciplinary joint activities and integrate professional resources; strengthen cooperation with local communities, enterprises, and cultural institutions in Ningbo to develop socialized projects such as “intangible cultural heritage research” and “corporate internship practice”, promoting international students’ in-depth integration into local society. Establish a multi-dimensional activity effect evaluation system, set quantitative indicators from dimensions such as participation rate, satisfaction, cultural adaptation degree, and interaction frequency, and regularly conduct activity effect reviews.

8. Conclusion

This study reveals through empirical investigation that while the second classroom for international students at Ningbo University has achieved remarkable results, it still faces challenges in cultural inclusiveness, language support, activity design, and information management. The root cause lies in the failure to fully implement the two-way interaction concept and refined operation thinking of cross-cultural adaptation. In the future, the construction of the second classroom in universities should achieve a fundamental paradigm shift, from a model of unilaterally outputting culture to international students to a two-way integration model that encourages cultural mutual learning and common growth. This not only requires innovation in activity content and forms but also systematic reconstruction from concepts, support to management. The optimization strategies proposed in this study aim to provide a feasible path for this purpose. Subsequent research can further track the implementation effect of the optimization strategies and expand the research sample to continuously improve the theory and practice of the second classroom for international students in China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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