

# Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Culture Shock among Overseas Chinese Students

You Wu

Faculty of Brain Sciences, University College London, London, UK  
Email: youwu575@gmail.com

**How to cite this paper:** Wu, Y. (2025). Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Culture Shock among Overseas Chinese Students. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 15, 926-935.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2025.1510053>

**Received:** September 15, 2025

**Accepted:** October 21, 2025

**Published:** October 24, 2025

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the cross-cultural adaptation and culture shock experienced by overseas Chinese students. By defining core concepts, it reviews the current status and gaps in research on cross-cultural adaptation among international students, analyzes the manifestations and core causes of culture shock in Chinese students at different stages. Combining empirical analysis, it compares the effectiveness of active and passive adaptation strategies, evaluates their efficacy, and puts forward specific suggestions. The study finds that culture shock is an inevitable stage in cross-cultural adaptation, and active responses can significantly shorten the crisis period. Universities, families, and individuals need to collaborate to enhance adaptation efficiency.

## Keywords

Overseas Chinese Students, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Culture Shock, Adaptation Strategies

## 1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization, international educational exchanges have become increasingly frequent, leading a growing number of Chinese students to choose to study abroad. As of early 2024, the total number of Chinese students studying overseas has exceeded 8 million, making China the largest exporter of international students globally. This underscores the enduring appeal of overseas education to Chinese families. For each international student, the success of cross-cultural adaptation directly influences not only academic performance but also mental health and personal growth. However, transitioning abruptly from a familiar cultural environment to a new and unknown society, international students commonly experience a psychological reaction known as “culture shock.” This shock, arising from significant differences in cultural values, behavioral norms,

and social conventions, can lead to severe learning difficulties, social isolation, and even mental illness if not effectively managed and addressed. Therefore, systematically studying the manifestations, causes, and underlying cross-cultural adaptation mechanisms of culture shock among Chinese students holds significant academic value and provides practical guidance and support for individual students, their families, and educational institutions both domestically and abroad.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

### 2.1. Core Concept Definitions

Culture shock, proposed by American anthropologist Kalvero Oberg, refers to the profound anxiety experienced by individuals when entering a new cultural environment due to the loss of familiar social interaction symbols and meanings, manifesting as disorientation, confusion, rejection, and even fear (Xia, 2020). Its development typically progresses through four stages: the honeymoon phase, characterized by curiosity and excitement about the new environment; the crisis phase, marked by conflicts and frustration arising from differences; the recovery phase, involving gradual adjustment and adaptation to the new environment; and the adaptation phase, where individuals fully integrate and enjoy multicultural experiences (Bai, Ge, & Li, 2023).

Regarding cross-cultural adaptation strategies, psychologist John Berry's theory identifies four approaches: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization (Dai & Zhao, 2021). Among these, the integration strategy—maintaining one's cultural identity while actively integrating into the new culture—is considered optimal, facilitating comprehensive psychological and social adaptation in cross-cultural contexts (Nguyen, 2024).

### 2.2. Research on Cross-Cultural Adaptation among Chinese Students

Most studies agree that cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic process (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024). Li Dapeng & Liu, (2023) proposed a four-stage model: honeymoon (initial excitement), crisis (anxiety and frustration), recovery (problem-solving), and adaptation (cultural integration), which echoes Oberg's classic theory and emphasizes the cyclical nature of cultural shock (Li & Liu, 2023). Yang Siyu's (2023) research on Chinese students studying in Europe revealed that academic adaptation follows a similar path, with initial confusion due to language barriers and teaching method differences, mid-term adjustment through active learning strategies, and eventual dual integration academically and culturally (Yang, 2023).

Existing research highlights that cross-cultural adaptation is influenced by a combination of individual factors, social support, and cultural differences. At the individual level, language proficiency, cultural intelligence, and psychological resilience are key variables (Wu, 2021). Fang Yuanyuan's (2010) empirical study showed a significant positive correlation between Chinese language proficiency

and social-cultural adaptation among international students, while the metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions of cultural intelligence (CQ) predicted adaptation outcomes (Fang, 2010). In terms of social support, Yang Baoyan & Wan, (2008) pointed out that support networks from host country faculty, family, and peer groups effectively alleviate cultural shock. At the cultural difference level, value conflicts (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism) and communication style differences (e.g., high-context vs. low-context) are identified as major barriers (Yang & Wan, 2008).

Research has proposed diverse adaptation strategies. Xue Biying (2023) suggested pre-departure preparation strategies, including language enhancement and cultural pre-adaptation training (Xue, 2023). Chen Yuhan (2018) proposed process-oriented support strategies, such as establishing cross-cultural mentorship programs and conducting group psychological counseling (Chen, 2018). Zhang Hong & Hu, (2019) recommended resource integration strategies, utilizing new media platforms to build virtual cultural communities (Zhang & Hu, 2019). Huixin (Xu, 2024) demonstrated that reverse cultural adaptation (e.g., “re-culture shock” experienced by Chinese students in the UK) and reverse study abroad phenomena (e.g., Chinese students pursuing degrees in the UK) are driving research toward a bidirectional interaction perspective (Xu, 2024).

In summary, existing research indicates that language barriers, social isolation, and identity conflicts are common challenges faced by international students (Tan, 2005). Language barriers not only affect academic performance but can also lead to social exclusion; social isolation may trigger feelings of loneliness and depression; identity conflicts arise from confusion and struggle over one’s cultural belonging (He & Tang, 2001). However, most existing research focuses on single cultural backgrounds or specific study abroad stages, lacking comparative analysis of the effectiveness of different adaptation strategies, especially for overseas Chinese students, where research is not comprehensive or in-depth enough (Guo, 1997).

### **3. Manifestations and Causes of Culture Shock among Chinese Students**

#### **3.1. Stage-Specific Manifestations**

During the honeymoon phase (1 - 3 months), international students are often filled with curiosity and excitement about the new environment, maintaining an open attitude toward cultural differences, actively participating in social activities, and exploring new things.

Entering the crisis phase (3 - 6 months), as international students gain a deeper understanding of the host culture, they begin to face numerous issues. Language difficulties become prominent, such as limited classroom participation and frequent misunderstandings in daily communication; social conflicts arise due to differences in cultural norms regarding personal space and direct expression; psychological reactions include loneliness, self-doubt, and even depressive tendencies

in some students.

In the recovery phase (6 - 12 months), through adjustment and adaptation, international students gradually build social circles, become familiar with daily routines, improve language proficiency, and achieve psychological stability.

During the adaptation phase (after 1 year), international students can fully integrate into the host cultural environment, enjoy the rich experiences brought by multiculturalism, and form a cross-cultural identity.

### 3.2. Core Causes

Cultural differences are a significant factor, with notable variations in values across countries and regions, such as conflicts between collectivism and individualism, which can confuse international students in social interactions and decision-making (Cao & Meng, 2022). Language proficiency also plays a role, as inefficient communication in a non-native language affects academic performance and social confidence, increasing the risk of culture shock (Zhao et al., 2023). The lack of social support cannot be overlooked, as international students are far from their families and familiar social networks, and the support systems of host universities may not adequately meet their needs (Nguyen, 2024). Additionally, individual factors influence adaptation, with extroverted personalities adapting faster and personal traits such as study abroad motivation (academic vs. experiential) significantly impacting cross-cultural adaptation (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024).

## 4. Empirical Analysis of Cross-Cultural Adaptation Strategies

### 4.1. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining “qualitative case study + quantitative measurement”. Six Chinese students studying in the UK were selected as the research subjects (Table 1). The study not only used in-depth interviews to explore the individual experiences of the adaptation process but also employed standardized scales and objective indicators to quantify the adaptation outcomes.

When recruiting participants, recruitment information was posted on the overseas student communities of multiple universities in the UK, Chinese overseas student forums, and social media platforms, explicitly seeking Chinese students studying in the UK. The inclusion criteria were: having studied in the UK for no less than one year and being willing to share their cross-cultural adaptation experiences. After obtaining the participants' consent, their anonymous participation in the study was ensured, and they signed informed consent forms. The research purpose, process, and data usage were explained to them to safeguard their rights and interests. Based on their adaptation strategies, they were divided into an active adaptation group and a passive adaptation group, with three participants in each group. The data sources included in-depth interviews, behavioral observations, and academic performance records to comprehensively understand the cross-cultural adaptation process of overseas students.

In the quantitative section, standardized psychological assessment tools were utilized.

For psychological adaptation measurement: The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21) was employed to evaluate psychological states, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was used to measure subjective well-being.

For social and cultural adaptation measurement: The Social Integration Scale (SIS) was adopted to assess the breadth of social circles and the ability to cope with cultural conflicts, and the Intercultural Communication Competence Scale (ICCS) was applied to measure cross-cultural communication ability.

For academic adaptation measurement: Objective academic performance data, including Grade Point Average (GPA) and course pass rates, were collected, and classroom participation indicators such as the number of speeches and contributions to group work were recorded.

For personal trait measurement: The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) and the Study Abroad Motivation Scale were used to control for the influence of individual differences on the results.

SPSS software was employed for data processing. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to present the differences in scores on each scale and academic indicators between the two groups. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the quantitative indicators of the active adaptation group and the passive adaptation group, with a significance level set at  $p < 0.05$ . Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore the correlation between adaptation strategies and adaptation outcomes, ensuring the objectivity and scientificity of the quantitative results.

**Table 1.** Basic demographic information of the six participants.

Name	Age	Educational Level	Major
Xiao Li	22	Undergraduate	Computer Science
Xiao Zhang	23	Postgraduate	Economics
Xiao Wang	21	Undergraduate	Art and Design
Xiao Zhao	24	Postgraduate	Education
Xiao Qian	22	Undergraduate	Biology
Xiao Sun	23	Postgraduate	Psychology

## 4.2. Case Comparisons

### 1) Active Adapters

**Xiao Li:** Before studying abroad, Xiao Li made thorough preparations, learning about British culture and local social norms, such as table manners and social distancing. After enrollment, he actively joined various clubs, including academic discussion and hobby-based groups, and initiated interactions with British students. When facing psychological distress, he promptly sought help from the university's psychological counseling center. Within 3 - 5 months, Xiao Li adapted to

the British cultural environment, achieved excellent academic results, built a wide social circle of British friends, and maintained stable psychological well-being.

**Xiao Zhang:** Xiao Zhang improved her English speaking and academic writing skills through online courses before going to the UK. Upon arrival, she actively participated in cross-cultural exchange activities organized by the university, interacting with international students from different countries to understand multiculturalism. She also proactively sought academic advice from British professors, enhancing her academic performance and communication with teachers. Around 6 months later, Xiao Zhang fully adapted to British academic and social life, navigating various cultural scenarios with ease.

**Xiao Wang:** Before departure, Xiao Wang gained a preliminary understanding of British history, culture, and society by watching documentaries and reading relevant books. In the UK, he actively participated in local volunteer activities, closely interacting with residents to gain in-depth insights into British society. Academically, he collaborated with British classmates on projects, improving his teamwork and cross-cultural communication skills. Approximately 4 months later, Xiao Wang adapted to the British environment, earning recognition and respect from British peers.

## 2) Passive Adapters

**Xiao Zhao:** After arriving in the UK, Xiao Zhao mainly relied on his Chinese peer group and rarely interacted with British students. When social conflicts arose, he adopted an avoidance strategy without seeking solutions. For example, during a group project, he chose to complete part of the tasks alone due to communication style differences with British classmates, resulting in poor group project performance. His adaptation period extended beyond 1 year, and he often felt lonely and anxious in his academic and social life.

**Xiao Qian:** Xiao Qian lacked understanding of British culture and was unwilling to actively adapt. In class, he hesitated to speak due to language barriers and did not communicate with teachers or classmates after class. Socially, he always waited for British classmates to approach him instead of taking the initiative. This passive attitude slowed his language improvement, limited his social circle, extended his adaptation period beyond 1 year, and led to depressive emotions that affected his academic performance.

**Xiao Sun:** After arriving in the UK, Xiao Sun felt uncomfortable with the new cultural environment but did not know how to change it. He was unwilling to seek help when facing problems and bore them silently. Academically, he struggled with unfamiliar British teaching methods and evaluation systems, resulting in poor grades, but he did not actively seek solutions. Socially, he was afraid of rejection and hesitated to interact with British students. His adaptation process was very difficult, with an adaptation period of 1.5 years and ongoing psychological instability.

## 4.3. Quantitative Analysis Results

The results of the independent-samples t-tests, as shown in **Table 2**, indicate that

there are significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the active adaptation group and the passive adaptation group in various quantitative indicators. Combined with the qualitative cases, it can be seen that the effects of the active strategy (social expansion + cultural learning + professional support) are significantly better than those of the passive avoidance strategy.

Active adaptors, through the behavioral chain of “pre-cultural preparation-active social participation-timely seeking support”, achieve comprehensive adaptation within 4 - 6 months, and their psychological, social, and academic indicators all reach excellent levels. In contrast, passive adaptors, due to “avoiding social interactions-refusing to seek help-neglecting cultural learning”, have their adaptation period extended to over one year, and they experience significant psychological distress (anxiety and depression) along with poor social and academic performance.

**Table 2.** Results of Independent-samples t-tests.

Quantitative Indicator	Active Adaptation	Passive Adaptation	t-value	p-value
	Group (Mean ± Standard Deviation)	Group (Mean ± Standard Deviation)		
DASS-21 Anxiety Score	3.0 ± 1.0	13.7 ± 1.5	-15.2	<0.001
SWLS Subjective Well-being Score	25.7 ± 2.1	13.0 ± 2.5	10.8	<0.001
SIS Social Integration Score	27.7 ± 1.5	9.0 ± 1.0	26.5	<0.001
ICCS Intercultural Communication Score	29.7 ± 1.5	14.3 ± 0.6	30.1	<0.001
GPA	3.7 ± 0.1	2.3 ± 0.2	16.8	<0.001
Duration of Adaptation Period (months)	4.3 ± 0.6	15.7 ± 1.2	-18.9	<0.001

#### 4.4. Key Findings

Active strategies (social expansion + cultural learning + professional support) proved significantly more effective than passive avoidance strategies. Active adaptors integrated into the new environment within a short time, excelling academically and socially, while passive adaptors experienced prolonged adaptation periods and were prone to psychological issues, affecting their academic and social development. Pre-departure training and psychological support provided by universities can shorten the duration of the crisis phase and facilitate cross-cultural adaptation among international students.

## 5. Discussion and Recommendations

### 5.1. Impact of Culture Shock

In the short term, culture shock can increase academic pressure and raise mental health risks among international students, such as anxiety and depression. In the long term, successful adaptation to culture shock can lead to the formation of a

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cross-cultural identity, enhance global competitiveness, and lay a solid foundation for future career development and international exchanges.

## **5.2. Evaluation of Strategy Effectiveness**

A comprehensive strategy (psychological adjustment + social expansion + cultural learning) demonstrates the strongest adaptability, promoting all-round cross-cultural adaptation among international students. Universities need to strengthen pre-departure training, such as providing language and cultural pre-adaptation courses to help international students understand and adapt to the host cultural environment in advance.

## **5.3. Specific Recommendations**

Before studying abroad, enhance English speaking and academic writing training to improve language communication skills; gain a preliminary understanding of host country social norms and cultural customs through documentaries, books, and online courses.

Universities should support international students by establishing an international student mentorship system, providing one-on-one adaptation guidance to address academic and social issues; offering cross-cultural communication courses as compulsory credits to cultivate cross-cultural communication skills; and strengthening the promotion of psychological counseling services to ensure international students know they can seek help for psychological problems.

Individuals should maintain an open mindset, be willing to try new things, such as participating in local traditional activities to deepen understanding of the local culture; regularly communicate with family members to share study abroad experiences, reduce emotional isolation, and gain emotional support; actively make friends with people from different countries to expand social circles and improve cross-cultural communication skills.

## **6. Conclusion and Future Prospects**

### **6.1. Research Conclusions**

Culture shock is an inevitable stage in cross-cultural adaptation, and active response strategies can significantly shorten the crisis period and promote comprehensive adaptation among international students. Universities, families, and individuals need to collaborate to enhance the efficiency of cross-cultural adaptation for international students.

### **6.2. Research Limitations**

This study has certain limitations. In terms of the sample, only six Chinese students studying in the UK were selected, resulting in a small sample size and a concentration within the UK. This may restrict the generalizability and applicability of the research findings. Given that cultural environments vary across different regions and countries, Chinese students studying abroad in other nations

and regions may exhibit distinct cross-cultural adaptation characteristics and strategies. Consequently, the results of this study may not be fully applicable to these groups.

### 6.3. Future Prospect

Future research can further expand the scope and depth, exploring the cross-cultural adaptation characteristics and strategies of international students from different cultural backgrounds and at different study abroad stages; combining new technologies and methods, such as big data analysis and virtual reality technology, to conduct more precise and comprehensive assessments and interventions in the cross-cultural adaptation process of international students; strengthening international cooperation and exchanges to jointly promote the in-depth development of cross-cultural adaptation research and contribute to building a community with a shared future for mankind.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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