

# Research on Cross-cultural Adaptation of International Students in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

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**Abstract:** With an increasing number of international students studying in Chinese higher vocational colleges, exploring effective cross-cultural adaptation strategies has become a practical necessity for the colleges. A sample (N=136) of international students from three colleges completed a survey that measured self-reported cross-cultural adaptation composed of three dimensions, i.e. sociocultural, psychological and academic adaptation. After data analysis with SPSS 27, the result suggested that the students generally performed well in all dimensions, with the fewest difficulties in academic adaptation. It also showed that students generally encountered fewer difficulties after coming to China for one year. The findings of this study highlight the need for putting more emphasize on the students' mental health, orientation education, and cross-cultural communication skills.

**Keywords:** higher vocational colleges; international students in China, cross-cultural adaptation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the continuous enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength and its opening-up police, China is playing an increasingly important role in international education. According to the 2023 Chinese Vocational Education Quality Annual Report, Chinese higher vocational colleges offered 1,043 programs for international students and hosted a total of 13,119 international students in 2022 (Li, 2024). However, due to the relatively late start and a smaller scale of students, international education in higher vocational colleges faces numerous challenges, of which cross-cultural adaptation is the first and foremost one. Previous research has estimated that sojourning students may experience a number of stressors such as language barriers, discrimination, loneliness, homesickness, financial concerns, problems in daily life tasks, and academic difficulties due to the new educational environment (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Ng, Wang and Chan, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to find out the current state of cross-cultural adaptation of the international students in Chinese higher vocational colleges and explore effective strategies accordingly.

The cross-cultural model constructed by Ward and her colleagues is recognized as one of the most influential concepts in cross-cultural adaptation (Searle and Ward, 1990; Ward and Kennedy, 1993). This model divides cross-cultural adaptation into two dimensions, i.e. sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation. However, unlike other sojourning groups, international students have their unique characteristics, with study being their primary mission. Consequently, more and more scholars take the academic adaptation as a research theme. For example, Zhu G. H. argued that academic adaptation is a crucial component of international students' cross-cultural adaptation and should not be conflated with everyday issues or psychological problems, and thereafter proposed three dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation for international students in China (Zhu, 2011), which has gradually gained recognition among scholars and served as a foundation for their further research (Cao and Meng, 2022). Based on the above discussion, this study will explore the students' cross-cultural adaptation from three dimensions, i.e. sociocultural, psychological, and academic adaptation.

## 2. METHODS AND MEASURES

### 2.1 Participants and Procedure

Participants of this study were international students from three higher vocational colleges in Anhui Province. A total of 152 questionnaires were distributed, with 136 valid responses collected, resulting in an effective response rate of 89.47%.

The final sample was made up of 136 participants (76.47% male and 23.53% female). Among them, 42.65% were under 20 years old, and 52.94% were between 20 and 24 years old. Students originated from 12 countries, with the highest proportions from Bangladesh (31.62%), Tajikistan (18.38%), and Indonesia (16.18%). At the time of the survey, 30.88% of the participants had lived in China for 1-6 months, 35.29% for 7-12 months, and 28.68% for 13-24 months.

### 2.2 Measures

In addition to demographic information (gender, age, country of origin and length of time in China), we measured self-reported sociocultural adaptation, psychological adaptation and academic adaptation.

#### 2.2.1 Sociocultural Adaptation

A 20-item scale adapted from Ward and Kennedy's Sociocultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS) was used to evaluate the sociocultural adaptation (Ward and Kennedy, 1999). Previous studies have demonstrated that this scale had satisfactory internal consistency reliability (Gui, Safdar and Berry, 2016; Lebedeva, Tatarko and Berry, 2016). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (no difficulty) to 5 (extreme difficulty), with higher scores reflecting greater sociocultural adaptation difficulties. The measure demonstrated an acceptable level of reliability in this study ( $\alpha = 0.933$ ).

#### 2.2.2 Psychological Adaptation

To measure psychological adaptation, a 15-item scale developed by Berry in 2006, which was originally designed to measure the psychological adaptation levels of transnational immigrant adolescents was used (Berry, et al., 2006). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert Scale, from 1 (never) to 5 (always), so that higher scores reflect greater difficulties. The measure met the standard reliability criterion ( $\alpha = 0.910$ ) in this study.

#### 2.2.3 Academic Adaptation

A 19-item scale developed by Zhu in 2011 was used to measure academic adaptation, covering issues such as curriculum, teaching content, teaching methods, evaluation, teacher-student relationship, peer relationship, extracurricular activities, rules and regulations (Zhu, 2011). All items were measured with a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (no difficulty) to 5 (extreme difficulty), with higher scores denoting higher difficulties. In this study, the scale demonstrated a high level of reliability ( $\alpha = 0.942$ ).

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Descriptive Analysis

#### 3.1.1 Sociocultural Adaptation

As is shown in Table 1, the mean score of sociocultural adaptation was 2.22, falling between "slight difficulty" and "moderate difficulty", indicating that the sociocultural adaptation of the students was generally acceptable, though there were challenges in some of the areas.

**Table 1: Mean Scores of Different Dimensions (N=136)**

	Sociocultural Adaptation	Psychological Adaptation	Academic Adaptation	Cross-cultural Adaptation
M	2.22	2.12	2.01	2.12
SD	.752	.704	.751	.616

As is shown in Table 2, among all the items, "Finding food that you enjoy" (M=2.83) and "Dealing with climate" (M=2.61) ranked at the top. One possible reason was that most of the participants in the survey came from south Asia and central Asia, while the survey was conducted in eastern China. The significant differences in geographical environments posed considerable challenges for international student's diet and climate adaptation. In addition, "Understanding jokes and

humour"(M=2.59) and "Making yourself understood" (M=2.4) also posed quite big challenges for them. Humor, as a unique expression of a culture, is often deeply rooted in a specific cultural context. China's unique style of humor contains a wealth of historical allusions, regional characteristics, and language skills, which are quite difficult for international students to understand. What's more, items like "Dealing with bureaucracy"(M=2.37), "Relating to members of the opposite sex"(M=2.34), "Dealing with people in authority"(M =2.33), and "Communicating with people of a different ethnic group"(M=2.33) were similar in scores, reflecting that international students have some difficulties in adapting to specific social situations and interacting with different people.

**Table 2: Mean Scores of Items for Sociocultural Adaptation (N=136)**

No.	Item	M	SD
1	Finding food that you enjoy	2.83	1.364
2	Dealing with climate	2.61	1.272
3	Understanding jokes and humour	2.59	1.232
4	Making yourself understood	2.4	1.176
5	Understanding ethnic or cultural differences	2.4	1.188
6	Dealing with bureaucracy	2.37	1.031
7	Relating to members of the opposite sex	2.34	1.11
8	Dealing with people in authority	2.33	1.047
9	Communicating with people of a different ethnic group	2.33	1.199
10	Making friends	2.22	1.052
11	Talking about yourself with others	2.2	1.101
12	Going to social gatherings	2.18	1.117
13	Worshipping	2.18	1.247
14	Following rules and regulations	2.1	1.225
15	Finding your way around	2.04	1.043
16	The pace of life	2.04	1.095
17	Using the transport system	1.99	1.125
18	Obtaining accommodation	1.91	1.071
19	Family relationships	1.85	0.98
20	Shopping	1.54	0.942

### 3.1.2 Psychological Adaptation

In this survey, the mean score of psychological adaptation was 2.12, falling between "rarely" and "sometimes", indicating that international students' psychological adaptation problems were generally manageable.

A deeper analysis of the data revealed that the items with higher mean scores included "I feel tired." (M=2.62), "I am worried about something bad happening to me." (M=2.32), and "I feel restless." (M=2.28). These data clearly showed that physical and mental exhaustion and anxiety tendencies had become major problems in the psychological adaptation process of international students. Further exploration of the underlying reasons suggested that these issues were closely related to the pressures of language learning and the heavy academic workload (Li, 2024). Therefore, it is imperative for colleges to pay attention to the students' mental health. For example, colleges can regularly organize various forms of activities, like workshops or lectures focusing on stress management, emotional regulation, and time management so as to help the students alleviate their pressure.

On the contrary, it is encouraging to note that the mean scores of symptoms such as "I feel dizzy and faint." (M =2.06), "I feel nervous and shaky inside." (M=2.02), "I feel short of breath even when not exerting myself." (M=1.93), and "I feel weak all over."(M =1.87) are relatively low, indicating that somatic symptoms are uncommon among the international students.

**Table 3: Mean Scores for Items of Psychological Adaptation (N=136)**

No.	Item	M	SD
1	I feel tired.	2.62	1.149
2	I am worried about something bad happening to me.	2.32	1.223
3	I feel restless.	2.28	1.016
4	I feel sick in the stomach.	2.21	1.103
5	I worry a lot of the time.	2.21	1.064
6	I feel tense or keyed up.	2.16	0.99
7	I lose interest and pleasure in things which I usually enjoy.	2.15	1.208
8	I feel unhappy and sad.	2.09	1
9	I feel lonely even with other people.	2.07	1.12
10	I feel dizzy and faint.	2.06	1.002
11	I feel nervous and shaky inside.	2.02	0.977
12	I feel annoyed or irritated.	1.94	0.972
13	I feel short of breath even when not exerting myself.	1.93	0.975
14	My thoughts seem to be mixed up.	1.92	1.033
15	I feel weak all over.	1.87	0.992

### 3.1.3 Academic Adaptation

In this survey, the mean score of academic adaptation was 2.01, which was close to "slight difficulty", indicating that the overall academic adaptation was favorable. Compared with sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation, international students had better performance in academic adaptation.

As is shown in Table 4, "Expressing ideas in class" (M=2.31), "Understanding what is taught by the teacher" (M=2.28), and "Understanding what is communicated in orientation" (M=2.21) ranked in the top 3. The primary reason for this may be that the above-mentioned three items had higher language requirements. However, due to the heavy academic workload and tight class schedules in higher vocational colleges, international students face great language barriers, even after one year of intensive Chinese language learning courses (Li, 2024). Additionally, "Understanding what is communicated in orientation" occurred at the very beginning of their studies when they were quite unfamiliar with the new environment. Therefore, great emphasis should be put on the orientation education. Both on-campus and off-campus practical life information should be provided, including enrollment procedures, campus facilities, nearby shopping centers, bank service, medical guides, and transportation lines. Colleges can also recruit volunteers from senior international students to share their own experience of studying and living in China with the freshmen.

Much to our relief, items such as "Taking notes in class" (M=1.74), "Establishing rapport with Chinese teachers" (M=1.79), and "Concentrating when studying" (M=1.81) showed that the students had a smoother adjustment to basic study habits and teacher-student interactions.

**Table 4: Mean Scores for Items of Academic Adaptation (N=136)**

No.	Item	M	SD
1	Expressing ideas in class.	2.31	1.202
2	Understanding what is taught by the teacher.	2.28	1.093
3	Understanding what is communicated in orientation.	2.21	1.021
4	Joining extracurricular activities.	2.18	1.048
5	Adapting to Chinese teaching style.	2.07	1.1
6	Functioning well in exams.	2.07	1.104
7	Selecting desirable courses.	2.05	1.013
8	Getting used to the forms of assessment.	2.05	1.056

9	Dealing with the college's/institute's administrative staff.	2.03	1.122
10	Relating to Chinese students.	2.02	1.057
11	Using the library.	1.99	1.135
12	Attending lessons regularly.	1.96	1.144
13	Following the college's/institute's rules and regulations.	1.93	1.13
14	Completing assignments on time.	1.89	1.03
15	Relating to co-nationals.	1.86	1.055
16	Relating to other foreign students.	1.84	0.968
17	Concentrating when studying.	1.81	1.007
18	Establishing rapport with Chinese teachers.	1.79	1.076
19	Taking notes in class.	1.74	0.989

### 3.1.4 Cross-cultural Adaptation

As is shown in Table 1, the mean score of cross-cultural adaptation among the participants was 2.12, suggesting that the overall adaptation status of international students in higher vocational colleges was stable. Among all participants, 65 students (47.8%) scored between "no difficulty" and "slight difficulty"; 62 students (45.6%) scored between "slight difficulty" and "moderate difficulty"; 8 students (5.9%) scored between "moderate difficulty" and "great difficulty"; and only 1 student (0.74%) scored between "great difficulty" and "extreme difficulty." From this distribution, it was evident that the majority of international students were in a relatively stable state of cross-cultural adaptation, with only a very small number facing significant adaptation challenges.

In order to enhance the students' overall cross-cultural communication skills, it is necessary to establish comprehensive and systematic cross-cultural communication courses, including China's national conditions, Chinese culture and cross-cultural communication skills. To help the students gain a holistic understanding of China's development, contents such as introductions to China's politics, economy, and social structures as well as the current opportunities and challenges China faces should be included in the China's national conditions course. For Chinese culture, it is crucial to explore engaging and interactive teaching methods. By organizing various hands-on activities, such as calligraphy practice, role-playing in traditional opera, and paper-cutting creation, students can experience the unique charm and profound depth of Chinese culture. For cross-cultural communication skills, colleges should set up cross-cultural communication theory and practice courses to help the students analyze the communication patterns, value differences and strategies so as to deal with cultural conflicts in different cultural contexts.

### 3.2 Comparative Analysis

Based on demographic characteristics, we used ANOVA to examine the differences across sociocultural, psychological and academic adaptations in terms of gender, age and the length of time in China. The results indicated that sociocultural adaptation showed significant differences on length of time in China ( $P < 0.001$ ). The mean scores for students who had been in China for "1-6 months" and "7-12 months" were higher than other groups, indicating that international students can better adapt to the society and culture after coming to China for one year. However, gender and age did not significantly influence sociocultural adaptation. Additionally, gender, age, and the length of time in China did not significantly affect psychological adaptation or academic adaptation.

**Table 5: Gender Differences Across Different Dimensions (N=136)**

	Male	Female	T	P
Sociocultural Adaptation	2.17±0.78	2.31±0.70	-0.975	0.332
Psychological Adaptation	2.10±0.77	2.16±0.54	-0.453	0.652
Academic Adaptation	1.97±0.78	2.08±0.70	-0.825	0.411

**Table 6: Age Differences Across Different Dimensions (N=136)**

	<20	20-24	25-29	F	P
Sociocultural Adaptation	2.36±0.71	2.11±0.75	2.29±1.08	1.768	0.175
Psychological Adaptation	2.20±0.75	2.05±0.64	2.29±0.92	0.952	0.389
Academic Adaptation	2.09±0.75	1.91±0.71	2.37±1.13	1.726	0.182

**Table 7: Gender Differences Across Different Dimensions (N=136)**

	1-6M	7-12M	13-24M	25-36M	>36M	F	P
Sociocultural Adaptation	2.56±0.66	2.24±0.77	1.90±0.70	2.01±0.59	1.25	4.969	<0.001
Psychological Adaptation	2.08±0.65	2.23±0.86	2.02±0.57	2.33±0.51	1.67	0.731	0.572
Academic Adaptation	2.16±0.53	2.06±0.90	1.81±0.76	1.87±0.56	1.26	1.512	0.202

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The study investigated the current state of cross-cultural adaptation of 136 international students from Chinese higher vocational colleges through a survey. The result suggested that the international students generally performed well in sociocultural, psychological, academic adaptation and cross-cultural adaptation at large, with the fewest difficulties in academic adaptation. Additionally, students generally encountered fewer difficulties after coming to China for one year. To address the difficulties exposed in the survey, this study highlights the need for putting more emphasize on mental health care, orientation education, and cross-cultural communication courses. Although this study has yielded some findings, the use of survey data is a major limitation. All participants in the survey were from the same province, which, to some extent, reduces the application of the results. In future research, it would be worthwhile to increase the sample size and diversify the sources of the sample to enhance the applicability of the findings.

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