

# Multifaceted Problems of Intercultural Adaptation: A Case Study of Chinese Students in Ukraine

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**Abstract:** *The paper is aimed to indicate the multifaceted problems that international students, in particular, those who belong to non-European intellectual traditions, meet at Sumy National Agrarian University, Ukraine. The authors examined the scientific works concerning Chinese students' intercultural adaptation experience in foreign universities. It was found out that successful intercultural adaptation process depends on effective interpersonal communication, which improves language proficiency, motivation, and promotes students' interaction with representatives of foreign cultures. Interviews and questionnaires with the international students were compiled and processed to determine the main problems of adaptation from physiological, socio-psychological, socio-cultural, academic points of view. The data for the survey was collected through observation over the participants, focusing on students' ability to keep the norms and rules of behaviour in Ukraine; ability to establish and maintain ties with the representatives of other cultures; ability to overcome intercultural tension in the process of communication. Thus, it has been concluded that intercultural adaptation can be successful only in the process of psychological, social, and cultural accommodation of international students, which can be gained with the following strategies: social facilitation, cultural awareness, psychological and pedagogical support, effective organization of interpersonal communication of students in the academic group, dormitories, communication with lecturers both at classes and outside the university.*

**Keywords:** *Academic and cultural environment; communication; cultural awareness; interaction; intercultural adaptation; international students.*

**How to cite:** Bilotserkovets, M., Fomenko, T., Gubina, O., Berestok, O., Shcherbyna, Y., Krekoten, O. (2020). Multifaceted Problems of Intercultural Adaptation: A Case Study of Chinese Students in Ukraine. *BRAIN. Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience*, 11(1), 178-188. <https://doi.org/10.18662/brain/11.1/22>

## 1. Introduction

Ukrainian universities are actively involved into the process of training international students. Currently, according to official international enrollment statistics, 75,605 international students from 154 countries are attending universities in Ukraine (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine/Ukrainian State Center for International Education, n.d.).

Although the choice of a higher education institution by international students is influenced by numerous criteria, the most important one is the quality of education, that in many respects depends on their effective adaptation to the new academic environment. Therefore, promotion of Ukrainian educational services to the international market requires organization of the process of adaptation of international students to the academic and cultural environment of higher educational institutions (Fomenko et al., 2019). In this context, there is a crucial necessity to study the process of students' intercultural adaptation and the approaches that can be implemented by Ukrainian universities in order to facilitate and support these students' learning activities.

The research was aimed to study the multifaceted problems that international students faced, while studying in Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU), as well as the ways to solve them. The researchers regarded the experience of universities worldwide on intercultural adaptation of international students, Chinese ones, in particular, who formed the largest group of international students in Sumy National Agrarian University at the moment, 200 out of 490. That is a current issue for SNAU, because since 2017 it has been actively cooperating with several Chinese higher educational institutions in the scientific and educational spheres. SNAU is engaged in several joint Bachelor and Master Programs, Postgraduate Training, exchange and internship of students, postgraduate students, faculty; holding joint conferences and symposia; promotion of mutual scientific research in different directions, etc. (SNAU, 2020).

## 2. Literature review

Modern economic and political trends have caused significant changes in scientific and educational spheres and drawn attention to the formation of future specialists, who are aware of their belonging to the world culture, and are capable of tolerant and successful collaboration in personal and professional areas with bearers of other cultures. They are able to perceive foreign language cultures and represent their own ones, as the

diversity of languages and cultures is a valuable source of knowledge, personal development, and self-fulfillment (Bakum et al., 2019).

It was found out that there is a wide variety of studies, devoted to the problems of international students' adaptation to the academic and cultural environment of a foreign higher educational institution. The researchers have underlined that entering the host society, international students undergo intercultural adaptation which is defined as a process of students' preparation to meet the demands of a new cultural environment (Kim, 1989).

The core factor of intercultural adaptation process is communication. When people communicate with someone from another culture, it considerably influences their behavioral practices, because it highlights and develops three main themes of personal communication – language ability, adaptive motivation, and flexibility, and it results in facilitation of their adaptation to foreign cultures. So, it is essential to take into account peoples' overall capacity to encode and decode hosts' information appropriately that helps them to easily adjust to the host environment, as well as capability of overcoming culture shock in the process of intercultural adaptation (Kim, 2008).

Various countries are featured with culture that is more specific than the social structures, so most scientists admit that it is extremely complicated to adapt and to get involved in other people's values, traditions and customs, while "adaptation to the social order of life in a foreign country is getting faster. So, primarily, a person adapts to the social conditions of life, and then to the cultural ones" (Merkulova et al., 2018).

However, some scholars (Solodka, 2013) note, that an individual does not need to adapt to all the aspects of the foreign culture in terms of temporary cultural contacts such as training, internships, participation in different international programs etc. International students need to learn only the most significant aspects of culture that affect interpersonal communication, and acquire the practical skills that underlie cultural and deterministic behavior of people of distinctive culture; gain understanding the rules which are used for social relations in this culture.

According to the topic of this study, the works concerning Chinese students' intercultural adaptation experience in foreign universities were of special interest. The research findings of the study regarding Chinese students and their British lecturers showed that "both parties went through a three-stage adaptation process during their one-year intercultural encounters. The first stage was marked with unfamiliarity and frustration for both Chinese students and British lecturers. In the second stage, the two parties

met greater expectation gaps, intercultural academic identity conflicts and psychological struggles. Only the third stage of their two-way adaptation process was perceived by students and lecturers with gradual adaptation and relaxation. Two factors were identified as being pivotal in relation to the ease or difficulty of integration of international students to the foreign academic environment: the pedagogical culture 'legitimated' by the lecturers and the level of intercultural sensitivity, especially as shown in a sense of other-orientation and support". (Zhao & Bourne, 2011).

Another one-year in-depth qualitative research was drawn upon a small group of Chinese postgraduate students' in a British university. It focused on exploring the three fold 'stress adaptation growth' in the intercultural learning process of these participants by reflecting and sharing their life experience in the UK. The researcher stated that "intercultural adaptation is in itself a process of intercultural learning, which potentially can cause essential changes in personalities of overseas students, transforming their perception of the education experience, self-knowledge, understanding other peoples, moral values and world perspectives". (Scherto, 2007).

Modern researchers H. Moon, J. Nam, and Y. Kim investigated the Chinese students' level of Korean culture awareness as well as the proficiency in foreign language in order to determine the most effective educational measures. They revealed that cultural education cannot be separated from language education for foreigners. The study indicated that international students from the same country may have different degree of exposure to foreign culture, knowledge priorities, and cultural familiarity, depending on their level of foreign language proficiency, prior learning, and degree of cultural similarity (Moon et al., 2014).

The scholars (Niemets et al., 2016) determined the main problems associated with the adaptation of international students while studying in Ukraine:

- linguistic (problems with learning Ukrainian or Russian, acquisition of special terminology in the chosen specialty, difficulties with understanding the lecturers, etc.);
- socio-cultural (problems of everyday communication with local residents and classmates, peculiarities of national cuisine and certain differences in the nutrition of local and international students, etc.);
- socio-psychological (tolerance issues, homesickness and isolation, etc.).

Thus, the study of the scientific sources proved that all cross-cultural experiences are both crucial and prosperous, providing opportunities for

personal transformation. Problems caused by cross-cultural experiences enable international students to change some of their old ways of behavior to undergo intercultural adaptation, in particular to meet the demands of the new educational and cultural environment.

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted with a qualitative research approach. Thematic analysis revealed two research questions:

1. What are the main problems, caused by cross-cultural experiences that Chinese students need to solve while studying at Sumy National Agrarian University?

2. What are the ways to facilitate Chinese students' adaptation to the academic environment of the Ukrainian university?

To determine the main problems of adaptation including physiological, socio-psychological, sociocultural, academic aspects, special hand-out questionnaires were compiled and processed.

Also necessary information was collected through observation over the participants (Fomenko et al., 2019). The following skills of international students - ability to keep the norms and rules of behavior adopted in the host society; ability to establish and maintain communication with the representatives of other culture; ability to overcome intercultural misunderstandings in the process of communication were assessed on the basis of pedagogical observation. During the pedagogical observation, the expert estimation method was used to obtain a more qualitative result of the data. The method consisted of an intuitive and logical analysis of the problem of interaction between students. The survey was conducted by lecturers and tutors who observed the interaction of students during practical classes, extracurricular activities.

In total 148 respondents participated in this study. The participants were identified as international Master (76) and Postgraduate students (72). The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to conduct an in-depth exploration of Chinese students' experiences in Ukraine. Each interview lasted 45 minutes. The respondents were asked to indicate the level of difficulty they had experienced with each issue, using a 10-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (no difficulty) to 10 (extreme difficulty). The major issues presented by the students are summarized in Table 1.

#### 4. Findings

The empirical findings indicated that Chinese students had to solve different problems while adapting to the academic and cultural environment of Sumy National Agrarian University (Fomenko et al., 2019).

**Table 1.** Physiological, socio-psychological, socio-cultural, academic aspects of problems that the participants of the survey met in the process of adaptation to the Ukrainian university

Aspect	Problem	% of students met
Physiological	Climate, weather	6
	Ukrainian cuisine	8
Socio-psychological	Feelings of homesickness	11
	the need to Communicate in a foreign language	15
Socio-cultural	problems with transport	3
	Unfamiliarity with a local lifestyle	14
	Difficulties in social behavior	17
Academic	Curriculum and pedagogy in the Ukrainian university	12
	Difficulties in understanding the lecturers and answering orally	14

Thorough analysis of the responses of Chinese students to the questionnaires revealed that on arrival in Ukraine they had had to get used to the climatic conditions (6%) and to the Ukrainian foodstuff (8%). They had had complications with socialization: feeling of homesickness (11%), foreign language communication (15%); 3% of the students who had been interrogated, had pointed out the problems with transport as well.

Having been asked: “How do you communicate with Ukrainians?”, 84% students answered that they had mainly used English, and 16% of respondents said that they had interacted well with the local population at an initial level of communication in Ukrainian. Moreover, 33.3% of the Chinese

students indicated that they could not be understood by Ukrainians during a live communication. As one student reported:

*The major problem I am having now is how to communicate with local people. They can't speak English well so it's hard for me even to order a meal in the cafe, etc.*

Most of the foreigners who come to Ukraine have problems in live communication. This significantly prevents them from freely interaction with the local people. Thus, there is a problem of alienation and mutual misunderstanding that affects both the physical and the psychological condition of an international student.

Many Chinese students in Ukraine had experienced confusion caused by ethnic identity and cultural difference. Common patterns of cultural difference included unfamiliarity with local lifestyle (14%), difficulty in social interaction (17%), but, at the same time, most Chinese students admitted being in friendly terms with Ukrainian students and faculty.

Chinese students' adaptation to the new academic environment had also caused certain problems in frames of an academic process at the university. 12% of the respondents had experienced complications in adapting to a different curriculum and pedagogy. 14% interrogated Chinese students told that initially it had been extremely difficult for them to understand the lecturers and to answer orally. However, most interviewees had considered their interaction with faculty to be positive, encouraging and facilitating their academic needs. The respondents explained:

*The English language we have learned and the English pronunciation here are different and can't be recognized immediately. We can't even understand what our teachers are talking about. Also we have to adapt to a new teaching and learning culture. Still we feel constant help of teachers, classmates, and people around.*

The Chinese students took their academic courses in English, yet many of them revealed certain degree of stress with language difficulties, that might have affected negatively their academic achievement:

*As I'm not good at English, the major problem is my language proficiency. I didn't have a reasonable level of English competence when I studied in China. That's why it is difficult to study all the common courses in English. So I'd like to improve my level of English.*

Since, according to this survey, the biggest problem that the international students had marked was the language barrier, Chinese students

were engaged in special English-language programs, meant to help them in overcoming this problem. The Chinese students attended also courses of the Ukrainian language and culture. 76% of them had difficulties with studying Ukrainian; 24% of the respondents noted that they knew already some Ukrainian expressions. Nevertheless, most of the international students thought that "their level of proficiency in Ukrainian was not sufficient for the academic process" - perceptions of lecture materials, oral answers, etc. (Fomenko et al., 2019).

So, the survey determined the following rate: socio-cultural sphere had caused certain problems for 31% of the international students, 29% of the participants had undertaken socio-psychological challenges, 26% of the respondents had met difficulties in the academic sphere, 14% of the respondents had faced physiological problems.

## 5. Discussion

Physiological aspect of adaptation regards international students' organisms' adjustment to the new surroundings. It is determined by the psycho-physiological consequences of changes in rhythm of life, stress factors of the environment, inaccessibility of the recreational sphere. Unusual climatic and geographical conditions and the absence of experience in adapting to them, new water and food rations are also of particular importance. International students may suffer both physically and psychologically because of such factors as sleepiness, appetite disturbance, indigestion, physical exhaustion, homesickness, depression, disorientation, and feelings of isolation and alienation (Niemi et al., 2016).

Socio-psychological aspect of adaptation refers to the international students' entering the system of interpersonal relationships in Ukraine, establishing ties within the academic group and forming personal behavior. The main factors that complicate the process of socio-psychological adaptation are identified as need for performing learning activities in a foreign environment, separation from the family and the usual social surrounding, feeling of loneliness in the first months of stay in another country.

In our opinion, an effective way of adapting Chinese students to living conditions in another country is '*social facilitation*', that is defined as an organization of a collective problem-solving process in a group managed by a facilitator (tutor, lecturer, dean). The task of social facilitation is the activation of students' academic work as a result of the strengthening of their dominant reactions – expressiveness and fluency of the language of

intercultural communication, presentation of their own point of view, generation of critical ideas (Kim & Park, 2010).

So, the adaptation of Chinese students to an unfamiliar environment, mentality, culture, worldview, customs and traditions involves the effective organization of interpersonal communication of students in the academic group, dormitories, communication with lecturers both at classes and outside the university (during excursions, visits to museums, theaters, theme soirees, days of national culture, etc.) (Fomenko et al., 2019).

Socio-cultural aspect of adaptation concerns Chinese students' awareness about the elements of the basic culture of Ukrainian society, the system of its values and norms of behavior, as well as culture and traditions of the university. It refers to the concept of '*cultural awareness*' as a way of thinking and viewing the world. It includes understanding, respecting and successful interacting with people whose background, views, values, behavior, communication styles, customs and practices are different than one's own. It usually involves internal changes in terms of attitudes and values (De Beuckelaer et al., 2012). It is provided by Chinese students' participation in intercultural trainings program. This program is necessary to ensure the elimination of the language and didactic barriers, to prevent interpersonal, interethnic conflicts with other students and to promote emotional comfort of the Chinese students. It is aimed in maintaining relationships among identity groups, and promoting better teamwork (Fomenko et al., 2019).

While analyzing the problems of academic adaptation, special attention should be paid to the peculiarities of teaching in multinational groups where there is a contact between two or more cultures and students who speak different languages (English, Ukrainian, Chinese etc.). The rules and processes of assessment, testing and examination are to be explained in detail. An international student should clearly understand what he/she has to do in order to pass the exam or credit and what assignments are to be accomplished during the term. The assessment should be objective and based on the standards approved by the Ministry of education and science of Ukraine and according to the university agenda. Students should be differentiated and motivated by marks during their process of study and at its end. This will give them sense of fairness and will be a good incentive for their further efforts. Academic achievements motivate students to solve other social and cultural problems, as they reinforce the main goal of the international students' staying in Ukraine.

## 6. Conclusions

Intercultural adaptation is a complex process that can be successful only in the case of interaction between the individual and the environment. International students' staying in the academic environment with different culture, the mismatch of education systems in various countries are facilitated by the intense process of their adaptation on the physiological, socio-psychological, socio-cultural, and academic levels.

The study revealed that most difficulties in intercultural adaptation for Chinese students in SNAU are caused by communication problems, both in socio-cultural and academic aspects, as well as the peculiarities of the surrounding environment. Also, the findings of the study proved that to achieve the successful adaptation of international students to study at the university, the whole range of academic and social programs should be implemented that would improve the academic and cultural environment of the university. Thus, intercultural adaptation is an ongoing interactive process, where the new culture influences and changes an individual, but at the same time an individual influences and changes the environment.

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