

# International Students' Traditional Chinese Culture Adaptation in China

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**ABSTRACT.** *This study attempts to examine international students' interested parts of traditional Chinese culture and cross-cultural adaptation. The study analyzed the international students' traditional Chinese cultural adaptation from cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. This study provides empirical support to the course of "Understanding China" in non-western contexts.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Intercultural adaptation, International students, The course of "understanding china"*

## 1. Introduction

With the education reform policy, the higher education institutions in main-land China have increased the enrollment of international students from the 21st century. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of international students is up to 492185 in 2018. [1] The large number of international students accelerates the internationalization of higher education institution in China, but also challenges the administration staffs.

Even China is the first receiving country of international students in Asia, intercultural adaptation of international students does not raise enough attention in international academic community. The lack of knowledge about international students' international adaptation in China, maybe due to the long-term status of China as a major sending country rather than a receiving country of international students in the world. [2]

Since China has a long history and the cultural roots in the time-honored history, we cannot ignore the aspects of traditional Chinese culture when we mention inter-cultural adaptation. This research focuses on the international students in a China university to adapt traditional Chinese culture in their beginning years, and the implications for the Chinese higher education institution.

## 2. International Students in China

With the plan of "Study in China (2010)", the number of international students in China has increased remarkably. Maybe because of the language barrier, Chinese is not an easy acquired language, most of the higher institutions in China provide English-taught courses to international students. International students are separated from local students both in class and in dormitory. Most of the higher institutions set a special college or department in charge of enrollment, teaching affairs and administrative affairs of international students.

The administrative staff is not only in charge of teaching affairs of international students, such as choosing courses, but also responsible for the ordinary life of the international students, such as assisting extending visa and going to hospital. Therefore, the international students get limited touch with the local people because of the language barrier and the management method. In the first month, the administrative staff will arrange many activities and lectures to let new international students to know about the campus, the university management method, and the city. To some degree, the administrative staff is like the "agency" of the international students. The work of administrative staff affects the intercultural adaptation of international students.

## 3. Intercultural Adaptation

*The Silent Language* of E. T. Hall opened a new page of intercultural communication. Since 1960s, many scholars have made great contribution to intercultural communication.

At the starting phrase, the effectiveness of intercultural communication and the stages of the intercultural adaptation are the main concerned problems of the scholars. The names most often associated with these issues

are Lysgaard (1955) and Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963). From 1980s, the theories of intercultural communication are flourished. William B. Gudykunst (2003) lists 15 intercultural communication theories in his book *Cross-cultural and Intercultural Communication*. Western and non-western scholars constructed theories and models of intercultural communication from different perspectives. [3] Dai (2018) lists more than 20 theories on intercultural communication in *A Study on Intercultural Competence*. [4]

Among these theories, Kim's definition of intercultural adaptation is taken in this study. Intercultural adaptation occurs when individuals move from their home cultures to some new, unfamiliar cultural environments, and they attempt to "establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal and functional relationships with those environments" (Kim 2001). [3]

#### 4. Research Method and Data

This study aims to answer two main questions: (a) which aspects of traditional Chinese culture are interested by the international students? and (b) to which extent the traditional Chinese cultural behavior will adapt to the international student ordinary life?

There are two parts of the questionnaire: the first part includes respondents' background information such as nationality, gender, education level, duration of stay, Chinese competence, motivation of studying in China, etc. The second part concerns the international students' intercultural adaptation. 21 questions are settled to measure the international students' adaptation to traditional Chinese culture from 3 dimensions - cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Cognitive means basically know the cultural phenomena; affective shows the likeness of the international students to 10 aspects of traditional Chinese culture; behavioral part wants to know whether participants is like to take these behaviors in ordinary life.

A total of 154 participants (male = 128; female = 26) were randomly chosen from a national China university. They came from over 35 countries (see Table 1). 49.4% of the participants were from Asia, 38.3% from Africa, 5.8% from Europe and America, and 6.5% unclaimed. Their residence in China ranged from the newly arrived to four years or more (Table 2).

*Table 1 Geographic distribution.*

Country	Total number	Percentage
Asia	76	49.4
Africa	59	38.3
Europe & America	9	5.8
Unclaimed	10	6.5

*Table 2 Length of residence.*

Length of residence	Total number	Percentage
Less than 6 months	7	4.5%
Year 1	29	18.8%
Year 2	65	42.2%
Year 3	39	25.3%
Year 4	14	9.1%

#### 5. Results

##### 5.1 Cognitive Aspect

In cognitive aspect, there were 3 questions to examine whether the participants know the cultural phenomena, such as traditional Chinese festival, zodiac sign/animal sign, and traditional Chinese medicine.

6 Traditional Chinese Festival Were Listed in the Questionnaire, Which Were Chinese Lunar New Year,

Lantern Festival, Qing Ming Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Chong Yang Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival.

No.	Items	Mean
1	Know your zodiac sign/animal sign	3.64
2	Know traditional Chinese medicine	3.21
3	Know traditional Chinese festival	3.12

The results showed that more than half of the participants knew zodiac sign, traditional Chinese medicine and traditional Chinese festival.

### 5.2 Affective Aspect

The questions tested the attitudes to Chinese tea, chopsticks, traditional Chinese medicine, Tai Chi, Chinese calligraphy, traditional Chinese painting, traditional Chinese craft (i.e. paper cutting, embroidery), Chinese opera, traditional Chinese costumes, etc. The 10 questions were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly like”=5 to “strongly dislike”=1.

No.	Items	Mean
1	Accept the core value of Chinese culture, e.g. harmony	3.99
2	Like using chopsticks	3.83
3	Like traditional Chinese costume	3.68
4	Like Chinese calligraphy	3.58
5	Like Chinese painting	3.54
6	Like Tai Chi	3.44
7	Like Chinese craft (e.g. paper-cutting, embroidery)	3.41
8	Like Chinese tea	3.32
9	Like traditional Chinese opera	2.92
10	Like to celebrate traditional Chinese festival	1.82

The total results showed that the participants accepted the core value of Chinese culture, and liked using chopsticks, traditional Chinese costumes, Chinese painting, and Chinese calligraphy very much. Tai Chi, traditional Chinese crafts, and Chinese tea were liked by the participants. The traditional Chinese opera and traditional Chinese festival were less acceptable by the participants. The results reflected that the more characteristically, the more liked; and the more easily get, the more accept. Using chopsticks is comparatively necessary in ordinary life, so the most participants liked it. However, traditional Chinese opera is not easy to touch in ordinary life and it contains the deep cultural meaning in it, so less than one third participants chose it. In cognitive part, more than half of the participants knew traditional festival, but much less participants liked to celebrate the festivals.

### 5.3 Behavioral Aspect

Contrast to the high proportion of “strongly like” and “like” in affective aspect, the results of behavioral aspects were different.

No.	Items	Mean
1	Want to learn Chinese calligraphy	3.65
2	Want to learn Tai Chi	3.42
3	Using chopsticks in ordinary life	3.40
4	Want to learn traditional Chinese painting	3.23
5	Will take traditional Chinese medicine when sick	2.79
6	Drink Chinese tea in ordinary life	2.36
7	Have celebrated traditional Chinese festivals	1.51

The participants strongly wanted to learn Chinese calligraphy, Tai Chi, and traditional Chinese painting and liked to using chopsticks in ordinary life. Traditional Chinese medicine is not the first choice of most of the participants. To traditional Chinese festivals, more than half of the participants knew them, less participants liked to celebrate them and much less participants have celebrated them.

The results showed a kind of “exoticism” intercultural adaptation. In the three phrases of intercultural adaptation, the highest degree of intercultural adaptation was affective phrase, then was cognitive phrase and the last was behavior phrase. Normally, we know something, then we like it and will do it; however, to the international students, they like the traditional Chinese culture more than know it.

## **6. Discussions**

### ***6.1 Pay Attention to in-Class Teaching***

The questionnaire also inquired the ways to know traditional Chinese culture. 36.1% of the participants chose “class”, 25.5% of the participants chose Film and TV, 18.8% of the participants chose Internet, 12% of the participants chose books, and 7.7% chose others. The results reflected that class was the main way of the international students to know traditional Chinese culture. In order to let international students studying in China better understand China, with the guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Chinese universities are tasked to develop a compulsory course for international students called “Understanding China” or “A Survey of China”.<sup>[6]</sup> The course syllabus, textbook and teaching method should be well designed due to the variance in international students’ nationality, education levels cultural and professional background.

### ***6.2 Take Advantage of New Media Platform***

With the modern technology development, social media is also an important way for young people to know the other. Teachers of the “Understanding China” or “A Survey of China” and Chinese language courses should also take advantage of the new media platform to introduce traditional Chinese culture. Teachers can release video, film or episode of TV series on social media platform, to give international student a direct impression of traditional Chinese culture. With the interaction on the social media, teachers can know the interest and the questions of international students, which will be helpful to revise the curriculum of the course.

### ***6.3 Enrich the after-Class Activities***

Due to residential and curricula arrangements, international students are deprived of many opportunities for interacting with Chinese students. However, it is necessary for international students to interact with Chinese students for the sake of learning about Chinese culture and Chinese educational practices.

Teachers and the administrative staff also need to increase the chance of international students to experience Chinese culture. The survey showed that international students have great interest to learn traditional Chinese painting, Chinese calligraphy, Tai Chi and so on. Universities can provide lectures and practice session after class on these aspects. Besides, teachers and administrative staff can organize some activities for international students to visit museum, traditional Chinese medicine exhibition, and join in traditional festival celebration in local community to experience some traditional cultural items.

## **7. Conclusion**

The present study has revealed some characteristics of intercultural adaptation of international students in China. They are: (1) the aspects of the traditional Chinese culture that the international students were interested; and (2) international students took an “exoticism” attitude to traditional Chinese culture. They liked traditional Chinese culture, but not so understood or adapted to their own behaviors.

The findings here are limited to the results of 3 phrases of intercultural adaptation. Future studies shall involve the influence factors of intercultural adaptation, such as residential length, Chinese language proficiency, cultural background and etc. In spite of the limitations, the present study should be informative to the content, teaching method and teaching objectives of the course of “Understanding China”.

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