

# *A Study on Intercultural Adaptation of Chinese Intercultural Students*

Yuying Li<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China, 610200*

*\*corresponding author: lyy2630@qq.com*

**Abstract:** With the development of China's economy and education, the number of students choosing to study abroad for further education is growing rapidly. As a result, research on the intercultural adaptation of overseas students has received increasing attention from scholars in China. This study uses a combination of questionnaires and sample interviews to explore the factors that influence the intercultural adaptation of Chinese students and the patterns that Chinese students follow in the process of intercultural adaptation based on the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model and the U-Curve Model. The findings of this study show that, firstly, the internal factors affecting the intercultural adaptation process of Chinese students include age, gender, language level, length of stay in the host country and motivation, and the most significant external factor is the technological development of the home country. Secondly, the pattern followed by Chinese students in their intercultural adaptation process is basically consistent with the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model and the U-Curve Model.

**Keywords:** intercultural adaptation, study abroad, Chinese students, cultural shock

## **1. Introduction**

With the development of China's economy and education, the number of students choosing to study abroad for further education is growing rapidly. The most recent statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education show that between 1978 and 2019, a total of 6,560,600 students of all types studied abroad. The characteristics of study abroad students have gradually changed as well. More and more families are now sending their children abroad to study at their own expense than in the past, and the age of those studying abroad is becoming increasingly younger[1]. The culture, religion, traditions, and customs of the countries to which international students go are often very different from those of their home countries China, and it is a matter of concern to scholars whether Chinese students will be affected by culture shock when they first enter study life and whether they will be able to adapt afterwards.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this paper will use American scholar Yong Yun Kim's Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model as a theoretical framework, with U-Curve Model as a reference, to analyse intercultural adaptation issues in the process of Chinese students studying abroad.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of intercultural adaptation as a formal phenomenon for study can be traced back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century. Berry [2] pointed out that the focus of intercultural adaptation has shifted several times. Now, broadly speaking, the term “intercultural adaptation” is used in an all-inclusive sense to denote “the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment” [3].

In recent years, as China’s national power has grown and the number of students studying abroad has risen, more attention has been paid to the study of intercultural adaptation. However, due to the geographical limitation of research data collection and policy orientation issues, most of the existing studies are on international students coming to China, and most of the research topics tend to be on the countermeasures related to strengthening the cultural identity of international students coming to China, which is a reflection of China’s increasing cultural confidence. For example, Li Shen and Xian-zhou Han [4] believe that Chinese universities should take more diversified measures to coordinate the cultural adaptation of international students coming to China, which can promote Chinese culture and enhance the country’s cultural soft power.

However, it is important to understand that the input and output of cultural confidence are two aspects that are organically integrated. The issue of intercultural adaptation in the process of Chinese students studying abroad cannot be ignored. For the past few years, some Chinese scholars have noticed the integration between input and output such as Li-sha Liu’s research [5] about the intercultural adaptation of Chinese international students. She has found that “all internal factors such as age of arrival abroad, length of stay, education level, foreign language level, adaptive personality and external factors interplay with each other to determine the whole intercultural adaptation process of Chinese International Students”. However, this study was more than a decade away, and many aspects of China have perhaps changed in recent years as the country has developed rapidly. More recent research like “Influence Factors and Countermeasures of Intercultural Adaptation of Chinese Students Studying Abroad” [1] points out that Chinese intercultural students should have a thorough understanding of the culture and customs of the country they are going to in advance to help them with the intercultural adaptation process. Nevertheless, this study lacks data support, which diminishes its validity and reliability.

Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a qualitative and quantitative study of intercultural adaptation with the current Chinese international students who are studying abroad. This will help international students to recognize the dynamics of intercultural adaptation in the post-epidemic era where globalization continues to advance, and thus contribute to the development of international student education.

## 3. Intercultural Adaptation

### 3.1. Definition of Intercultural Adaptation

Intercultural adaptation, also called cross-cultural adaptation, can be regarded as a variant of cultural adaptation. According to Liu, cultural adaptation can be traced back to the birth of people [5]. “The individual’s internal system undergoes a progression of quantitative and qualitative changes by integrating culturally acceptable concepts, attitudes and actions” [6]. Therefore, intercultural adaptation refers to a process where one already has a home culture unconsciously and then is surrounded by people from another different culture. The inevitable interaction makes one conscious of the difference and finally, as a social and cultural human being, one is forced to adapt to the different cultures in order to integrate with the environment in which one lives.

## 3.2. Intercultural Adaptation Models

In this essay, several intercultural adaptation models will be used as tools to analyse the collected data.

### 3.2.1. U-Curve Model

Sverre Lysgaard, the Norwegian sociologist, proposed the very famous stage-orientated descriptive model, U-Curve Model in 1955. The U-Curve Model comprises four stages: the honeymoon stage, crisis stage, adjustment stage, and biculturalism stage. (See Figure 1)

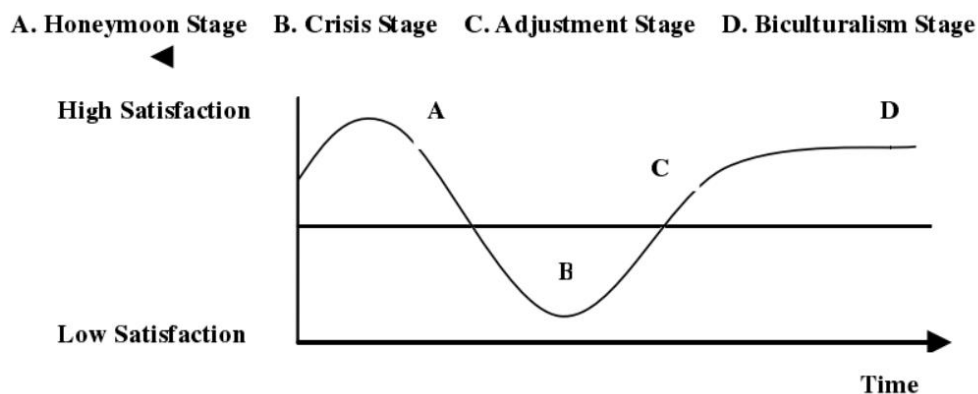
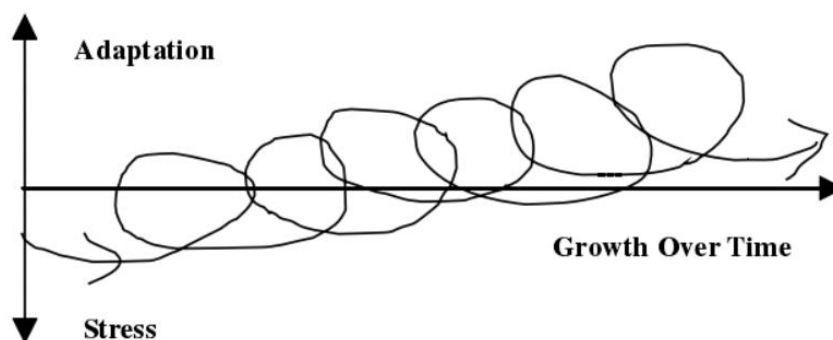


Figure 1. U-Curve Model.

The U-Curve Model demonstrates the process of intercultural adaptation, including initial adjustment, crisis, and regained adjustment. After the initial excitement about something new, i.e. the honeymoon stage, is over, international students will feel great negative emotions such as loneliness, depression and fear. It stems from the difficulties and challenges they face with the new culture. When the crisis stage is overcome, they will gradually learn how to adjust and transition and will eventually adapt to the new culture and complete the process of intercultural adaptation.

### 3.2.2. Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model



Source: Kim, 2001, p. 57.

Figure 2. Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model.

The Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model is an intercultural adaptation model proposed by Yong Yun Kim in 2001. The model reveals how the adaptor, as an outsider, or stranger, can reassert his or her identity in a new environment. The model is also a development of John Berry's work,

who in 1990 divided the strategies of acculturation into four categories: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. The Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model is the very detailed analysis of the “integration” part. (See Figure 2)

Adaptation goes hand in hand with personal growth and unfolds in a spiral. On the one hand, the adaptor enters a new environment and encounters challenges, which can cause discomfort and stress, while on the other hand, this experience of stress and difficulty promotes learning and change, allowing the adaptor to grow. As the spiral progresses over time, the degree of adaptation becomes higher and the pressure felt becomes lower, which is the meaning of the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model.

#### 4. Methodology

The target population of this study is Chinese international students who were continuing studying abroad when the research started in 2022.6. Ten people were asked to complete the questionnaire and three people were randomly selected for interviews. Quantitative and qualitative, i.e. questionnaire and interview methods are used to study the factors that influence Chinese international students' intercultural adaptation. In addition, the pattern followed by Chinese international students in the process of intercultural adaptation is explored according to the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model. The questionnaire consists of two parts, with 20 questions, and the participants complete the Likert Scale by selecting the appropriate score from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Besides, three open-ended questions are designed to be used in a random sample interview. EXCEL is used to analyse the data converted from the questionnaire, which helps to explore the factors affecting the intercultural adaptation of Chinese international students and the patterns followed by Chinese students in the process of intercultural adaptation.

It can be argued that investigating the intercultural adaptation of Chinese students who were studying abroad at the time will make the research data more intuitive and valid. Therefore, due to geographical restrictions, the questionnaire was conducted online and 12 questionnaires were returned, of which 10 were valid, with a validity rate of 83.33%.

#### 5. Result and Analysis

In this section, two parts of the questionnaire and sample interviews will be presented and analyzed separately.

##### 5.1. Factors that Influence Intercultural Adaptation

This is the first part of the questionnaire and consists of ten questions, six of which explore the internal factors that influence Chinese international students' intercultural adaptation, such as gender, personality, language level and motivation. The remaining four questions explore external factors. Frequency, percentage and mean in descriptive statistics will be widely used to analyze and discuss the raw data.

Of the ten questions, the more significant factors include language level, personality and motivation. The questions about them in the questionnaire are: *I feel comfortable communicating with native speakers in the new culture, whether on academic or lifestyle topics*; *I am brave enough to take risks to try new challenges*; *I am totally voluntary to study abroad without any pressure from others*.

Based on the results of all ten subjects' answers, it can be seen that though concrete data varies, all three questions have small standard deviations ( $SD < 1$ ), especially language level, which means

that language level, personality and motivation are three of the more obvious factors influencing the process of intercultural adaptation. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Language Level, Personality and Motivation.

	N	M	SD
<b>Language Level</b>	10	2.800	0.155
<b>Personality</b>	10	2.900	0.286
<b>Motivation</b>	10	3.800	0.681

As mentioned in the previous section, intercultural adaptation means that the home culture of the adapter becomes aware of a new culture. The concept of intercultural adaptation can be established by default on the premise that there is a medium of interaction between the two cultures, which is to say, language. Of the three factors, language level has the smallest mean (2.800). This indicates that the subjects do not consider their language level to be able to communicate very smoothly with native speakers in the host country. If the language level is not high enough, intercultural adaptation will be problematic, or at least the process of intercultural adaptation will become relatively difficult.

When the three data points are compared longitudinally, it can be seen that the mean and standard deviation of motivation are the highest. This indicates that on a scale of 1 to 5, subjects choose higher scores on the question of motivation, i.e. the majority of subjects choose to study abroad voluntarily.

## 5.2. Pattern Followed in the Process of Intercultural Adaptation

This is the second part of the questionnaire and consists of the other ten questions, all of which explore the pattern followed by Chinese international students in the process of intercultural adaptation, according to the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model and U-Curve Model. The Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model believes that international students perceive the difference between the home and new culture during the intercultural adaptation process and therefore feel stressed. However, as the stress persists, international students will self-adjust and gradually adapt to the new culture, eventually grow in this spiral process. Therefore, most of the questions in this section are presented like this: *I felt stress and pain when I arrived in the host country, but I have now almost overcome them.*

Seven of the ten subjects had been studying in the host country for more than ten months, which means they were more likely to finish experiencing such a process than subjects who stayed for a shorter time. Considering this, the number of valid answers to the question above is 7. The average score, or mean, of these seven people is 4.6 and the standard deviation is 0.249. With a reasonably slight deviation, the mean of this question is relatively high, indicating that the pattern of the subjects' intercultural adaptation process is consistent with the description of the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model and the U-Curve Model as subjects at least overcame the crisis stage and were in the adjustment stage or even biculturalism stage.

## 5.3. Analysis of Sample Interviews

In addition to the quantitative method of questionnaires, interviews with a random sample are used as a qualitative method. The purpose of the sample interviews is to extend the data results so that

more specific similarities or influences can be analyzed, or more detailed patterns of intercultural adaptation of Chinese students can be summarized.

The first question in the interview is, “*What difficulties have you encountered in your daily life in the host country?*” This question has an implication as a combination of factors that measure intercultural adaptation and an exploration of the pattern followed in the process of intercultural adaptation. As expected, language proficiency is one of the most obvious factors affecting everyday life, both in school and non-school life. According to one of the interviewees, “Perhaps because of the difference in communication habits, it is rare to have in-depth conversations with native speakers other than exchanging pleasantries. Most native speakers would ask me about Chinese traditions, but that’s about it.” It reveals that the limitation of language level is mainly in the ability to initiate other topics.

Moreover, all three interviewees mentioned that the difference in the education system between the host country and China was another major difficulty in their study abroad experience. Compared to the traditional Chinese approach to education, there is a greater emphasis on student-teacher interaction, as well as critical and lateral thinking among students abroad. Chinese students have to deal with it.

An additional open-ended question is included in the interview questions: *Currently, how do you position yourself in both cultures?* Through this question, it is expected to provide some insight to Chinese overseas students who are going through the process of intercultural adaptation, or at least to enable them to complete the process more smoothly. Of the three interviewees, one was under the age of 18 and the rest were all over the age of 22. Their answers to this question were interesting. The two older respondents still showed a preference for their home country, but the younger interviewee saw himself as being situated in the middle of the two cultures and getting used to the new one.

Most importantly, in the interviews, all three interviewees mentioned that the rapid development of technology in China now makes it easier and more efficient to communicate with family and friends at home, which to a large extent alleviates the pain and frustration during the intercultural adaptation process. According to U-Curve Model, pain and frustration from the intercultural adaptation process basically match the performance of international students in the crisis stage. As a result, the pattern of intercultural adaptation for Chinese students largely follows the U-Curve Model and the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model, except that the stress has been reduced compared to the past due to changes in the surrounding technological environment. On the other hand, it raises new questions. Due to the ease of communication, many Chinese international students have lost the pressure of being forced to socialize with native speakers in the new culture and are no longer actively adjusting themselves, resulting in less visible growth.

## 6. Conclusion

This study uses a combination of questionnaires and sample interviews to explore the factors that influence the intercultural adaptation of Chinese students and the patterns that Chinese students follow in the process of intercultural adaptation based on the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model.

The findings of this study show that, firstly, the internal factors affecting the intercultural adaptation process of Chinese students include age, gender, language level, length of stay in the host country and motivation, and the most significant external factor is the technological development of the home country. Secondly, the pattern followed by Chinese students in their intercultural adaptation process is basically consistent with the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model and the U-Curve Model.



It is no denying that there are limitations in the research design and data analysis in this study. Firstly, the sample size could have been larger. Secondly, the questions in the sample interviews should have enabled them to be conducted on a wider range of dimensions. As a qualitative research method, sample interviews require specific, common and individual data to be collected from interviewees, but online random interviews are more uncontrollable. It requires consideration of interviewees' schedules and network conditions, and it is therefore more difficult to conduct multidimensional interviews.

As for possible future research directions, the author believes that the intercultural adaptation process of Chinese students is essentially a confrontation between two cultures. Chinese international students need appropriate intercultural adaptation systems or institutions to provide authoritative advice or to put themselves in overseas students' shoes to help them complete the intercultural adaptation process more smoothly.

## References

- [1] Zhou, Yan-ping, Li Shi-zhong & Yang, Ze. "Influence Factors and Countermeasures of Intercultural Adaptation of Chinese Students Studying Abroad". *Chinese Frontier Health Quarantine*, 2021(10), Vol. 44, No. 5, pp. 337-339.
- [2] Berry, J. W. "Conceptual approaches to acculturation". *Acculturation: Advances in Theory, Measurement, and Applied Research*, 2003, pp. 17-37.
- [3] Kim, Y. Y. "Adapting to a new culture: An integrative communication theory". In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication*, 2005, pp. 375-400.
- [4] Shen, Li & Han, Xian-zhou. "An Exploration of Chinese Cultural Identity Education for International Students in China". *Heilongjiang Higher Education Research*, 2018(12), Vol. 36, No. 12, pp. 136-138.
- [5] Liu, Li-sha. "Intercultural Adaptation: A Study of Chinese Intercultural Students". *Liaoning Normal University*, 2008, 1-72.
- [6] Kim, Y. Y. "Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation". Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 2001.
- [7] Yu, Wei. "Chinese Students' Acculturation in the U.K. and Their Use of Xiaonei Web". *Shanghai International Studies University*. 2009, 1-25.
- [8] Xiao, Wen-yue. "Intercultural Adaptation and Competence Development of Chinese Students to the United States". *Journal of News Research*, 2018(10), Vol. 9, No. 19, pp. 220-222.
- [9] Chen, Hui & Che, Hong-sheng. "A Review of Research on Factors Influencing Intercultural Adaptation". *Advances in Psychological Science*, 2003, Vol. 11, No. 6, pp. 704-709.
- [10] Liu, Wei. "A Study on the Relationship among Chinese Overseas Students' Acculturation, Social Support and Life Satisfaction in Britain". *Fujian Normal University*. 2008, pp. 25-46.