

Research on the Cross-cultural Adaptation of East Asian International Students in China and Strategies for Its Improvement: A Case Study of Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Mongolia

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Keywords: East Asian International Students; Cross - Cultural Adaptation; Strategy Research

Abstract: In recent years, the number of East Asian international students in China has fluctuated. Despite the challenges of the international situation, East Asian international students remain an important part of the international student community in China. International students face many adaptation difficulties during their studies in a foreign country, especially in terms of social adaptation, academic adaptation, psychological adaptation, and interpersonal communication. This research, based on the literature analysis method, deeply explores the difficulties of East Asian international students in social, academic, psychological, and interpersonal aspects, and focuses on analyzing the profound impact of cultural factors on them. On this basis, this paper aims to propose effective strategies and suggestions, not only to help international students better integrate into the learning and living environment in China, but also to promote cross - cultural communication and understanding, and strengthen the dialogue and integration between different cultures.

1. Introduction

With the development of globalization, the internationalization of higher education has entered a new stage. Cross - cultural understanding and communication have become increasingly important, and international students, as a core component of such communication^[1]. When they move from their native cultural environments to new ones, they often encounter cultural shock. They are more likely to integrate into a new society when the new social culture is similar to their original one; otherwise, they may be prone to rejection^[2].

According to the data of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2018, among the top 15 countries in terms of the number of international students in China ranked by country, South Korea (with 50,600 students), Japan (with 14,230 students), and Mongolia (with 10,158 students) ranked first, ninth, and fourteenth respectively^[3]. After 2019, affected by the global pandemic, the number of East Asian international students in China has fluctuated. The number of South Korean students has decreased sharply, while the numbers of Japanese and North Korean

students have declined slightly. The number of Mongolian students, however, has shown a stable growth. Overall, the group of East Asian international students in China remains large, and China remains an important choice for East Asian students to study abroad.

East Asian countries are influenced by Confucian culture, but they have significant differences in history, society, and politics. This makes the cultural adaptation problems of East Asian international students in China more complex. They have to deal with difficulties caused by cultural differences and use a new language, which increases the difficulty of adaptation. If cross - cultural adaptation issues are not properly addressed, they can affect students' studies and lives, and may even lead to mental illnesses. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply explore the cross - cultural adaptation problems of East Asian international students and propose solutions.

2. Cross - cultural Adaptation Problems of East Asian International Students

2.1 Social Adaptation Problems

2.1.1 Environmental Adaptation Problems

Social adaptation is a multi - dimensional process of dynamic interaction between individuals and the social environment. East Asian international students in China need to adapt to both the urban natural environment and the humanistic environment. In the aspect of the humanistic environment, interacting with government departments, enduring unsatisfactory services, and understanding humorous jokes are the main troubles^[4]. Some South Korean international students have reported problems such as low efficiency in some Chinese institutions^[5]. In terms of the natural environment and daily life, international students are not adapted to climate and geographical changes. They are prone to getting sick during season changes, which affects their study and life^[6]. Moreover, the lifestyle in the study destination, including clothing, food, housing, and transportation, is quite different from that in their home countries. It is particularly difficult for international students from Mongolia, Japan and other countries to adapt^[7].

2.1.2 Dietary Adaptation Problems

In terms of dietary tastes and characteristics, the cuisine in northern China is rich in oil and salt, which upsets the stomachs of Japanese and Mongolian students who prefer a light diet. South Korean and North Korean students also find it difficult to adapt to the spicy flavors of Chinese cuisine. Regarding dietary features, Japan has a lot of raw and cold food, which is different from China's mainly cooked food. It's hard to find authentic flavors of South Korean and North Korean fermented foods. Mongolian cuisine mainly consists of dairy products like milk tea and milk tofu, and meats such as mutton and horse meat. Chinese dairy products vary greatly from those in Mongolia in terms of flavor and variety. Some studies show that some Mongolian international students have difficulty finding hometown food in China and are dissatisfied with the food in the school cafeteria. For example, the sweetness of Chinese milk tea makes them and their friends uncomfortable^[8].

2.2 Academic Adaptation Problems

2.2.1 Language Barriers

A questionnaire by Zhou Li et al. indicated that the academic adaptation dimension scored lowest among all aspects of East Asian international students' adaptation^[9]. Academic adaptation difficulties mainly result from language differences. Poor language skills hinder students from

understanding courses, joining discussions, and finishing assignments. Li Xiaoli's research on South Korean international students in Sichuan's universities via questionnaires and interviews showed their learning adaptation had uneven differences. Their overall language use ability was weak, with oral skills slightly better than written ones, and low proficiency in searching and reading Chinese documents^[10]. Language differences also make teacher - student communication harder. Even when teachers clearly explain assessment details, students often say they're unclear about academic requirements.

2.2.2 High Academic Pressure

As students, international students face various exams such as classroom quizzes, mid - term and final exams. Some of them also need to prepare for certificates like HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) and HSKK (Test of Chinese Speaking). Moreover, exam scores are often linked to scholarship evaluations, which affects their academic and psychological adaptation abilities^[11]. Interviews with Japanese international students show that they generally consider Chinese to be difficult and the exam pressure to be high, which increases the difficulty of academic adaptation^[12].

2.3 Psychological Adaptation Problems

2.3.1 Homesickness and Loneliness

Research on South Korean international students at a university in Dalian and Japanese international students living in Beijing shows that South Korean international students scored high in homesickness and loneliness in terms of psychological adaptation^[13]. Although most Japanese international students believe they can adapt to life in Beijing, their written compositions still reveal psychological issues such as homesickness, lack of security, and high study pressure during cross - cultural adaptation^[14]. This indicates that East Asian international students studying abroad are prone to loneliness and homesickness.

2.3.2 Depressive Psychology

Surveys indicate that there exist notable disparities in the psychological adaptation of international students from diverse cultural groups. Roughly 30% of East Asian international students encounter difficulties in adapting to the new environment and culture when studying abroad^[7]. A study on South Korean international students in China reveals that those who have been in China for 1 - 2 years exhibit poor cross - cultural adaptation, particularly in the realm of psychological adaptation, with relatively severe depressive symptoms^[15]. The measurement of the depression scale for Japanese international students shows that 33.1% of the surveyed subjects are in a state of mild depression, and some are in a condition of moderate to severe depression^[16].

2.4 Interpersonal Communication Adaptation Problems

2.4.1 Difficulties in Language Expression

A survey on international students' adaptation shows the main interpersonal - communication challenges for international students. Japanese students face significant difficulties adapting to Chinese social life^[17]. They stress phonetic accuracy, but their spoken Chinese is stilted and lacks fluency. Some worry that Chinese stereotypes, due to historical and diplomatic factors, will impede their social integration. South Korean students are better at writing than speaking. Korean - Chinese students, though having a Chinese language base, fear oral communication. Mongolian students'

Chinese usage often has errors because of cultural and linguistic differences, affecting their social interactions.

2.4.2 Difficulties in Adapting to Non - verbal Symbols

Adapting to non-verbal symbols, covering voice, tone, etc., demands greater cultural and value - based tacit understanding than verbal symbols. It's the toughest in language adaptation dimensions^[18]. Nations vary remarkably in non-verbal symbol use and comprehension. Japanese may be puzzled by China's direct communication. South and North Korean students use nodding frequency and body tension for respect, yet Chinese peers often miss these cues. Mongolians' exuberant non-verbal style, like loud talks and big gestures, risks being misread as rude in Chinese social scenes.

3. Cultural Difference Factors of Cross - cultural Adaptation Problems

3.1 Reasons for Social Adaptation Problems

3.1.1 Objective Differences in the Environment

Geographical location shapes each country's unique climate and lifestyle. Japan, with frequent volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, typhoons and few plains, has an intensive urban layout and strong disaster prevention awareness. Dense living brings strict noise control and clear privacy lines, differing from China's acquaintance society. South Korea, mountainous with population concentrated in big cities, has a fast-paced and competitive society. North Korea, mountainous and closed, has weak infrastructure and a tradition of collective cooperation and resource allocation. Mongolia, in high-latitude grasslands, is vast and sparsely populated with harsh winters, fostering a nomadic economy and mobile living. China, vast and ecologically diverse, has a diverse and stable sedentary civilization.

3.1.2 Dietary Cultural Differences

Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, and North Korea have distinct cuisines, differing greatly from Chinese food, thus affecting international students' dietary adaptation. Japan, an island nation, favors raw and cold seafood and light dishes, contrasting with China's greasy and spicy fare. South Korean students find Chinese food too salty and greasy^[19]. Mongolians' meat preferences vary from school offerings in China. North Korean cuisine is light, so Chinese food high in oil and salt can upset North Korean students' stomachs. However, research indicates that students' liking for Chinese cuisine is the main factor affecting their adaptation in China^[20]. In other words, those positive about Chinese food culture integrate better, while negatives face more adaptation challenges.

3.2 Reasons for Academic Adaptation Problems

3.2.1 Language Differences and Difficulties in Learning Chinese

The languages of Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Mongolia are agglutinative, differing greatly from Chinese (an isolating language) in character traits. This makes Chinese learning tough for international students, impacting their studies and exams. Languages on the Japanese and Korean Peninsulas, influenced by Chinese, use Chinese words, yet these also cause learning errors due to lexical differences while aiding Chinese study^[21]. Mongolian, an Altaic language with no

cognates to Chinese, and with the Cyrillic script reform, means Mongolian students face greater difficulty overcoming script and language family gaps when learning Chinese.

3.2.2 Differences in the Education System

The education systems of four East Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Mongolia) vary greatly from China's, impacting international students' academic adaptation. In Japan, with an emphasis on group obedience and standardization, students get anxious in China's discussion-based classes. South Korean education values academic scores and stresses autonomous learning and creativity. North Korean education, influenced by political ideology, causes students' cognitive conflicts when facing diverse Chinese academic views. Mongolia's nomadic-culture-influenced practical education clashes with China's structured classroom management, making students resist strict attendance and theoretical cramming.

3.3 Reasons for Psychological Adaptation Problems

3.3.1 Differences in Lifestyle

Lifestyle covers aspects like transportation, entertainment and diet. There are varying differences in lifestyles between China and Japan, South Korea, North Korea and Mongolia. In transportation, China has diverse options and complex traffic planning in big cities. With the language barrier, international students often struggle with commuting. In entertainment, students from Japan, South Korea etc. prefer consumer-based activities. Due to entertainment preference differences, they find it hard to blend into Chinese students' social circles. Moreover, the difference in bathing culture is hard to adapt to. The Japanese are used to soaking in bathtubs. Interviews show that Japanese female students new to Beijing are unaccustomed to bathrooms with only showers^[16].

3.3.2 Excessive Psychological Expectations

A survey by Lanzhou University found that the psychological adaptation level of East Asian international students is lower than that of European international students. Because China is geographically close and culturally related to many East Asian countries, people often expect East Asian international students to quickly integrate into the Chinese environment. In fact, due to frequent business and trade exchanges between China and East Asian countries, international students from Japan, South Korea and other East Asian countries often have high expectations of China before arriving. Such high expectations sometimes make it difficult for them to fully distinguish between the overall situation and specific differences, setting too high expectations for the study destination. When international students cannot adjust to this gap, they are prone to depression over time, resulting in low mood and loss of will.

3.3.3 Insufficient Social Support

When an individual enters a new cultural environment, their original social relationships will change. Building an effective social support network in the new environment can help them cope with difficulties, relieve psychological discomfort, and better adapt to the environment. However, international students who have just arrived are unaccustomed to the unfamiliar environment and lack social relationship support. When facing cultural differences, they are prone to feelings of frustration, which in turn trigger homesickness and have a negative impact on their cross-cultural adaptation.

3.4 Reasons for Interpersonal Communication Adaptation Problems

3.4.1 Differences in Social Etiquette

In East Asian countries, socializing follows the hierarchy of status and seniority. The Japanese value "collectivity" in social life. Fearful of public shame and exclusion, they restrict their behavior^[22], making them more reserved and humble due to "shame culture". South Korea has strict etiquette, especially in seniority and the superior-subordinate system. Nodding to elders or superiors is impolite, and honorifics are a must^[23]. North Koreans use honorifics even among peers at first meetings. In China, respect and equality are key in socializing, with less strict use of honorifics for both elders and peers.

3.4.2 Selection of Interpersonal Communication Modes

Influenced by various factors, international students in China develop diverse interpersonal communication patterns. They often cluster by region, forming a "like-minded grouping" model, and prefer interacting with fellow countrymen due to concerns about post-return relationship dilution, reducing exchanges with others. A Jilin University survey likened South Korean students' communication with Chinese society to an encounter; introducing Chinese friends or Korean majors had little effect^[24], indicating their preference for in-group communication. The Japanese see solitude as normal, embracing it as a time for mental reflection^[25], and are unenthusiastic about socializing. North Korean students, bound by collective rules, form conservative communication styles, relying on their domestic peer circle, using fixed rituals for emotional expression with less individuality. Mongolian students favor straightforward communication and take Chinese polite phrases (e.g., "Stay in touch when free") seriously, asking for specific timings.

3.4.3 Differences in Culture and Values

In terms of context culture, China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea are high-context cultures, relying on non-verbal cues, context, and subtext^[26]. Chinese value "face" but are more direct than the Japanese and South Koreans, especially in the north. For students from Japan, South Korea, and North Korea, direct negation in decision-making seems rude, while Chinese youth find it normal. Mongolia, a low-context culture, struggles with China's "face" culture, leading to communication misunderstandings.

There are differences in collectivism among Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Mongolia, and China. Japan's "harmony" culture makes its students silent to avoid conflict in teams, misinterpreted by Chinese students. South Korea's collectivism combines competition with strong national identity, making it sensitive to cultural comments. North Korea's collectivism restricts individual expression, causing cognitive gaps about campus individuality. Mongolia values individual ability and feels burdened by China's "reciprocal favors".

4. Countermeasures to Improve Cross - cultural Adaptation

4.1 At the Social Adaptation Level

4.1.1 Strengthen Life Guidance Services

Universities should compile multilingual living guide handbooks, covering daily high-frequency scenarios (such as payment, medical treatment, and transportation), and provide comparative explanations by taking into account the differences in cultural habits of students from different

countries. Organize on-site cultural experience activities and help students adapt to the operation rules of Chinese society through simulated scenarios (such as market shopping and handling of public services).

4.1.2 Set up Special Windows to Provide Exotic Cuisines

Colleges and universities can conduct market research on international students to understand their dietary preferences and habits. This can be carried out through methods such as questionnaires, interviews, or social media surveys to ensure that the provided food meets their tastes. According to the research results, universities may set up special windows in the cafeteria or dining areas, specifically offering exotic cuisines that international students love. These windows can include restaurants serving various national flavors, vegetarian food windows, etc., to meet the needs of different international students.

4.1.3 Build a Cultural Cognition Platform

Universities establish a cultural comparison database, extract the core differences between various countries and China in aspects such as etiquette, customs, and values, and popularize this information in the forms of pictures, texts, videos, etc. Organize cultural theme salons regularly, encourage students to share the culture of their home countries, and at the same time, learn about the social norms in China (such as waste sorting, codes of conduct in public places).

4.2 In Terms of Academic Adaptation

4.2.1 Improve the Academic Support System

Universities offer tiered language courses with specialized tutoring in academic Chinese and professional terms (e.g., in science, engineering, medicine) to ease language barriers. Design a transitional teaching model to gradually guide students to adapt to the rhythm of Chinese classrooms, such as shifting from using recordings to taking independent notes and from group work to independent research.

4.2.2 Provide Diversified Teaching to Alleviate Academic Pressure

Teachers should adopt various teaching methods to narrow the gap between the traditional teaching received by international students and the teaching in our country. Interactive and gamified teaching methods, such as group discussions and role-playing, can be employed to enhance international students' learning enthusiasm and participation, as well as improve their thinking abilities and creativity. Moreover, teachers should actively guide international students to set reasonable learning goals and clarify graduation requirements (such as passing the HSK level exams or publishing academic papers), helping them make proper study plans and avoid learning confusion and bewilderment that may exacerbate their adaptation difficulties.

4.3 In Terms of Psychological Adaptation

4.3.1 Provide Cross - cultural Psychological Counseling Services

When international students experience negative emotions such as loneliness, depression, and homesickness, and these emotions are not relieved for a long time, it will inevitably affect their cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, it is necessary to set up a special psychological counseling office, invite psychological experts to the campus to conduct mental health lectures, and hire

experienced counselors to provide international students with cross-cultural group psychological counseling or individual case counseling services^[27].

4.3.2 Build a Social Support System for International Students

Higher education institutions are pivotal in the support system for international students. A dedicated international student service center should be set up, offering one-stop services like enrollment, visa, accommodation, and medical care to aid their campus integration. Also, international students are urged to establish academic, cultural, and sports associations to create a cross-cultural exchange platform. Moreover, volunteers should be organized to provide language and life guidance, enabling international students to surmount obstacles and enhance their adaptability and living standards.

4.3.3 Create an Emotional Expression Space

To create spaces for emotional expression, institutions can organize non-verbal activities like art creation and sports competitions, enabling students to express themselves and relieve stress in a relaxed setting. Alternatively, online anonymous platforms can be established, allowing students to share cross-cultural experiences in their native languages, gain emotional support, and build mutual-aid communities.

4.4 In Terms of Interpersonal Communication Adaptation

4.4.1 Strengthen Language Practice

Due to the lack of real-life scenarios in language teaching in various countries, international students often have insufficient language communication experience, making it a common difficulty for them to be afraid of speaking the new language. To address this, schools should encourage international students to step out of the classroom through language practice classes, buddy programs, language corners and other means, integrate into the Chinese social context, and improve their language abilities. At the same time, international students themselves also need to take the initiative to practice speaking to adapt to the new environment.

4.4.2 Adjust the Mindset and Make Friends

Research reveals that international students in China with Chinese friends exhibit stronger cross-cultural adaptability and better performance in language learning and social interactions^[28]. This highlights the positive role of local friendships in cultural adaptation. Thus, international students should proactively adjust their mindset, expand their social networks beyond their own groups, make Chinese friends through activities such as student associations and gatherings, and seek support from them when in need.

4.4.3 Respect and Accept Cultures and Concepts Mutually

Schools can regularly hold cultural comparison seminars to build an in-depth communication platform for international students and Chinese students. At the seminars, both sides can have in-depth discussions on the similarities and differences in values, social norms, and ways of thinking between the two countries (or regions). This kind of direct dialogue and communication helps to break down cultural barriers, promote mutual understanding and respect, and thus build a harmonious cross-cultural relationship at a deeper level.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through the literature analysis method, summarizes the problems existing in the cross - cultural adaptation of East Asian international students in China, explores the cultural factors that cause these problems, and proposes corresponding improvement strategies to help East Asian international students improve their learning quality and life experience in China. The cross - cultural adaptation status of international students not only has a significant impact on their personal academic achievements, but also affects their perception of China after returning to their home countries, and is thus related to the construction of China's foreign cultural image to a certain extent. Actively promoting the development of the education cause for East Asian international students in China is of great significance for promoting mutual understanding among people of different countries, strengthening international cultural exchanges and dissemination, and building a broader international education cooperation bridge.

Acknowledgement

Subject information: This paper is the research result of the key project of the Chengdu University Research Center for Civilization Mutual Learning and the "Belt and Road" 2023: "Research on the Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Enhancement Strategies of International Students from Main Countries along the "Belt and Road. The project approval number is WMHJTF2023B04.

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