

# ***Research on Cross-cultural Adaptation and Enhancement Strategies for International Students from the Commonwealth of Independent States: Taking Russia, Moldova and Azerbaijan as Examples***

**Zeng Linling, Liao Caizhi\***

*College of Teachers, Chengdu University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610106, China*

*\*Corresponding author*

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the Belt and Road Initiative has been continuously deepened and advanced in various countries, and educational cooperation and exchanges between China and the countries along the routes have also become more frequent. Among them, the CIS countries, as an important component, have been continuously deepening their cooperation with China in the field of education. However, due to the significant differences between China and the CIS countries in terms of geographical environment, language system, educational policies, culture and religious beliefs, etc., international students face many challenges in the process of cross-cultural adaptation, such as language barriers, cultural differences, mental health problems, etc. These not only affect the studies and lives of international students, It may also pose an obstacle to the realization of the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative. This study, in combination with the cultural background of the CIS countries and based on the actual needs of educational exchanges under the background of the "Belt and Road Initiative", explores the cultural adaptation issues of international students from CIS countries in China, and puts forward targeted suggestions from aspects such as improving the service capacity of overseas study education, strengthening the cultivation of Chinese culture awareness among international students, and gathering social forces. It aims to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the promotion of educational exchanges and cooperation between the CIS countries along the "Belt and Road" and China, as well as the deep integration and development of both sides in the field of education.

## **1. Preface**

In recent years, the Belt and Road Initiative has been continuously advancing, and cooperation and exchanges among various countries in all aspects have been increasing day by day. At the same time, the exchanges between science and technology and culture have also become more frequent. The number of students going to the countries along the Belt and Road every year is constantly increasing, which has also become a new trend and new direction for studying abroad.

Among them, the CIS countries along the Belt and Road Initiative include seven, namely Russia,

Belarus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia. In terms of the overall number of students, in 2015, there were 20,384 international students from the Commonwealth of Independent States, and nearly 80% of the international students were from Russia<sup>[1]</sup>. From the perspective of academic qualifications, as of 2015, there were 7,701 degree students from CIS countries studying in China, accounting for 7% of the total number of degree students from countries along the Belt and Road that year. Among the 15 countries along the route where the number of undergraduate students studying in China is more than 1,000 and the 8 countries along the route where the number of postgraduate students is more than 100 and ranks among the top 10, only Russia among the CIS countries has reached this number<sup>[2]</sup>.

However, due to the differences in social culture, ethnicity, etc. among the countries along the route, their language culture, customs and other characteristics each have their own unique features. Therefore, when international students embrace the cultures of other countries, they not only have to bear the academic pressure brought by foreign schools, but also face a series of more difficult problems such as language barriers, cultural differences, dietary habits, interpersonal communication, personal safety, and even discrimination and prejudice<sup>[3]</sup>. This will not only affect the life and study of international students, but also cause them to have more psychological pressure and problems<sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, how to promote the cultural adaptation of international students is of vital importance. This study intends to combine the specific cultural background and actual situation of the CIS countries, take problems as the orientation, and provide theoretical and empirical basis for promoting cross-cultural communication, student services, education and management among Chinese students studying in the CIS countries along the "Belt and Road".

## **2. Cultural Background**

### **2.1 Topography and Geographical Environment**

The geographical environment of the CIS countries is rather complex. Their terrain is diverse, mainly consisting of plains, plateaus and mountains, and the climate is complex. In contrast, China's geographical environment has significant differences. China's terrain is higher in the west and lower in the east, distributed in three steps. The terrain is complex and diverse, mainly consisting of mountains, plateaus and hills. The area of mountainous regions accounts for two-thirds of the country's total area.

Secondly, the CIS countries are rich in natural resources and have relatively superior geographical locations. Take Azerbaijan as an example. It is located at the hub of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. It is an important republic of the former Soviet Union and an important member of the Commonwealth of Independent States. It is at an important node of the "Belt and Road Initiative", attracting experts and scholars from countries including Europe, America, Japan, South Korea, Russia, major Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey and Iran, as well as from China. It has created a natural environment for their communication and learning.

### **2.2 Language System**

Most of the CIS countries use Russian and their national languages as official languages and are known as Slavic countries. The national languages of these countries all fall under the category of Slavic languages. Slavic languages belong to the Indo-European language family. Therefore, although China and the CIS countries are geographically close, their languages and cultures are quite different. Chinese is a graphic script, while Slavic languages are alphabetic scripts. The two scripts are quite distinct. Chinese language learners in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries receive a kind of language and writing learning activity across language families.

Therefore, the differences in language, writing and culture bring double difficulties to learners<sup>[5]</sup>.

In response to the emergence of such problems, relevant countries have also taken certain measures to deal with them. For instance, in 2002, Baku State University in Azerbaijan officially established a Chinese language major. Up to now, systematic Chinese language teaching in Azerbaijan has a history of eighteen years. The establishment of the Confucius Institute in the capital Baku in 2010 also marked an important turning point. Since then, more and more colleges and institutions in Azerbaijan have begun to offer Chinese language classes. This has led to a significant increase in the number of people learning Chinese<sup>[6]</sup>.

## 2.3 Culture and Religious Beliefs

The cultural values of the CIS countries are influenced by multiculturalism, presenting complexity and diversity. As a core country of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Russia's cultural values are deeply influenced by the Orthodox and Slavic traditions, emphasizing nationalism, collectivism and loyalty to the country. The Central Asian countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States, on the other hand, have been profoundly influenced by Islam, emphasizing the connections between families and tribes, and stressing religious beliefs and social order. Its cultural values tend to be more dominated by nationalism and religious beliefs, emphasizing the loyalty of individuals to the country and religion. In contrast, Chinese culture attaches great importance to family ethics, social responsibility and collective interests.

The religious beliefs of the CIS countries are rich and diverse. Russia mainly adheres to the Eastern Orthodox Church, which plays a significant role in Russian society. It not only influences the spiritual life of Russians but also plays a crucial role in national identity and cultural inheritance. In Central Asian countries, Islam is dominant. Religious beliefs occupy a core position in the social life of these countries, influencing People's Daily lives, social customs and values. China is a multi-religious country, but it has no state religion. There is freedom of religious belief, and it emphasizes the adaptation of religion to a socialist society.

## 2.4 Education Policies

The Bologna Declaration proposed to promote the outflow of students from the CIS countries. Subsequently, the CIS countries successively introduced policies to promote the internationalization of their education. Take Russia as an example. In 2013, the President of Russia signed Presidential Decree No. 967, "Measures to Enhance the Potential of Human Resources in the Russian Federation", which supports students in studying at top foreign educational institutions and overseas students in returning to China for employment, providing significant social support for the outflow of international students from Russia<sup>[7]</sup>. In 2014, the Russian government promulgated the National Outline "Global Education", dedicated to supporting domestic students to study at top foreign educational institutions and helping them solve subsequent domestic employment problems: In terms of financial aid, the state provides students with all the study expenses and living expenses for studying abroad. Regarding school selection, currently, there are 200 top universities worldwide covered by this project. In terms of returning to China for service, students are required to go back to Russia after completing their studies and work for at least three years in the 526 research institutions, universities and large enterprises stipulated by the project<sup>[8]</sup>.

Secondly, in terms of higher education forums and agreements, cooperation between China and the CIS region is almost non-existent. Agreements are only signed in a decentralized manner with various countries<sup>[9]</sup>.

### 3. Cross-cultural Adaptation Issues of International Students from CIS Countries in China

"Culture shock" is a concept proposed by the American cultural anthropologist Oberg. He believes that "the deep anxiety disorder that an individual experiences in a new cultural environment due to the loss of the original familiar social communication signals or symbols and unfamiliarity with the social symbols of the other party is cultural shock"<sup>[10]</sup>. The adaptation process of international students from CIS countries in China is also a rather complex issue. It includes not only the adaptation to the new social and cultural environment, but also the adaptation to the new language communication environment and educational environment. It also includes adaptation to new climates, geographical conditions, schedules and other daily living environments. If one fails to adapt properly during a "culture shock", the following problems will arise.

#### 3.1 Difficulties in cultural adaptation

At present, regarding the adaptability of foreign students, researchers generally believe that adapting to Chinese social culture and the Chinese language environment is an important issue faced by international students in China. International students from CIS countries often encounter a series of problems such as language difficulties, communication barriers and cultural differences during the process of learning Chinese<sup>[11]</sup>.

The first reason for this is the lack of corresponding teaching staff. For instance, the official language of Azerbaijan is Azerbaijani. Due to special historical reasons, Russian is also widely used there, but the popularity of English is relatively low. At present in China, only Beijing Foreign Studies University offered an Azerbaijani language major in 2018. Therefore, there are very few teachers in domestic universities who can speak Azerbaijani. Other teachers all use English as the medium of communication, which to a large extent increases the difficulty of teaching and is not conducive to the mutual communication and interaction between teachers and students. Second, the scale of international students from countries along the route still needs to be expanded: Among the countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative, the development of international student education in Southeast Asia and South Asia is relatively good, and thus the scale of international students in China is relatively large. However, the scale of international student education in most of the countries along the route is still relatively low. In 2015, the number of international students from the Commonwealth of Independent States was almost no more than 1,000. The total scale of international students coming to China is relatively small, which cannot provide strong talent support and language guarantee for the comprehensive advancement of the "Belt and Road Initiative"<sup>[12]</sup>.

Therefore, it is an extremely urgent and important research topic to conduct targeted research on the adaptability issues such as social culture and language environment of international students in China, and formulate purposeful training plans based on the research results.

#### 3.2 Poor psychological adaptation

Some studies have measured the psychological conditions of international students from the CIS countries along the Belt and Road Initiative and found that they have mental health problems in several dimensions such as anxiety, frustration, aggression and paranoia<sup>[13]</sup>. This is consistent with the conclusion drawn from existing studies<sup>[14][15]</sup>.

The reasons for this are as follows: First, during the process of cross-cultural contact, expats will experience a series of life changes, such as differences in culture, diet, customs and habits, geographical environment, pace of life, climate, etc. These changes will bring various degrees of pressure to expats. The research by Furnham and Bochner suggests that there is a high correlation

between life changes and the psychological disorders of expats, and life changes have an important impact on the mental health of expats<sup>[16]</sup>. The second is cultural distance, that is, the difference between the parent culture and the mainstream culture, which also affects the mental health status of travelers during the cross-cultural adaptation process<sup>[17]</sup>. There are obvious differences between the cultures of the CIS countries and Chinese cultures in terms of cultural values, religious beliefs, social structures and cultural inclusiveness. Chinese culture emphasizes the concept of "harmony between man and nature", family ethics as its core, and values the middle way. It focuses on holism and the integration of diversity, and has a strong sense of inclusiveness and continuity. The cultures of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries show diversity and complexity. They are deeply influenced by religions such as Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam, have a strong sense of nationalism, and have obvious cultural differences in different regions. Moreover, they exhibit certain contradictions in cultural integration and conflicts.

Thirdly, there is a lack of social support. Existing studies have shown that social support can reduce psychological disorders and depressive symptoms among international students<sup>[18]</sup>. For instance, communication barriers caused by language difficulties may result in an inability to interact well with local people, thereby making it easier to develop negative emotions such as helplessness, loneliness and guilt.

## **4. Countermeasures and Suggestions**

### **4.1 Strengthen language teaching**

First of all, it is necessary to strengthen Chinese language teaching, focus on the all-round cultivation of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and improve the Chinese proficiency of international students. Meanwhile, attention should be paid to the localization of teaching contents for different students. For example, Chinese vocabulary and grammar can be compared with those of students' familiar native language in teaching to help them better understand and master Chinese knowledge. Meanwhile, in combination with the cultural customs and living scenarios of the CIS countries, some practical Chinese dialogues and short essays are compiled to enable students to better integrate into the social and cultural environment of China during the process of learning Chinese

Secondly, various teaching methods and means should be adopted, such as multimedia teaching and online teaching, to improve the teaching effect and the learning interest of international students. For example, when explaining traditional Chinese culture, multimedia materials such as pictures and videos can be utilized to showcase traditional Chinese festivals, folk arts, historical relics and other contents. Through multimedia teaching, various real life scenarios and communication situations can also be simulated, allowing students to communicate and interact in Chinese in a virtual environment and enhancing their language practice ability. Teachers can also make use of online teaching platforms to provide personalized learning plans and resources for international students.

### **4.2 Strengthen psychological service support for international students**

First of all, establish a psychological monitoring system for international students. Colleges and universities as well as educational administrative departments should attach great importance to the psychological conditions of international students, achieve overall control, early prevention, key detection and key tracking, and ensure the mental health of international students. The first is to build a platform similar to a national integrated system for monitoring and early warning of students' mental health, to monitor the mental health status, influencing factors and development



trends of international students. Second, regular psychological surveys should be organized to establish dynamic psychological status files for each international student, so as to promptly identify potential problems. Third, special attention should be paid to international students who are facing risk factors such as cultural conflicts, academic pressure, economic difficulties and emotional crises.

Secondly, establish psychological support services for international students. This includes psychological counseling and guidance, etc., to help international students relieve negative emotions, enhance self-confidence and adaptability. Provide international students with full-time and part-time teachers specializing in mental health education and psychological counseling, and establish a dedicated psychological counseling service center. We offer professional and public welfare services including positive psychology popularization, psychological counseling, and psychological measurement. We can also offer elective courses on mental health education, invite experts to give lectures, and provide group counseling for common interpersonal troubles and psychological adaptation issues faced by international students.

Finally, establish a mutual assistance mechanism for international students to encourage them to support each other and grow together. Peer clubs can be formed to promote mutual assistance among international students.

#### **4.3 Strengthen cultural exchange and understanding**

First, it is necessary to improve the residential management model, provide international students with a more free living space, break the confined model, and encourage Chinese students to communicate actively and proactively with international students. In the past, for the convenience of management and to prevent conflicts caused by differences in culture and living habits, the most common practice for the school was to provide separate accommodation areas for international students, forming a relatively closed group. Managers should make rational use of living conditions, especially accommodation environments. They can consider having Chinese and foreign students sleep together without affecting their correct daily routine to deepen daily interaction and communication.

Second, in terms of curriculum design, the proportion of cultural courses should be increased. The curriculum design requirements for students at all levels should be clearly defined. For junior international students, due to their limited Chinese proficiency, some rich, vivid and intuitive cultural appreciation courses can be offered. The teaching contents can include the appreciation of traditional cultures such as Chinese scenic spots and historical sites, folk songs and dances, Chinese food culture, folk handicrafts, calligraphy and painting, etc., with an emphasis on display. Stimulate students' interest in learning Chinese and understanding Chinese culture, and prompt them to form a preliminary and intuitive understanding of Chinese culture. For intermediate students, their previous perceptual understanding and desire to explore should be utilized to further stimulate their interpretation of Chinese culture. Therefore, at this stage, courses and textbooks such as calligraphy and learning Chinese and discussing culture can be offered. Textbooks that attach equal importance to language knowledge and cultural knowledge should be selected, gradually deepening from the beginner level to the advanced level to help students make the transformation and transition from their perceptual understanding to rational understanding.

Third, more diverse and rich cultural experience activities should be held. There are significant differences between China and the CIS countries in terms of human geography, customs and habits. For example, the terrain of Russia is mostly plains and hills. Its international students are full of curiosity and the desire to explore the lofty mountains and deep valleys of China. Then, the administrators can organize the students to visit famous ancient mountains such as Mount Tai and

Mount Hua to fully understand the connotation of Chinese culture. The CIS countries are Orthodox countries and their religious beliefs are different from those of China. Educators can gradually help them understand the Chinese people's life concepts and ways of dealing with people by offering religious and cultural courses.

#### 4.4 Establish a professional development mechanism

First, provide teachers with continuous professional development opportunities, such as international education symposiums and teaching workshops, to enhance their cross-cultural education capabilities. Strengthen the construction of the teaching staff and cultivate a team of teachers with an international perspective and professional capabilities.

Second, a dedicated academic consultation center should be established, staffed with staff who are familiar with the culture and language of international students, to provide guidance on solving problems related to their daily life, development, and academic pursuits.

Third, it is to encourage the active participation of all sectors of society and form a comprehensive support system. For example, encourage enterprises to offer internship opportunities and scholarships to international students to help them better understand Chinese society and workplace culture; Social organizations and volunteer groups can carry out cultural exchange activities to enrich the extracurricular life of international students and promote communication and friendship between Chinese and foreign students. The media should enhance the publicity of overseas study education, disseminate positive stories of international students in China, eliminate misunderstandings and prejudices, and increase society's acceptance and friendliness towards international students. Through the joint efforts of the government, schools and society, a warmer, more inclusive and vibrant learning and living environment should be created for international students, so that their study journey in China is not only an academic pursuit, but also an unforgettable cultural experience and life experience.

Finally, it is necessary to promote the "people-to-people connection" between international students and China. As an important member of cultural dissemination and a significant force in the economic, cultural, educational and diplomatic fields of various countries, international students, by applying the knowledge of the Chinese language they have mastered and the Chinese culture they understand, not only play an important role in their own positions, but also serve as an important driving force for friendly exchanges between China and foreign countries. It plays an irreplaceable role in the exchanges of politics, economy, culture and education in various fields between China and the countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, and is conducive to promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture in these countries

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