Cross-cultural Adaptation and Enhancement Strategies for International Students from Central and Eastern Europe to China

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Abstract: Under the advocacy of "One Belt, One Road", more and more students from Central and Eastern Europe are going to China for further study. Meanwhile, due to cultural differences, international students will show cross-cultural adaptation problems, such as language communication barriers, dietary discomforts, restricted beliefs, and conflicts in social etiquette, etc. Based on this, the present study proposes to alleviate the cross-cultural adaptation problems of foreign students in China by increasing the implementation of cultural exchange activities, Based on this, this study proposes to alleviate the cross-cultural adaptation problems of international students from Central and Eastern Europe by increasing cultural exchange activities, formulating multicultural education policies, optimising language teaching and training, strengthening the guidance of beliefs and social customs, and establishing a perfect social support network.

The "Belt and Road" initiative puts forward: vigorously developing international student education in China is a strategic choice for deepening education cooperation and expanding the opening of education to the outside world, and it is the main channel for promoting humanistic exchanges, talent cultivation, etc., and it has a pioneering and strategic role. At the same time, the General Office of the State Council "Opinions on Doing a Good Job of Opening Up Education in the New Era" points out that "by increasing the implementation of the action plan for studying abroad, we will accelerate the cultivation of five types of talents, such as the outstanding talents coming to China"[1].This attracts their students to come to China for postgraduate studies, which is not only a way to promote cultural exchange and learning, but also a way to gather high-level human capital and enhance innovation capacity, as well as an important initiative to spread culture and cultivate elites.

In recent years, the number of international students from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in China has shown remarkable growth, and the scale of international students from CEE in 2010-2017 has nearly tripled from 2010 to 2017, with the total number of students totalling 30,798 in eight years, accounting for 2.2 per cent of the total number of international students from the countries along the "Belt and Road". 2.2% of the total number of international students from countries along the "Belt and Road"[2].

In this context, as more and more students from Central and Eastern Europe go to China for further study, the problem of international students' cultural adaptation has become more and more prominent. Due to the significant differences in geography, history, religion and social customs between CEE and China, international students face many challenges in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, it is of great significance to study in-depth the cultural adaptation problems of international students from Central and Eastern Europe to China.

1. Introduction to culture

1.1 Cultural foundations

1.1.1 Historical background

Because of the strategic significance of its geographical location, the Central and Eastern European region has long been the focus of competition among the major Powers, while at the same time it has long been subject to the constraints of the major Powers, and the path of its modernisation and development has often not been decided by itself, which has led to a slower process of modernisation.

In terms of timeline, during the two world wars, the CEE countries were reduced to a battleground for the great powers[3], and after the end of the World War II, a number of CEE countries established communist regimes, which, although politically united, remained economically and diplomatically under the control of great powers such as the USSR[4]. And the geopolitical landscape of the post-Cold War period made the autonomy of the CEE countries even more limited. It was not until the end of the Cold War that the CEE countries began their political transition to market economies and democratic politics[5].

1.1.2 Language system

The languages spoken in the CEE region are diverse, including Slavic, Romance and Germanic languages. Among them, Romania is the only country in CEE where Romance languages are spoken, Hungary is the only country in CEE where Germanic languages are spoken, and languages such as Polish, Czech and Slovak belong to the Slavic language family[6].

In addition to the national language, the Central and Eastern European region attaches more importance to the mastery of foreign languages, and a study shows that children in Croatia start learning their first foreign language in the first grade, mostly choosing English, but also German, French and Italian, with 53.6 per cent of English and 28.6 per cent of German. In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, children currently start learning their first foreign language in the fourth grade of primary school, and English is taught in 90 per cent of schools[7].

1.1.3 Religious influences

Religion in Central and Eastern European countries occupies an important position in social life, and the Central and Eastern European peoples mainly believe in two of the world's three major religions - Christianity and Islam. Christianity is divided into Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism, and the religious composition of many countries is relatively mixed, such as Estonia, which has a large number of Protestant and Orthodox Christians; Hungary, where Catholicism is dominant but Protestant Christianity is a powerful force; and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the religions of faith include Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Islam[8].

At the same time, most of the festivals and celebrations in Central and Eastern Europe are closely linked to religious activities. In Poland, Catholicism is closely linked to national identity

and is an important symbol of the national culture, and Catholic rituals such as the Mass and the sacraments are of great significance in people's lives. Many traditional customs are also associated with Catholicism, and the way religious festivals like Christmas and Easter are celebrated reflects the influence of Catholic culture. In addition differences in religious beliefs bring about significant differences in the timing of major holidays and fasts, for example, the differences in religious holidays between Orthodox Christians (Romanians, Serbs) and other Christians are particularly significant, as the difference of more than a week between the Gregorian and Julian calendars means that even shared Christian holidays are usually celebrated at different times[9].

1.2 Cultural traditions of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe

1.2.1 Dietary habits

The Central and Eastern European diet is based on meat (e.g. beef, pork, chicken), dairy products (e.g. milk, cheese, yoghurt), grains (wholemeal bread, rye bread), fruits and vegetables, and fats and oils (salad dressings, butter, etc.)[10].

Cooking styles are relatively simple, with simple ways of preserving the nutrients of vegetables such as stir-frying, sautéing and stewing being widely used, while frying, stir-frying and deep-frying are more common, using oil as a heat transfer medium[11]. For example, in Romania, the main cooking methods include: frying and roasting, the traditional food of the local people is soy sausage instead of beef and pork, which is processed by frying, and the traditional recipes of the local people, such as cakes and other baked goods will involve roasting[12]; and stewing is very common in Hungary, for example, the traditional Hungarian cuisine Hungarian Stew is made of beef and potatoes stewed[13].

1.2.2 Artistic features

The development of art in the countries of the Central and Eastern European region is characterised by a variety of flowers, each with its own strengths.

In the field of handicrafts, the Czech glass-making tradition began in the Renaissance, and its hand-blown glass and crystal decorative artworks are famous all over the world[14]; Polish embroidery originated in the 10th century AD and was used to decorate churches and aristocrats' gowns, and then developed into folk handicrafts, with a variety of styles, including flowers, animals and other elements, which are representative of the Polish folk culture and an important part of its economy[15]; traditional clay sculpture and painting in Montenegro focus on religious and human statues, with a complex process and exquisite modelling, which carries the local folk culture. Montenegrin traditional clay sculptures and paintings are mainly religious and human statues, with complex craft processes, diverse decorations and exquisite modelling, carrying local folk culture[16].

In the field of film and media, Emir Kusturica of Serbia has participated in many international film festivals, contributing to the exchange of films and the dissemination of culture[17]. Bulgaria The Sofia International Film Festival in Bulgaria is dedicated to introducing national and Balkan cinema to an international audience and fostering cooperation among filmmakers[18]. The Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in the Czech Republic has a long history and is one of the world's A-list film festivals. At the same time, the Czech Republic has seen a rapid development of new media art, with a number of artists actively exploring the use of new media technologies in their artistic creations[19].

1.2.3 Lifestyle

Richter studied the lifestyles of people in seven Central and Eastern European countries, namely

Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Russia and Romania, by means of questionnaires using cluster analysis. The study found that the youth population is dominated by the following two types of lifestyles: (1) Enterprising: they are energetic, adventurous, pursue success, are concerned about the environment and their own health, and aspire to establish new moral values and actively participate in politics; (2) Constructive: they are idealistic, pursue a secure, balanced and harmonious life, are responsible, not overly materialistic, are curious about the world, and are health-conscious. (2) Constructive: they are idealistic, seek security, balance and harmony in their lives, are responsible, not overly materialistic, are curious about the world, are health-conscious, are both innovative and conservative, and are environmentally conscious[20].

1.2.4 Interpersonal communication

A study of Polish students by Huo Shuning shows that Polish students are influenced by their native language, values, and language ability in their interactions with Chinese people, thus reflecting the following four aspects[21].

1.2.4.1 Value-orientated communicative tendencies

Polish students tend to favour an individualistic culture, focusing on personal rights, freedom and privacy. When introducing themselves, they highlight their personal interests and hobbies, and they are more sensitive and reluctant to voluntarily disclose their privacy, such as their family situation. Most Polish students prefer to think independently and are used to completing their homework independently. In social relationships, Polish students value equality and are influenced by individualism and power distance, and in most cases accept the "AA system" as a form of equal relationship.

1.2.4.2 Social language style

In terms of language expression, CEE students are more direct, for example, most Polish students express their thoughts directly. They like to say what is on their mind straight away.

1.2.4.3 Non-verbal communication habits

International students from Central and Eastern European countries are accustomed to looking the other person straight in the eye during a conversation, which is considered a sign of interest, honesty, self-confidence and careful listening. Meanwhile, when it comes to the way of dressing, influenced by the culture of individualism, some Polish students believe that what they wear is their own freedom, and some think that wearing slippers and vests to class is appropriate.

1.2.4.4 Social Etiquette

Locals in Central and Eastern European countries such as Poland tend to use etiquette such as hugging when meeting friends. When it comes to tipping, it is customary to tip in Poland. Polish students in families usually adopt a split meal system.

2. Analysis of Cross-cultural Adaptation Problems of International Students from Central and Eastern European Countries Coming to China

2.1 Language communication barriers

The complexity of Chinese language makes CEE students face great challenges in language

learning. First of all, Chinese belongs to the Sino language family, and its grammatical structure is fundamentally different from that of the Central and Eastern European languages of the Indo-European language family[22]. Chinese lacks obvious morphological changes, and mainly relies on word order and dummy words to express grammatical meanings, e.g., "I like him" and "he likes me", and the semantic meaning changes when the word order changes; whereas common Central and Eastern European languages, such as English, reflect their grammatical functions through changes in verb morphology[23].

Secondly, in terms of vocabulary, Chinese idioms, sayings and hysterics are rich in cultural loaded words with deep historical and cultural connotations, such as "drawing a snake to add feet" and "three ignorant cobblers are better than Zhu Geliang", which are difficult for CEE students to understand and apply[24].

Again, in terms of writing, Chinese characters have many strokes and complex structures, for example, the character "ying" has seventeen strokes and consists of several parts, so for international students who are used to Pinyin, it takes a lot of time and effort to memorise and write Chinese characters[25].

Finally, in terms of phonology, the four tones of Chinese can change the meaning of words, such as "ma (mā), ma (má), ma (mǎ), scolding (mà)", and since their mother tongue does not have this concept, they have difficulty in accurately distinguishing and pronouncing the four tones of Chinese, which leads to inaccurate pronunciation and seriously affects communication, which is a great challenge for the Central and Eastern European students accustomed to a non-tonal language. This is a great challenge for CEE students who are accustomed to non-tonal languages, and their pronunciation accuracy is easily affected, which in turn hinders communication[26].

2.2 Eating disorders

Firstly, there are differences in tastes, and CEE students have difficulties in adapting to the unique flavours of Chinese cuisine, especially the heavy flavours such as spicy, sweet and sour dishes. For example, the spicy and fresh flavour of Sichuan hot pot is too stimulating for CEE students who are used to a light diet to accept.

Second, differences in ingredients. Animal offal, seafood, and soy products commonly used in Chinese diets are not common in CEE, and international students may be resistant to them. For example, popular Chinese snacks such as duck blood vermicelli soup may deter international students who are not accustomed to it due to the presence of animal offal, limiting their dietary choices and causing distress. Such differences often make it difficult for international students from Central and Eastern Europe to make dietary choices and adapt.

2.3 Restrictions on beliefs

In China, religious activities need to be carried out within the scope of laws, regulations and policies. CEE students may not be aware of China's religious policies and may be restricted in their religious activities, which may lead to confusion and lack of understanding. For example, in public places such as schools, they cannot preach or hold group religious activities without permission, which is different from the relatively free religious environment in their home countries, and may make them feel that their freedom of religious belief is restricted, which may lead to psychological discomfort.

2.4 Conflict of social graces

In interpersonal communication, there are many differences in social etiquette between China

and Central and Eastern Europe. In terms of meeting greetings, "Hello" and "Have you eaten?" are commonly used in China, whereas they are expressed differently in Central and Eastern Europe; in terms of address, China focuses on honorifics, whereas Central and Eastern Europe tends to call people by their first names[27]. These differences are likely to lead to misunderstanding or embarrassment when international students interact with Chinese people, which affects the social experience and interpersonal relationship building.

In terms of communication, international students from Central and Eastern European countries are not good at euphemistic expressions, which contrasts with the euphemistic expressions in Chinese culture influenced by Confucianism, and is prone to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. This leads to communication embarrassment and difficulties.

There are also differences in the normative requirements of classroom dress code. The results of a research on etiquette and dress for Chinese university students show that nearly half of the group cannot accept others wearing slippers and vests in the faculty[28], whereas CEE students are more open to the freedom of dress[21] . They believe that dressing casually in the classroom is a sign of personal freedom, and this difference sometimes leads to a poor first impression or even prejudice of CEE students by teachers or other students.

In terms of values, international students in Central and Western Europe tend to value personal space and show a strong aversion to the violation of personal space[21]. Comparatively speaking, Chinese people emphasise the importance of collectivism. Therefore, in social situations, Chinese people are more inclined to maintain collective harmony and avoid direct conflicts[29]. Meanwhile, Central and Eastern Europeans are more accustomed to expressing their personal opinions and grievances directly. This cultural difference sometimes causes misunderstanding and conflict in communication.

3. Suggestions for Preventing and Solving Cross-cultural Adaptation Problems of International Students from Central and Eastern Europe in China

3.1 Policy recommendations

3.1.1 Increasing cultural exchange activities

Actively encourage colleges and universities and other institutions to carry out cultural exchange activities of various forms and rich contents. Create more opportunities for CEE students to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, and at the same time build a broad platform for Chinese students to learn about CEE culture. For example, Chinese and Central and Eastern European cultural festivals are regularly held to showcase the traditional art, music, dance, food and other cultural elements of China and Central and Eastern European countries; Chinese and Central and Eastern European education forums are held to promote exchanges and cooperation between the two sides in the areas of education concepts, teaching methods and discipline construction.

3.1.2 Development of a multicultural education

Colleges and universities should strongly advocate the concept of multicultural education and promote the organic integration of multicultural education into the curriculum and teaching content of schools at all levels and in all categories. Teachers are encouraged to focus on cultivating students' intercultural communication skills and awareness of cultural tolerance in the teaching process. Through such teaching methods as group discussion, role-playing and field research, students are guided to gain a deeper understanding of and respect for the differences between different cultures. At the same time,for international students from Central and Eastern Europe,

special cultural adaptation courses can be set up to provide them with systematic cultural learning and practice opportunities, so as to help them adapt to China's cultural environment faster and understand and integrate into China's social norms and values.

3.2 Operational recommendations

3.2.1 Optimising language teaching and training

Colleges and universities should tailor-make personalised Chinese language teaching programmes according to the Chinese language proficiency and learning characteristics of international students from Central and Eastern Europe. They should make full use of modern education technology and adopt diversified teaching methods. For example, they should develop special Chinese learning software and online course platforms to provide rich and diversified learning materials for international students and meet their needs for independent learning; at the same time, they should regularly organise Chinese speaking corners and speech contests to create a strong Chinese learning atmosphere, stimulate international students' interest and enthusiasm in learning, and practically improve their Chinese language application ability.

3.2.2 Strengthening faith and social practice guidance

Schools should attach great importance to the propaganda and education on religious policies for international students, and through the opening of special lectures and other means, provide international students with a comprehensive understanding of China's religious laws and regulations and policy requirements, and guide them to carry out religious activities on the premise of legal compliance. At the same time, courses on Chinese social customs and etiquette are offered to introduce international students in detail to the knowledge and norms of Chinese social etiquette, festival customs, marriage and funeral, etc., so as to help them better integrate into Chinese society. It can also organise visits to traditional Chinese families for international students to get a first-hand experience of the living atmosphere of Chinese families; during important festivals such as the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, international students are invited to take part in the celebrations, so as to let them experience the cultural connotation of traditional Chinese festivals in depth.

3.2.3 Establishment of a sound social support network

Schools should set up special international student service centres with corresponding teams of counsellors and volunteers to provide international students with all-round and multi-level life guidance and psychological support. Counsellors should communicate with international students on a regular basis to understand their study and living conditions and help them solve problems they encounter. Volunteers can assist international students in going through the admission procedures, getting familiar with the campus environment and integrating into campus life, including guiding them to use campus facilities such as libraries and gymnasiums, introducing campus clubs and student organisations, and helping them make Chinese friends. In addition, a network of international student alumni should be established, and graduated international students who have successfully adapted to Chinese culture should be invited to share their experiences, so as to provide reference and encouragement to current international students. At the same time, schools should strengthen cooperation with local communities and organise international students to participate in community cultural activities, volunteer service and other projects, so as to promote interaction and communication between international students and local residents, and enhance their sense of identity and belonging to Chinese society.

Acknowledgement

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