

Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Talents from the Belt and Road Countries: A Case Study of Suzhou Vocational University

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a shift in strategy to integrate China with the rest of the world like Asia, Europe, and Africa, and it has promoted cooperation in higher education between countries along the belt and road. A large number of international talents are studying in China, and their cross-cultural adaptation has drawn increasing attention from domestic scholars. Will they encounter problems and obstacles in their cross-cultural adaptation? What problems and obstacles do they have?

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and highlight the issues and problems faced by international talents at Suzhou Vocational University in their cross-cultural adaptation in terms of their study, life and psychology and put forward some suggestions for both the university management and international talents to make cross-cultural adaptation easier and facilitate their study in China.

Keywords: International talents; Cross-cultural adaptation; Belt and road initiative; Vocational University

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) put forward by the Chinese Government in 2013 by President Xi, refers to the new Silk Road Economic Belt that connects China with Europe through Central, Western and South-East Asian countries. China's concrete deliverable interest in the international investment regime is becoming much influential in the region [1].

In the past decade, the number of International students studying in China has been increasing. It is reported that the number of international students studying in China's institutions of higher education has increased from 397,000 in 2015 to 440,000 in 2016 and 489,200 in 2017. In 2018, the total number of international students in China is up to 492,185 coming from 196 countries [2]. The growth rate has been over 10% for two consecutive years 2016 and 2017. China has become the largest study abroad destination country in Asia. The expansion of the number of international students studying in China is inseparable from the promotion of China's international status, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, which is of great significance for creating a new pattern of all-round opening-up in China and promoting regional and world development. In recent years, more and more students from countries along the Belt and Road have come to study in China as national scholarships have been offered to neighboring countries and countries along the Belt and Road.

In July 2016, the ministry of education of China issued the document "Jointly Build the Belt and Road Education Action Plan" [3] which clearly pointed out: "provides a great opportunity for promoting the opening, exchange, and integration of regional education. We should join hands with countries along the belt and road to build an education community, form an equal, inclusive, mutually beneficial and active education cooperation trend, promote the development of regional education, comprehensively support and jointly build the Belt and Road and comprehensively enhance the influence of regional education." According to the statistics from the website of Ministry of Education of the people's republic of China, in 2016, there are 13376 international students studying in 153 higher vocational universities in China [4].

In this context, Suzhou Vocational University, as a vocational college that fully supports the Belt and Road Initiative, has found a path that meets the National needs and suits its own development. It cultivates application-oriented talents and is committed to providing talent training support for countries and regions along the belt and road. Abiding by "Diligence, Bravery, Credibility and Loyalty" as the school motto, Suzhou Vocational University has been serving local economic and social development by providing highly qualified technical and skilled-oriented talents. Since 2014, the University began to recruit short-term foreign students. In 2017, the China-Pakistan economic corridor cultural exchange center, jointly set up by Suzhou vocational university and the education department of GB¹ province of Pakistan, was established in the University. In the academic year of 2017, it enrolled 82 international talents from countries along the "Belt and Road", such as Pakistan, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and so on. In the academic year of 2018, more International talents came from Pakistan, South Africa, Laos, Vietnam, Ghana, Belarus, Burundi and so on. As a result, these International talents with different cultural backgrounds have to adapt to Chinese culture. Will they encounter problems and obstacles in their cross-cultural adaptation? What problems and obstacles do they have?

The objective of the study

In general, the education of international students is an important part of China's higher education, an important part of the country's "soft power" as well as an important support for the implementation

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Received March 29, 2019; Accepted April 23, 2019; Published April 30, 2019

Citation: Zhao F, Ahmad R, Liao P (2019) Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Talents from the Belt and Road Countries: A Case Study of Suzhou Vocational University. Arts Social Sci J 10: 443. doi: 10.4172/2151-6200.1000443

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of the country's Belt and Road Initiative. Strengthening the education of international students and paying attention to the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China is an important way to improve the educational level of colleges and universities and serve the Belt and Road Initiative. At present, the education of international students in higher vocational colleges is in the process of rapid development and is faced with many new situations and challenges.

Therefore, how to help international students in China adapt to Chinese culture successfully has become one of the major research issues in international education management of colleges and universities. This study aims to find out the cross-cultural adaptation status of international students in Suzhou Vocational University and help them deal with the difficulties they have in their life and study and integrate into the university community more easily, adapt to cross-cultural communication and Chinese culture more readily and complete their studies successfully. Through questionnaires and interviews, this study also aims to provide some suggestions for the university to enhance their management of international students and better serve the fundamental purpose of higher vocational education. It is necessary to be innovative in the teaching of international students, change the traditional way of thinking, improve the overall education level, and boost the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Literature Review

Cross-culture adaptation and models

Chitakornkijasil [5] states that "culture strongly affects values, beliefs, world views, non-verbal behavior, language, and how to have a relationship with others". The term "cross-cultural" emerged in the social sciences in the 1930s, largely as a result of the Cross-Cultural Survey undertaken by George Peter Murdock, a Yale anthropologist. "Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the process of internal change in individuals so as to be able to function in an unfamiliar culture. Newcomers learn to make adjustments in their original cultural habits and are able to attain a level of efficacy in the new environment." [6].

Cross-cultural adaptation takes place when a traveler moves from one culture to another. We should differentiate between different types of cross-cultural travel. There are mainly three types of travelers: short-term travelers, such as those who go on a vacation or on a business trip to a new culture for a short period of time; sojourners, those who travel to a new culture for an extended period of time for study or business with a plan to return to their homeland; immigrants, those who move to another culture with plans to settle down and make new homes in that new culture. Obviously, international students belong to the second type, for they usually spend one year or several years studying in China depending on their types of study. The cross-cultural adaptation of International talents is a complex process. International students' cross-cultural adaptation refers to the process of adapting to the new environment and improving their social skills in the country where they study.

Cross-culture adaptation is a dynamic process. Lysgaard [7] proposed the U-curve hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, cultural adaptation went through three stages, initial adjustment, crisis, and regained adaptation. During culture shock, people go through four stages: honeymoon stage, crisis stage, recovery stage and adaptation stage [8]. The honeymoon stage refers to a person's sense of freshness of new arrival instead of maladjustment. The crisis stage refers to culture shocks brought by the challenges and difficulties of a new environment and new life. In the recovery stage, international students

become more sensible and face reality with adjustments. Adaptation stage is a natural process as a result of the previous stages. Usually, it takes several months or half a year to come to this stage depending on the individual's adaptability.

Factors that affect cross-cultural adaptation

The cross-cultural adaptation process is affected by many factors. The Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation identifies the following factors as working together and interactively facilitating or impeding an individual's adaptation to a host cultural environment [3]: communication factors, environmental factors, and individual predispositions.

Searle and Ward [9] believed that cross-cultural adaptation includes two dimensions: psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation is based on emotional response, which refers to the mental health and life satisfaction in cross-cultural contact. Sociocultural adaptation refers to the ability to adapt to the local social and cultural environment and the ability to effectively contact and communicate with people from local cultures.

Successful psychological and sociocultural adaptation depends on many individual factors. "Good psychological adaptation is predicted by personality variables, life change events, and social support, whereas good socio-cultural adaptation is predicted by cultural knowledge, degree of contact, and positive intergroup attitudes." [10]. Later, more dimensions were classified, including academic adaptation, life adaptation, and language adaptation.

Professor Guoming Chen [11] pointed out that "cross-cultural adaptation is a continuous process led by the cultural spirit of the interactors". He further believed that "cross-cultural adaptation is a cross-border game as well as a cross-cultural dialogue in nature. A cross-cultural dialogue requires space for interaction, in which communicators respect each other, patiently have discussions with each other, and make concerted efforts to reach cross-cultural consensus, so as to build harmonious and mutually beneficial intercultural relations" [12].

Mori [13] language difficulties appear to be the most challenging issue for the majority of international students, Christine Yeh [14] explored the acculturative stress of international students in the United States. The study found that English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness were all predictors of acculturative stress. Shafaei [15] studied factors that influence acculturation attitude of international postgraduate students in Malaysia. The study found that the identified predictors (English language proficiency, media usage, intention to stay in the host country after graduation, and perceived positive stereotype image) are shown to positively influence integration attitude while the demographic factors (gender, geographical region, marital status, and education level) have no significant effect on international postgraduate students' acculturation attitude in Malaysia [16].

Methodology

Questionnaire

This study is based on quantitative data which was collected by researchers themselves in the actual environment by the distribution of questionnaires in classrooms and conduct of interviews on campus. The research environment was not a lab environment but a natural environment. Respondents for the study were 110 International talents from different countries who are currently studying at Suzhou Vocational University. 110 questionnaires were distributed and

collected and among them 101 questionnaires were valid (91.8% valid questionnaires). Among 101 International talents aged between 18 and 30 who completed the questionnaires, 81 were males and 20 were females that were 80.2% and 19.8%, respectively [17].

The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part is about background information, including nationality, gender, age, native language, education, previous overseas experiences, length of staying at the university and future field of study. The second part questions in terms of study, life, and psychology. Questions about study focus on their purpose or expectation of studying in China, planning after graduation or completion of the study, teaching methods, test evaluation, language, and other aspects. Questions about life cover climate, food, housing transportation and interaction with local people. Questions about psychology are about their mentality, interpersonal communication, loneliness, emotional and psychological changes.

The questionnaires were anonymous. From the background information, it can be seen that most of the subjects have completed high school education with no previous overseas study experiences and with low or no Chinese proficiency. They chose to study in Suzhou vocational university mainly for the scholarships provided by the Government.

Interviews

The interview mainly consists of the following parts:

- i. Describe briefly one culture shock you have had since you came to China.
- ii. What are the differences in classroom settings between China and your country?
- iii. What major difficulties do you have when living in China?
- iv. Do you have suggestions to improve the services for international talents?

Interviews were mainly conducted in the classrooms and in the meeting room for about ten to twenty minutes each. As the author is currently working in the international college office, information is also collected during daily encounter and communication.

Results and Discussion

Academic adaptation

This Table 1 shows that more than 60% of international talents find it somehow difficult to learn Chinese and understand lectures. Lectures are delivered both in Chinese and English. Because of their relatively low or no Chinese proficiency, about one third find it very difficult to learn Chinese. Most of them do not have much difficulty in adapting to teaching methods, taking part in classroom discussions and taking notes. Some find it a little bit difficult to borrow books and journals from the university library. 72.3% of them show interest in Chinese culture (Table 1).

Life adaptation: 31.7% of International talents find it most difficult to get used to local food. This may be a common issue in the adaptation from one country or region to another country or region. Buying daily necessities and carrying on leisure activities is no big issue for most of them. 72.8% of them are content with various services provided by the university to different degrees: satisfactory, good or excellent. 46% of them believe life in China now is better than life before. However, 8% find it worse (Tables 2 and 3).

Psychological adaptation: About half of International talents feel lonely and experience culture shock sometimes. 8.9% of international students often feel lonely. 12.9% even feel depressed. Making new friends may relieve their loneliness and depression. Tables 3 and 4 show that International talents still have some difficulties in making friends with Chinese students due to at least five reasons: low frequency of interaction, limited topic, and means of communication, different values and language barriers.

Analysis of the interviews

In the interviews conducted afterward, more information was collected. Culture shock includes different ceremonies or celebrations, confusing sizes of clothes, addressing senior citizens, greetings and asking for help and so on. Most of them find that classroom setting is almost the same except sometimes different teaching methods. One big difference is language. Many students hope that courses related to their majors can be given purely in English and they can have the opportunity to have classes with Chinese students. Difficulties living in China include food, bank transaction or money issue, taking a taxi

Variables	Most difficult	A little difficult	Not difficult
Learning Chinese	32.6%	60.5%	6.9%
Familiarizing classroom teaching methods	2.9%	37.6%	59.5%
Understanding lectures	10.9%	60.4%	28.7%
Expressing your ideas in class	6.9%	41.6%	51.5%
Participating in discussions in class	5.9%	25.7%	68.4%
Taking notes of lectures	5.9%	23.8%	70.3%
Obtaining books and journals from the library	17.8%	38.6%	43.6%

Table 1: Study adaptation survey.

Variables	Most difficult	A little difficult	Not difficult
Contacting your families and friends	21.80%	39.60%	38.60%
Buying daily necessities	8%	37.60%	54.40%
Getting used to local climate	13.90%	45.50%	40.60%
Getting used to local food	31.70%	40.60%	27.70%
Taking part in local social events	21.80%	44.60%	33.60%
Making friends with Chinese people	14.80%	35.60%	49.60%
Carrying on leisure activities	8.90%	38.60%	52.50%

Table 2: Life adaptation survey.

Life now in China compared with previous life	
Much better	16%
Better	46%
About the same	29%
Worse	8%
Much worse	1%

Table 3: Life now in China compared with previous life.

Variables	Often	Occasionally	Rarely
Feel lonely	8.9%	42.6%	48.5%
Experience culture shock	13.9%	42.5%	43.6%
Feel depressed	12.9%	27.7%	59.4%

Table 4: Psychological adaptation survey.

and so on. Some of them have difficulty applying to universities. Some suggestions include engage them more frequently with local citizens, providing a kitchen for them so that they can cook their own food, organizing more field trips and so on.

Findings

Most international talents are content with their life in China and show interest in Chinese culture. They find it difficult to learn the Chinese language although some of them can speak Chinese quite fluently. Quite a few have problems in making friends with Chinese students due to lack of frequent contact and communication. Cross-culture adaptation varies from person to person and is closely related to a person's adaptability. That is to say, it has something to do with a person's personality and experiences. Some of them adapt to a new culture faster than others depending upon their ability to "fit in".

Suggestions

Cross-cultural adaptation, which is a major concern for students studying in foreign countries, is also an important issue to be paid attention to by university management who are in charge of the overall education of international talents. From the data obtained from this study, it can be seen that international talents generally feel good in their life and study without great difficulties in cross-cultural adaptation. However, in the face of unfamiliar learning and living, international talents are bound to have some difficulty in cross-cultural adaptation especially at the very beginning, which will affect their daily life and interpersonal relations and mentality. It is necessary for us to put forward some suggestions and countermeasures to help them adapt to the new environment in a quicker way and facilitate their study in China.

Suggestions to the University management

Expose them to Chinese culture more often: The University should organize more cultural activities concerning China's National conditions and cultural experience field trips in a planned way, and actively cooperate with mass organizations and communities to promote positive interaction between international talents and the local society. It has proved that only by carrying on the past and opening up the future, constantly showing our outstanding culture to the world with an open mind, can we maintain the vigorous vitality and creativity of Chinese culture and generate stronger attraction and influence.

The main cause of cultural conflicts is that people view the culture of a foreign language country from the perspective of their own culture. When the cultural behaviors of another country or region are inconsistent with the cultural values of their own mother tongue, there may be misunderstandings and conflicts. Some of the cross-cultural

difficulties of foreign students are caused by language barriers and the lack of understanding of Chinese culture. The University management can provide cultural immersion for international talents in a variety of ways, cultural communication training or lectures on Chinese culture. In addition, Chinese language teachers should be invited to provide language guidance to international talents on a regular basis to encourage them to learn Chinese in their spare time. "Chinese corner" and "one help one help" program (one Chinese student and one International talent), for instance, will enable Chinese students who have cross-cultural communication skills to help international talents who are learning Chinese. This will not only familiarize international talents with Chinese culture but also facilitate their interpersonal communication and cultural exchanges with Chinese students.

Implement various cultural exchanges programs: Strengthening cultural exchanges and cooperation with other countries and absorbing the fine cultural heritages of other countries are the key factors and important guarantee for the international influence of Chinese culture. Cultural exchange is one of the important ways of cultural development. If any culture is to develop, it cannot be separated from the mutual exchange, mutual absorption and mutual integration with other cultures in the world. Isolation will inevitably lead to the backwardness of culture and even the disappearance of culture. As a result of maintaining an open mind and strengthening exchanges with other countries in history, the Chinese Nation has not only spread Chinese culture but also absorbed foreign cultures and incorporated them into its own culture. Since the reform and opening up, China has gradually started to integrate into the world and strengthen foreign exchanges, including cultural exchanges with other countries, so as to actively promote Chinese culture around the world.

When it comes to cultural exchanges, one evident area for collaboration is education. The University can collaborate with more research activities, both academic and contract research projects, with different countries. Organize short-term academic programs on campus, such as workshops for both teachers and students. Organize exchange lectures, international conferences, and seminars. This will not only benefit the international talents but also do good to Chinese teachers and Chinese students by arousing their culture awareness and improving their cross-culture communication skills and research abilities.

Improve the teaching model and teaching quality: The University is the main body of responsibility for the education quality of international talents. With the advantages and characteristics of the university, the practical teaching of International talents, which meets the professional requirements, should be associated with their career planning to meet the needs of international talent training. There should be more requirements of the teaching qualification, teaching proficiency, foreign language ability and cross-cultural ability for teachers, so as to ensure that teachers are competent for the teaching of international talents and there are no communication barriers between them. Teachers' foreign language proficiency and cross-cultural competence should be improved in a planned way through training and communication, so as to raise the internationalization of the teaching staff, especially teachers who teach Chinese language and Chinese culture.

International talents should be encouraged to give feedbacks of teaching and participate in teaching evaluation. Teachers should be encouraged to carry out teaching research on international talents, update teaching contents and improve teaching methods and techniques to better suit the learning styles of International talents. The

University should provide adequate and qualified teaching facilities and resources for the teaching and training of international talents and ensure that international talents and Chinese students can equally use teaching facilities and resources provided by the university.

Care about their overall well-being: After arriving in a new place, international talents may lose contact with their original social culture and support system in a short period of time and are lacking in the support of social communication and emotional communication, which is likely to cause psychological problems. International students' mental health and psychology are key factors that affect their cross-cultural adaptability as well as their overall satisfaction of life.

The University should provide guidance to students in various aspects, organize and guide foreign students to participate in healthy and beneficial extracurricular educational activities, and promote the integration of international talents into the campus environment. The University should improve the management system of international talents and encourage and support international talents to join the student union, social clubs on campus and other student organizations and participate in student associations and sports activities so that there can be full exchange and mutual understanding between Chinese and international students on campus. Besides medical services, the university should also provide international students with psychological counseling services, and provide necessary assistance and support for students to use social medical and psychological counseling services in society.

Suggestions to the International students

Be ready for cross-cultural adaptation: International talents should familiarize themselves with China's history, geography, society, economy and other basic knowledge about China's National conditions and culture, know about China's political system and foreign policies, have some idea of China's mainstream social values and public morality, and be aware of China's laws. The more knowledge they have, the easier their cross-cultural adaptation will be.

At the beginning of their arrival in a new city, they can ask their teachers and friends to help them get familiar with the local conditions and customs, such as food, climate, and social conduct codes. Accept the existence of culture shocks. Find the gap between Chinese culture and their home culture. Make clear their study objectives in China, set goals and focus on their academic achievements. When faced with different stages of culture shock, they should take it easy and accept it as a natural part of their cross-cultural adaptation.

Learn Chinese well: Many barriers are caused by language or communication. Communication is defined as the successful transmission or distribution of thoughts and feelings in the form of language or another medium (Oxford University Press, 2014). Hence, intercultural communication is the interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds [3]. For International talents studying in China, learning Chinese well can lessen communication barriers more effectively. It is worthwhile to spend more time learning to speak Chinese if you are in China. Among the international talents of SVU, more than half of them plan to further their study in China after graduation, and a few of them have already obtained Chinese language proficiency certificates HSK 3, but there is still much room for improving their Chinese proficiency.

To make sure they successfully complete the learning and research tasks of their own disciplines and majors, there are Chinese language proficiency requirements for international students who apply for

Bachelor's degree, Master's degree or Ph.D. For International students who can successfully complete their own study and research tasks in the corresponding foreign languages, at the time of their graduation, the Chinese language proficiency of undergraduates shall at least reach the international standard for Chinese proficiency level 4, and the Chinese language proficiency of Postgraduates and Doctoral students shall at least reach the international standard for Chinese proficiency level 3 [12] Learning Chinese well is helpful for their academic adaptation as well as life adaptation.

Be open-minded to Chinese culture: International talents in China should have the awareness, knowledge, attitude, and skills of tolerance, cognition and adaptation to cultural diversity, and be able to play a role in mutual respect, understanding and solidarity among different ethnic groups, societies and countries. Culture plays an important role in the adaptation of international students.

International students from different culture backgrounds should realize the differences in values and customs between Chinese culture and their home cultures. It is essential to recognize that this culture is no better than that culture, just different. Accept and respect cultural differences, keep an open and inclusive mentality and adapt to cultural differences. In the process of cross-cultural adaptation, students may go through rejection of Chinese culture, being paranoid, or looking at things stubbornly based on their own values. With a deepened understanding of Chinese culture by learning it through various culture experience activities, they can gradually appreciate some part of Chinese culture and even share Chinese culture with people from their own countries. At the same time, the culture shock period can be successfully passed and its adverse effects are reduced.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the above discussion, it is come up with the concluding remarks that as in the 21st century, the most prominent project is an important part of the Belt and Road Initiative is the cultivation of international talents, who bring foreign cultures to China and spread Chinese culture to other countries. It is not only helpful to the University from an International perspective, but also is a boost for the friendly exchanges between China and other countries. The cross-cultural adaptation process is dynamic and dependent on many factors. Cross-cultural adaptation is still being studied around the world. It is worth our continuous research and exploration to find something more in common and get ourselves both as local citizens and global citizens better prepared.

The study has some limits. There can be a larger number of respondents from Universities of the entire city. When this survey was conducted, some international students have been living in China for more than one year while others have just settled down for a few months. More variables could have been included in the questionnaire being used and more questionnaires could have been designed. Interviews could have been carried out throughout the research project. Questionnaires can also be done separately between one-year language students or internship students and three-year degree students. Follow up studies can be done and comparisons can be made between the first year of their stay and after three years of study in China. Comparisons can also be made between students from different countries or regions.

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