

Cross-cultural Adaptation of Chinese Students in America Beyond Pandemic¹

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Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the re-emerged culture shock and psychological adjustment of Chinese students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. The investigation shows that Chinese overseas students, who had acculturated to the American culture, have just experienced a more severe cultural shock than ever before. Reasons for this are various, in which the hatred and anti-Chinese sentiment and the misleading information contribute a lot. What is encouraging is that some students' culture shock has been alleviated slightly with the coming end of the pandemic. This study attempts to offer a perspective to critically reflect on the changes of the students' cultural adaptation resulting from the pandemic, as well as to reflect on how we can rethink, and accordingly, take measures to restore these students' confidence and help them have better contact with people from other cultures in this fast-changing complex world.

Keywords: Culture shock; Cross-cultural adaptation; COVID-19 pandemic; Coronavirus; Overseas students

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and knowledge economy, exchanges between different cultures and countries are becoming more and more common. International student mobility has become one of the most active phenomena in global tertiary education. The collision of ideas from different backgrounds enables these students to embrace differences and think creatively and diversely.

However, the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that has resulted in unprecedented national economic lockdowns and social distancing restrictions, influences not only the economy, politics (Bretas & Alon, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020), but also education, especially studying abroad. In this case, reports from several large international organizations focusing on education have aimed to capture the impact of the epidemic as it spreads. It can be seen from the Report on Chinese Students' Overseas Study that the number of Chinese students studying abroad has decreased severely (by almost half) in 2020, from 703,500 to 403,510, a huge slowdown of 42.6% due to the epidemic (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Although the continuous spread of the epidemic around the world has brought a certain negative impact on the choice of Chinese students to study abroad, the demand for international high-quality tertiary education has not fundamentally changed. Studying abroad is still a crucial direction. In this case, though the number of Chinese students studying abroad has decreased slightly, the United States still remains a beneficial choice to experience something new. With apprehension and uncertainty, some international students persistently

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go to other countries to formulate their own academic plans despite countless invisible changes and challenges. Correspondingly, such a large group faces a common cultural conflict in a foreign country and incompatibility with cross-cultural interpersonal communication.

From the research on the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students studying in the United States before the epidemic in 2019, it can be seen that the students' cross-cultural adaptation was in a relatively good state, with small fluctuations (Tong Duan, 2020). As a trend of cultural integration, cultural shock seemed not obvious. In light of the globalization of tertiary education, challenges brought by cross-cultural adaptation for overseas students were weakened, until interrupted by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a clear and unprecedented impact on global education, contributing to the rise of fear, anxiety and distress among overseas students. According to the results of a recent survey among the international students, 73.4%, 76.6%, and 58.5% of the participants had depression, anxiety and stress symptoms, respectively, during the pandemic, and male students presented more symptoms of depression and anxiety than females due to their greater risk-taking behaviors (Xiaobin Wang, et al., 2021).

Regardless of the severity, the epidemic has indeed added a lot of variables to the lives of international students, and its continuation has also brought a lot of confusion to students who are interested in applying to study abroad. At present, research on cross-cultural adaptation mainly focuses on the management of international students in China and their response to the influence of Chinese scholars on Chinese culture, while ignoring the cross-cultural adaptation of overseas Chinese students during the epidemic. Our research builds on this part to better understand how overseas students are coping with the challenges posed by the current pandemic, and how they are adapting to different cultures in this rapidly changing and complex world, taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related crises. Some appropriate measures against different aspects of negative cross-cultural adaptation of the COVID-19 pandemic are also proposed. While this research was conducted in the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects are sufficiently applicable to future scenarios and crises, with significant implications for universities, faculty, as well as international students.

2. Literature Review

Since the beginning of the 20th century, cross-cultural adaptation has received extensive attention in the United States, Australia, Canada, The United Kingdom and so on. The term "acculturation" was raised for the first time by J. W. Powell from the Bureau of American Ethnology. He defined it in 1883 as a psychological change caused by imitation of the new culture by sojourners from a foreign culture, which is not totally same as the term what we recognize today. The earliest formal definition of acculturation was given by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936), and referred to "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (pp. 149-152.). This definition is widely recognized currently across the world.

Contact between diverse cultures is always accompanied by conflicts and contradictions in the process of adaptation, which are almost unavoidable. When international students enter a new country, region and culture, culture shock is always present and basically certain to happen, in which they will develop anxiety, palpitation and other uncomfortable social and psychological states. Especially when there are obvious cultural differences between the two cultures in terms of geography, lifestyle, values, etc., the difficulty of adapting to the new culture becomes more apparent than usual.

Cultural and communication differences tend to hinder individuals from adapting to a new environment. Kalervo Oberg (1960) described culture shock as “precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (p. 177). Intercultural adaptation is defined as the process of coping with intercultural change. Especially in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, many factors are still changing dynamically and are not stable enough. Coupled with the strong pressure exerted by the host country, international students face a combination of language barriers, depression, communication barriers, academic barriers, etc., under which they are also facing greater challenges of low personal cultural adaptability and low satisfaction on a global scale. The pandemic poses a destabilizing threat to entire societies around the world. To date, several studies have investigated the intercultural adaptation of international students (Dhawan, 2020; Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020; Wang, Lu, Wang, Qu, Yuan, Gao & Pan, 2021; Firang, & Mensah, 2022). Since the outbreak of the epidemic, researchers from all over the world have carried out research principally from three aspects: psychological adaptation, academic adaptation, and cross-cultural adaptation strategies of international students.

Psychological adaptation is a process in which people make active responses through the self-regulation system when the external environment changes, so that their psychological activities and behaviors are more in line with the requirements of self-development, in which the subject and the environment achieve a new balance. The occurrence of COVID-19 is a sort of disruption which severely influences society and life. In the current era of continuous advancement of globalization, the barriers to cross-cultural adaptation of international students have weakened to a certain extent. However, in order to curb the spread of the pandemic while preventing the virus, corresponding blockade and isolation policies have been adopted by various countries, depriving students of their social skills and proving to be more negative for their mental health. It can be shown that college students who self-isolate are more likely to have physical and mental health problems (such as insomnia, depression) than those who do not (Tang et al., 2020; Zhao et al. al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020), which greatly hinders their integration into the host country’s culture, affecting their normal academic and social life. In this case, they would have a serious social-avoidance mentality (Al-Rabiaah et al., 2020), and thereby their communication is also considerably undermined, causing additional psychological problems such as anxiety and depression (Kaparounaki et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020). Even though the detrimental emotions of international students have been gradually weakening under globalization, related psychological problems are still emerging, which cannot be avoided and eliminated. In addition, the pandemic has made it impossible for international students to seek psychological help from the host country in a timely and normal manner. The pandemic experience has been particularly challenging for international students who lack adequate social support (family, friends) from their domestic peers. As a result, mental health problems are predisposed to exacerbate these negative emotions (Smith & Alharbi, 2018; Chen et al., 2020), and the students could not quickly integrate into the new environment, and it was difficult to develop a sense of belonging to the host country (Fang & Baker, 2018). This can be unexpected and demanding.

In the early days of the virus, it was predicted that international students may be socially excluded due to the health crisis and fear brought about by the pandemic, with negative experiences such as anti-attitudes. Numerous scholars have highlighted these negative experiences, including encounters with racism and discrimination (e.g., Brown & Jones, 2013; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016; Yao et al., 2019), experiences of depression (e.g., Rice et al., 2012) and self-esteem struggles (e.g., Meegan & Kashima, 2010). Emotions based on race and culture continue to radicalize (Cohen, 2020). This can be extraordinarily obvious to students from Asian backgrounds (Rzyski & Nowicki, 2020), and the occurrence of this phenomenon not only has a profoundly negative impact on their mental health, but also hurts

their self-esteem and sense of belonging (King et al., 2020). Correspondingly, all these negative emotions can also in turn seriously hinder the progress of their cross-cultural adaptation transition, which is reflected in the cultural adjustment model (e.g., Kim, 2001).

At the same time, negatively affected by the severe psychological adjustment of anxiety and depression under the epidemic, the academic adjustment of international students in the United States has also been seriously influenced and has worsened (Kecojevic et al., 2020). In order to control the spread of the epidemic virus, the ways of teaching have been transformed. Within various responses, some colleges have opted for emergency remote instruction (Crawford et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020), such as available online platforms (Mishra et al., 2020; Kaup et al., 2020), resulting in several virtual challenges for both faculty as well as overseas students, especially for directly interacting and accessing online course content (IIE, 2020c). Although research has shown positive work-from-home experiences (e.g., Dubey & Tripathi, 2020), students' experiences are often described as disrupted and leading to feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and hopelessness (Hajdúk et al., 2020; Wang & Zhao, 2020). Meanwhile, students have expressed concerns about socioeconomic impacts, family and social health impacts, and their own educational and career plans (Cohen, 2020). This further disrupted the academic life of international students, and because they did not get out of the phase of cross-cultural adaptation, they also faced new challenges in the interaction of online course content in the face of virtual teaching. In terms of learning experience, students are often dissatisfied with distance learning because they miss out on interaction with peers and teachers (de Haas et al., 2020). In addition, campus closures mean students lack access to vital resources they typically get through colleges, such as dining halls, tutoring centers (Burke, 2020; IIE, 2020), leading to a detrimental impact on their sense of belonging and subsequent academic performance.

Students perceive their academic experience to be more difficult and worse than before the pandemic due to the chaotic organization of online learning and the lower quality of online courses compared to traditional courses (Wilczewski et al., 2020).

Due to the persistence of the pandemic, an increasing number of scholars and experts have begun to pay more attention to the academic experience of international students. However, the impact of the collision of different cultural backgrounds on international students under the pandemic without completing cross-cultural adaptation still needs to be investigated.

Faced with the phenomena of increasingly serious psychological adjustment, learning adjustment, etc., scholars have conducted a lot of research to effectively understand the challenges of cross-cultural adjustment faced by international students, and related factors that affect students' cultural adjustment (Shafaei & Razak, 2016). There are various reasons that affect the cross-cultural adaptation of international students, among which individual factors are constantly emphasized, including age, gender, time spent studying abroad, language ability, cultural distance, etc., which can continuously affect the way individuals adapt to a new culture (Pan & Wong, 2011; Luo et al., 2021). At the same time, their adaptive experiences have been extensively studied, including social support (Shu et al., 2020; English et al., 2020), perceived discrimination (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Scott et al., 2015; Kunuroglu, 2021) and social reciprocity (Kim, 2001; Szabo et al., 2020).

Some of the studies effectively propose research strategies for cross-cultural adaptation, advocating interventions, practices, and policies that can improve the student experience. Scholars have traditionally focused on intercultural adaptation research to understand how individuals respond to cultural barriers and challenges as they move between cultures. For international students, unfamiliar environments can heighten their insecurities, and adjusting to a new environment requires overcoming multiple barriers, including academic and social barriers.

In terms of research content, relevant research has sorted out the basic conditions of overseas students, including life, psychology, values, etc., with a certain breadth and depth, but there are still many articles that are only monotonous lists of theories and influencing factors, lacking in-depth research and discussion. Therefore, theoretical research is insufficient, most of which remains as the introduction and commentary of the theory of cross-cultural adaptation, without analyzing the national conditions. In addition, the research perspective is mostly in a macro-level, while little in micro-research, concentrating in the field of psychology. At the same time, less attention has been given to international students' cross-cultural adaptation and mental health, and the samples in the empirical research are restricted in number.

3. Research Methodology

This article aims to use the data of Chinese international students to explore the analysis of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students studying in the United States under the epidemic. Although there have been many similar studies on intercultural adaptation before, fewer studies are conducted on the status and impact of intercultural adaptation under the epidemic and how to provide overseas students with necessary social and emotional support and other strategies. In this regard, drawing on the theory of cross-cultural adaptation and cultural shock, we conducted online interviews with 8 participants who are studying in the United States during epidemic. The interview mainly raised relevant interview questions from the aspects of students' psychological adaptation, academic adaptation, and social and cultural adaptation, so as to effectively grasp the changes and challenges brought by the epidemic to international students' cross-cultural adaptation.

In fact, at the end of 2019, before the epidemic, the authors already conducted a systematic cross-cultural adaptation analysis of more than 80 Chinese students studying in the United States by means of questionnaires and interviews. Therefore, in the analysis of this article, we can also skillfully draw on the research results before the epidemic for comparative analysis, so that the whole article is more evidence-based and more valuable.

Based on the culture shock theory and previous research, this paper studies the process of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students from a time perspective, and attempts to provide further suggestions for Chinese students in crisis and the promotion of relevant guidance in Chinese universities. The authors propose several research assumptions to examine the process of Chinese students' cross-cultural adaptation, presented as the following hypotheses:

H1: During the epidemic, the overall cross-cultural adaptation of international students deteriorated, and it showed a cliff-like decline from before the epidemic.

H2: Academic adaptation is more severely affected by the epidemic than psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation.

H3: The epidemic isolation policy has seriously affected the psychological adaptation of international students.

H4: The emergence of the epidemic has aggravated the cultural shock of international students.

H5: International students are most worried about personal development in the future development of the epidemic.

H6: Language barriers are still a difficult part of the sociocultural adaptation of international students under the epidemic.

H7: International students want more assistance from local universities and supervisors.

Respondents were found through advertisements posted on the university campus network and by seeking help from teachers and classmates on campus. In order to conduct the

interviews more accurately, the interviews were transcribed primarily through Chinese both orally and in writing, followed by English translation.

In order to make the selected samples more convincing, the interview data more objective, and to avoid unnecessary regional or university deviations, the authors expanded the range of participants and conducted interviews with Chinese students in different schools and regions in the United States in recent years. Among them, a total of 8 people participated in the interview. Three are undergraduates; five are doctoral students. Their age spans from 19 to 30 years old, and their majors involve science, performance, management, etc. More details are as follows:

Table 1. Demographic description of all subjects.

Items	Gender	Age	Major	Educational background	Average adaptation	The biggest worry	Length of stay
1	Female	27	Musical Performance	Ph.D	worse	Tickets and policy on returning to China	Five years
2	Male	26	Mathematics	Ph.D	general	Declining cultural exchange	Four years
3	Male	26	Biostatistics	Ph.D	worse	Inflation	Four years
4	Female	21	Mechanical Engineering	undergraduate	general	Tickets and policy on returning to China	Two years
5	Male	19	Sports Management	undergraduate	general	Tickets and policy on returning to China	Two years
6	Female	24	Politics	Ph.D	general	Tickets and policy on returning to China	Three years
7	Male	20	Computer Science	undergraduate	general	Tickets and policy on returning to China	One year
8	Female	25	Statistics and Data Science	Ph.D	worse	Tickets and policy on returning to China	Four years

Due to time constraints, this study mainly adopts document classification and interviews to analyze the adaptation process, and compares and analyzes the students' cross-cultural adaptation with the data before the epidemic. The 8 Chinese international students who have been in the United States for more than one year were selected for in-depth interviews to

further understand the intercultural adaptation status and obstacles they have met at this special stage, so as to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of their detailed and psychological feedback in their intercultural life. A semi-structured interview format was conducted which consists of 8 open-ended questions to investigate the process and status of the students' intercultural adaptation (see Appendix).

4. Analysis

4.1 Overall Cross-cultural Adaptation

Before conducting a detailed analysis of the cross-cultural adaptation of current Chinese international students in the United States, it is necessary to analyze their overall cross-cultural adaptation to find out whether the outbreak of the epidemic has brought new challenges to them. The selection of interview questions is mainly carried out from the aspects of psychology, academy and sociocultural adaptation. The 8 questions in the interview can cover these dimensions well, from which the author set up an overall evaluation item in the interview at the second question "How has your overall cross-cultural adaptation changed due to the impact of the epidemic?" From the results of the interview, it can be clearly seen that among the 8 respondents, respondents No. 2, No. 4, No. 5, No. 6 and No. 7 mentioned that their cross-cultural adaptation was average, mainly due to the differences in culture and lifestyle between the two countries with nothing to do with the epidemic, but there are certain occasional discomforts, which do not obviously affect the overall adaptation of the students. This also shows that the degree of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students is relatively moderate, and the proportion of people with severe cultural shock is still extremely small. Additionally, Respondent No. 3 and No. 8 stated that their cross-cultural adaptation was relatively poor owing to the epidemic, while Respondent No. 1 clearly stated that her cross-cultural adaptation was severely affected by the epidemic and had been in an intensely poor state. Interviewee No. 3 mentioned that "In the early days of the outbreak, I was a little scared to live alone because my two roommates (American and Australian) at the time were both home. In addition, there were occasional instances of Asian hate in the news at that time. Therefore, during that time, I had serious discomforts."

4.2 Adaptation in Different Aspects

4.2.1 Academic Adaptation

The adaptation to different educational environments is of great significance for the overseas students. In the sense of different teaching methods in different regions, the way foreign professors impart information may be completely disparate. When it comes to the source of anxiety for international students, the first and foremost is the pressure of heavy academic work and exams. Students find that they have to handle countless quizzes, essays, group assignments, and exams. Moreover, many foreign colleges and universities are quite strict in the assessment of students' homework scores, attendance rate and even class mentality. The continuous pressure of coursework examinations causes many international students to have negative emotions such as anxiety and collapse in the process of adapting to overseas teaching methods.

Under pandemic, what international students abroad have experienced is a relatively complete class scheme formulated by the college and professors after several months of adjustment and planning, including the completely online courses, face-to-face teaching in

small classes with large classrooms, or the combination of online and offline class for students to choose from, with strict management over the number of students attending classes and the epidemic inspection of students. For international students who are stranded abroad due to various problems, the college also provides a variety of solutions. But no matter which way of compromising with the epidemic is chosen, the impact of the epidemic is like a domino, overturning the study environment that international students were once familiar with. Whether it is an international student staying in China or an international student studying abroad, everyone needs to regain a foothold amid the sudden uncertainty and quickly familiarize themselves with the “new normal” of studying abroad.

For many international students, the most direct change in online learning is that “home” has become a common place for work, study, life and social interaction. In the sixth question of the interview: How has the epidemic affected your study and life, respondent No. 3 believed that online classes would affect their class efficiency and greatly reduce their academic experience of studying abroad. Without the real learning environment, motivation to go to school plummets, and the attention is often distracted by the influence of the surroundings. In addition, the distinction between studying time and playtime has become blurred, with severe Zoom fatigue, feeling more anxious. Therefore, before facing the tasks to be done, international students must first comfort all their negative emotions, more or less prone to have some little procrastination. Respondent No. 5 mentioned that online courses place extremely strict demands on their self-control. Even little homework seems to take more time to do than before the pandemic. The pressure of life also began to hover in front of their eyes, and the weight of studying abroad kept falling. The effect of online teaching is indeed lower than that of face-to-face teaching. On the one hand, teachers cannot conduct high-frequency interactions as usual. The learning output is thus lower than with the usual teaching mode. Besides, online learning also brings them more serious language barriers. Quarantine at home deprives them of opportunities to communicate, whether with Chinese or foreigners.

However, Respondents No. 1 and No. 2 believe that online classes have little impact on them, and they can also gain a lot at home. During the pandemic, sometimes international students have been unable to enter classrooms as well as their offices, and have little chance to talk to professors. However, every time when they have obstacles, professors are always willing to help them. They also exchange ideas with their peers about their homework, but rarely chat with their peers from different countries after class. This can be due to various reasons such as different cultures, professions and personalities.

4.2.2 Psychological Adaptation

Psychological feeling is an extremely important part of culture shock. In an attempt to bring conceptual integration to a fractionated area of research, Ward and Kennedy have proposed that cross-cultural adaptation may be meaningfully divided into two domains: psychological (emotional/affective) and sociocultural (behavioral) (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). They proposed that emotional changes are significant for residents to adapt abroad.

In the early stage of the epidemic, based on the rising infected cases and the hype of social media home and abroad, students simply could not and dared not go out. Later, when the pandemic was relatively partially under control, the local blockade was completely lifted, they didn't care that much about basic protection, such as masks, disinfectants, etc. With the popularization of vaccines and the fact that Omicron's symptoms are not severe, people's attitudes towards the Coronavirus have changed. Respondent No. 2 pointed that “when the school started at the end of January 2020, there were 27 people in our class, half of which were wearing masks at that time. But in the last class at the end of April, the people in the

class who wore masks are no more than 5, 3 of them Chinese.” However, influenced by domestic public opinions and the relatively conservative environment, international students still do not dare to go out for entertainment unscrupulously, posing excessive pressure on their psychological adaptation. Interviewee No. 1 mentioned that he seemed to be exposed to more psychological pressure every time he went out for relaxation and some entertainment, being in a dilemma. They tend to be tortured when being caught in the two completely different ways of thinking about the epidemic in China and the United States. In the absence of social support, these students are prone to react anxiously.

Respondent No. 3 stated that during the epidemic, they were inclined to doubt the meaning and purpose of studying abroad. They were unable to make many friends during the lockdown blockade. Due to the time difference, it was tricky to gain comfort from relatives and friends in China. He proposed that “I can’t digest all of these by myself, and become more and more negative, with continuously decreasing learning efficiency.” All the above factors have made this group, which has endured more than others, even more vulnerable. In fact, the mental health problems of international students are not entirely unique during the epidemic. “In the Yale University survey on depression, Chinese students have clearly stated that the tendency to depression is as high as 45%, while only 13% of American students [reported depression]”. In general, the main source of mental health problems for international students is excessive stress.

However, Respondents No. 4 and No. 5 believed that their psychological adaptation has been in a relatively good state. These two international students have been studying and living in the United States for about two years before the epidemic, so they have already had a positive attitude towards studying abroad. The emergence of the epidemic just made them study and work in a different environment, and such an isolation environment may allow them to concentrate more. Not being affected by external social and cultural factors, they can focus more on their own research and complete their own studies.

When it comes to their biggest worries about the current development of the epidemic, everyone invariably mentioned the issue of returning to China. They stressed that air tickets are extremely expensive and hard to buy. Respondent No. 4 mentioned that “I ended my class at the end of 2020, and I bought a ticket to return to China in January 2021 half a year in advance. As a result, the flight was canceled three days before departure. By 2022, the price of air tickets from the United States back home will increase to between 20,000 to 30,000 yuan.” Respondent No. 2 also suggested that “the price of a flight back to China is now 8-10 times the original price. Suppose I fly back to China directly from New York. According to the requirements, I will first be quarantined in New York for a week, and I will do 4 nucleic acid tests within a week. In the future, if I fly directly to Shanghai, I will still be quarantined at a hotel. In addition to the air ticket, the total cost of returning to China will be between 80,000 and 100,000 yuan.” Simultaneously, interviewee No. 3 said he worried that inflation would become more serious. If so, it would be another severe psychological burden for international students.

When question No. 7 of the interview asked whether students were racially discriminated against by the local faculty or society, most of them thought no, whereas Respondent No. 1 pointed out that it was more of an invisible discrimination in attitude. “For example, when I team up with my classmates to check information, the other party ignores me and pretends not to hear my talking.” Respondent No. 2 states that it is rare, but still exists, such as being emphasized by the mechanic who pronounced a certain word while repairing his car.

When it came to this negative emotion, the participants agreed that they could not find a technical way to get rid of the negative emotion. They usually turn their attention to other activities and let these feelings go away smoothly. For example, Subject 2 said that when she was in a bad mood, she would cry and go to bed. Also, she plays video games, watches sad

movies, and sometimes eats dessert to dispel bad emotions. In addition, others felt that using Chinese social media helped the adjustment process, as talking to family members and close friends allowed them to express their feelings and gain social support. One of the interviewees said she felt better after talking to her family about her depression. Another interviewee also said that talking with close friends back home gives some relief.

4.2.3 Sociocultural Adaptation

The sociocultural adaptation of international students includes on-campus and wider off-campus social and cultural adaptation, covering all aspects of their daily life, such as language communication, conceptual differences, climate, diet, religious habits and so on. At this level, Ward (1999) clearly expressed that socio-cultural adaptation is “the ability to manage day-to-day life in the host culture context.” (p. 659). Moreover, he proposed that sociocultural adaptation means that international students acquire knowledge and skills suitable for the culture of the country where they are studying, and can transmit and communicate effectively in the new cultural environment.

For the purpose of having a more comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural adaptation of international students, the second question of the interview was set to explore more details. Ten areas are specifically listed to provide them with a broader perspective, in case they have no idea where to start, including diet, accommodation, transportation, consumption, medical treatment, recreation, social customs, academic pressure, language barriers, and social interaction.

The lockdown associated with COVID-19 has disturbed lives around the world. The ability to meet everyday needs is a vital skill that can greatly improve one’s well-being during this specific time. However, various problems about local diet in the United States have also been continuously derived from this epidemic. Local restaurants were blocked in the early stage of the pandemic, which was greatly inconvenient. Respondent No. 1 mentioned that during the epidemic, inflation was severe, plus prices soared, thus the cost of their food increased a lot, bringing a certain burden to their living expenses even when eating at home. Even after the quarantine was being lifted, dining at home resumed in the later stages, as students were still under larger economic pressure to eat at restaurants than to eat at home. Respondent No. 2 stated that since he cooked a lot, he was not affected too much when being isolated at home. However, grocery shopping during quarantine can also be a hassle, and various policies will bring a lot of inconvenience to their travel. Additionally Respondent No. 8 added that their socializing decreased since they no longer dine out.

Similar to the consumption, local rents have also increased to a certain extent during the epidemic, which was mentioned by both respondents No. 2 and 5. The interviewee No. 2 declared that his rent has risen directly from the original \$500 to \$550, which although a small rise, is still a big blow to his quality of life. However, interviewees No. 1, No. 3, No. 4 believed that their accommodation had not been affected too much, because they lived off-campus with little price changes, so they did not have any obstacles adapting to this aspect. At the same time, the epidemic has also had a certain impact on leisure, for instance, many indoor entertainment activities were reduced. Interviewer No. 1 said that the chance of friends gathering has been greatly reduced. Not only have outdoor activities decreased, but even indoor gatherings have almost disappeared.

Compared with the discomfort in terms of consumption and accommodation, the impact of the epidemic on their transportation is much smaller. Due to the influence of local policies, the isolation did not last for a long time. Almost all the respondents believed that their daily travel was not hindered as in China. For example, respondent No. 8 mentioned that “Due to the epidemic, I no longer choose to take public transportation but drive myself, so spending

on transportation has decreased. Also, at the height of the epidemic, we didn't go out for almost a month." However, multiple concerns about travel abroad under the epidemic still arise. Since airplanes are the most common means of transportation in the United States other than private cars, interviewees No. 1 and No. 3 mentioned that whenever going to other places for meetings, matches or travel, they are required to spend a long time to check the epidemic prevention policy in advance. Similarly, in the medical field, most interviewees reckoned that medical treatment has not been affected too much. Since there is no mandatory requirement for nucleic acid testing in the United States, and people are more inclined to do antigen self-testing at home, the number of people who go to the hospital has not surged accordingly, so it will not be overcrowded. Besides, beyond pandemic, people generally do not go to the hospital unless it is a particularly urgent and serious situation.

As for social customs, respondent No. 8 stated that the quarantine measures of the epidemic have made them more aware of cultural differences. Many of the Americans refused to vaccinate and quarantine. Concerning interactions, most Chinese international students believe that they still prefer to make friends with other Chinese students. In previous research, identity has been considered a psychological awareness, revealing a sense of belonging between individuals and groups. Identity comes from the individual's feelings of difference or conflict after interacting with the group. Therefore, Chinese identity may be the reason why participants are more likely to make friends with other Chinese. They may find people from the same country friendlier and more comfortable to get along with. Moreover, during the epidemic, there were many online courses, and they rarely had the opportunity to communicate with their professors and American classmates, thus it was more difficult to make friends with them.

Another thing that all the interviewees highlighted is the language barrier. The language incompatibility actually exists. It mainly occurs when communicating with non-American residents such as store salespersons and restaurant waiters, during which some accents are really hard to recognize. Coupled with the increase in social distance during the epidemic, international students become more cautious. Moreover, wearing masks may bring poorer English pronunciation. These phenomena have caused great obstacles to their hearing. Besides, under the epidemic, it is rare to make new friends and attend new parties, so that the communication with foreign friends is extremely reduced. The language degradation of foreign students is obvious, and it is more formidable to become friends with Americans. In particular, it is most difficult to communicate with non-native English speakers, which makes them have a certain degree of fear of social interaction.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Major Findings

This study attempts to figure out the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students in terms of academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation under the epidemic. Through extensive textual analysis, it is clear that some of the original assumptions have been proven in line with the reality, while others are partly opposite. The following conclusions are drawn from the data analyzed in the Section 4, with reference to the assumptions (hypotheses) presented in Section 3.

H1: Generally speaking, the overall cross-cultural adaptation of international students during the epidemic did not change much, and compared with before the epidemic, it did not show the expected cliff-like decline, which is inconsistent with the assumption. Five of the

participants felt that they adjusted well to the new culture, while three said they experienced some discomforts, which was still acceptable and improving over time.

H2: Among the analysis of diverse aspects, the academic adaptation, psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation of international students all have a certain degree of discomfort, but there is no obvious comparative relationship, which is inconsistent with the assumption. All three have more or less impact on students. As to academics, heavy essay pressure and the popularization of online courses led many of them to collapse in the process of adaptation, with intensely negative emotions such as anxiety, distress and fear, imposing an adverse impact on their academic adjustment. With regard to psychological adaptation, the impact of the epidemic on the study abroad policy and employment led international students to feel a strong sense of instability, anxiety about short-term and long-term life planning, and being at a loss. Additionally, all kinds of appalling cases such as exclusion of Chinese and hostility against Asians have occurred; consequently, they are surrounded by various dangerous factors, and there is no way to vent their grievances, leading to severe psychological discomfort, and even severe anxiety and depression. Moreover, the high expense of studying abroad and the earnest expectations of parents and family members and diverse public opinions have also made international students bear a lot of “burden” when considering employment issues. Under the joint catalysis of these internal and external forces, some international students naturally feel anxious and have certain negative emotions. In terms of social culture, rising prices and aggravating language barriers have had a certain negative impact on them.

H3: During the quarantine of the epidemic, the psychological adaptation of international students was seriously affected, which was in line with the assumption. They tend to doubt the meaning and purpose of studying abroad, and they make few friends during the blockade (lockdown). Due to the time difference, it is difficult to find comfort from relatives and friends in China. Most of the time, they can only digest negative feelings by themselves, becoming increasingly negative.

H4: At the same time, because some students have lived in the destination country for a period of time before the epidemic, their cultural shock after the epidemic is not obvious, which is inconsistent with the assumption. In addition, they were locked at home for a long time under the influence of the policy, and were passively cut off from communication with the outside world. Without communication, lots of conflicts and frictions were reduced. Therefore, their cultural shock in the early stage of the epidemic was not obvious.

H5: Under the trend of the spread of the epidemic, the employment prospects are not clear. Coupled with the feelings of home and country, they are eager to return to the embrace of the motherland, so they think what they are most worried about in the future is the return tickets rather than personal development, which is inconsistent with the assumption.

H6: During the epidemic, the language barrier has become more serious, as expected. For example, when communicating with other non-Americans residing in US, such as store salespersons, restaurant waiters, etc., some accents are difficult for international students to distinguish. In addition, everyone is wearing masks, contributing to the worse pronunciation. These phenomena have caused great obstacles to their hearing, and thus have some negative effects on their sociocultural adaptation.

H7: Under the changes of the epidemic, overseas students have experienced various discomforts, which have had many impacts on their healthy development. However, due to the implicit attitude of the Chinese themselves, everyone would rather suffer the discomfort by themselves than seek help from others. Relatives and friends were unable to directly help them over long distances and they endured all this and did not want to ask local Americans for help, so this item doesn't match the assumption.

5.2 Suggestions

According to the contextual analysis in the previous section, it is obvious that few Chinese students are willing to express their personal needs due to implicit attitude. However, the various problems they encountered still need the help of society and individuals to solve. Moreover, universities' management and sojourners' learning and living are closely related. Therefore, this section will put forward some effective suggestions from the perspective of universities and students, combined with the results of contextual analysis.

5.2.1 Suggestions for Universities

Universities should vigorously develop relevant training services under pandemic, providing an academic environment of diverse systematic and credible knowledge. This includes explaining the certain condition of the country where the student is going, such as local shopping, medical circumstances, and related courses.

Similarly, students' foreign language proficiency also plays a significant role in cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, schools should provide professional English training for students with Chinese English teachers and foreign teachers, to help them quickly practice their spoken English while consolidating basic English knowledge. Additionally, cross-cultural communication is generally considered to be a specialized course for English-major students, but it seems to be more and more prominent nowadays.

At the level of university management, a special international office under pandemic should be set up to build a platform for students who are abroad to communicate with them, and offer support for their emergency obstacles. In addition, a cross-cultural mental counselling system during this special period is needed to be established to provide care and counseling to the psychological obstacles and negative emotions that occur during the cross-cultural adaptation of foreign cultures. For example, there should be a combination of individual counseling and group counseling, epidemic mutual aid WeChat group, professional psychological counseling, online learning guidance, and various types of public lectures, to solve the specific difficulties of students in the local area in real time. They can also set up a special epidemic fund to provide funds for students who are affected by the epidemic and have difficulties in life support. Departments of universities could hold a round-table discussion on the COVID-19 pandemic, making clear the need for vigilance and condemnation of possible discrimination.

5.2.2 Suggestions for Sojourners

Before going abroad, individuals are supposed to find useful information which is available to be searched online, including entering the university's official website, checking the course information to be completed, and accommodation conditions, as well as other infrastructure locations under epidemics, in order to better adapt to the unfamiliar environment. At the same time, international students are expected to take the initiative to contact the seniors who have participated in overseas projects, getting some practical advice from them.

Besides, the United States, as a melting pot, hosts international students from different countries with diverse cultural backgrounds, in which cultural differences will lead to deviations in their values and customs. To adapt to local culture, international students must actively face cultural differences, maintain an open and inclusive attitude and accept cultural differences in order to successfully survive in the crisis period and reduce the adverse effects of culture shock.

When encountering difficulties, whether it is trouble in daily life or becoming infected with the virus, students should try to seek assistance nearby. Local organizations and institutions in universities as well as communities with strong and stable social resources are all instrumental for international students. They may ask for advice from tutors, school staff, and international student federations. In addition, they can also contact some Volunteer Associations, Chinese churches, and embassies in the United States. In many states in America, community libraries and universities provide free English and American cultural training to foreign students as well as employment opportunities all the time. Meanwhile, international students are also supposed to establish a new social network. One of the effective ways is to actively participate in school and community activities. In addition, due to the prosperity of the Internet, through Instagram, international student forums, foreign websites, etc., they can learn about newest epidemic news faster and more conveniently and establish effective network relationships.

5.3 Limitations

Based on these findings, this study attempts to analyze the applicability of acculturation theory to current Chinese students' cross-cultural adaptation under epidemics. Although it was performed to the best of the researcher's ability, some limitations should be noted.

First, the small sample size is a major limitation of the current study, as only 8 Chinese students were interviewed. Therefore, the experiences of these participants may not apply to all Chinese students in American universities, and the results of the study may be biased.

In addition, since there is no follow-up survey of different stages of cross-cultural adaptation of the same group of research subjects over time, and there is no triangulation of quantitative and qualitative analysis methods, the methodology could be improved for better generalizability of the findings. In the field of cross-cultural adaptation, there is still a lot of arduous tasks to finish and compensate for research on the mental health of international students under newest processes. In terms of theoretical research, cross-cultural research on Chinese students sojourning abroad should be incorporated into China's national conditions and the theoretical depth should be expanded. At the same time, how to integrate the existing investigations into an inductive analysis and refinement, and how to form a relatively complete system are also the directions that need to be worked on in the future.

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Appendix

— Basic information :

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. Major:
4. Educational background:

Please provide your thoughtful answers in 1-2 paragraphs to the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Your honest response will help us provide support and services to international students in the future during times of crisis. We thank you for volunteering to participate in this research.

Questions:

1. What's your personal feelings before and after the pandemic?
2. How has your overall cross-cultural adaptation changed due to the impact of the epidemic, whether better or worse, please justify your reply.
(1. food 2. accommodation 3. transportation 4. consumption 5. medical treatment 6. recreation 7. social customs 8. academic pressure 9. language 10. social interaction)
3. Did you feel uncomfortable with your life in the US at the time? Try to describe the degree of this discomfort.
4. Has the outbreak aggravated your culture shock or eased it? What do you think of the reasons?
5. What is your biggest worry or concern throughout COVID-19, currently and moving forward?
6. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your studies and your life?
7. Have you been racially discriminated against at school or in society?
8. How have you dealt with the challenges posed by the pandemic? During the campus shutdown due to COVID-19, did you seek any academic assistance (advisor, professor, the library, the Learning Center, or the Writing Center) or help from student support services such as the Student Health Center, the Counseling Center, the International office, the Campus Cupboard or anything like this? If you did, please describe your experience. Nowadays what kind of assistance would you like to receive?

附录（中文）

一、基本信息：

1. 性别：

2. 年龄：

3. 专业：

4. 教育背景：

请用 1-2 个段落对以下问题作出你深思熟虑的回答。答案没有对错之分。你的诚实回答将有助于我们在未来的危机时期更好地为国际学生提供支持和服务。感谢你自愿参与这项研究。

问题：

1. 疫情前后你的个人感受是什么？

2. 由于疫情的影响，你的整体跨文化适应性有什么变化，请说明你的回答。

(1. 饮食 2. 住宿 3. 交通 4. 消费 5. 医疗 6. 娱乐 7. 社会习俗 8. 学术压力 9. 语言 10. 社会交往)

3. 你是否对当时在美国的生活感到不舒服？试着描述这种不舒服的程度。

4. 疫情的爆发是加剧了你的文化冲击还是缓解了你的文化冲击？你认为原因是什么？

5. 对于疫情目前的情况及未来的发展你最担心或关切的是什么？

6. 疫情对你的学习和生活有什么影响？

7. 你在学校或社会上受到过种族歧视吗？

8. 你是如何应对大流行病带来的挑战的？在校园封锁期间，你是否寻求过任何学术援助（顾问、教授、图书馆、学习中心或写作中心）或学生服务中心等的支持，如学生健康中心、咨询中心、国际办公室、校园食堂等的帮助？如果你有，请描述你的经历。现在你希望得到怎么样的帮助？