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Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Asian and Non-Asian International Students in China

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ABSTRACT

Past research has focused primarily on the cross-cultural adaptation of expatriates upon arrival in the host country, but few studies have explored the prior cross-cultural contact and adjustment experiences of international students. This study examined the impact of prior cross-cultural exposure on the cross-cultural adaptation of Asian and non-Asian international students with varying lengths of stay in China. The analysis of questionnaire data from 430 international students (77.44% Asian, 22.56% non-Asian) in western China revealed that both groups had limited prior cross-cultural exposure. Cross-cultural adaptation increased over time in China. Interestingly, non-Asian students had better cross-cultural adaptation in the first three months than Asian students did because of better preparation, but subsequently faced more crises in adjustments that eased past the two-year point. The findings suggest the need for pre-departure cross-cultural training to consider cultural distance and the transition phase.

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility is an important component and strategic force in the internationalization of higher education (Huang & Mittelmeier, 2024; Liu, 2021). Most international students in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries come from China and India (International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2025). As one of the fastest-growing host countries in recent years, China still faces many uncertainties in managing the dynamic process of students' cross-cultural adaptation as the inflow of international students continues to increase (Gong & Huybers, 2022; Luo & Zhang, 2021). These include accommodations and transportation, climate and sustenance, cultural and value differences, loneliness, homesickness, and academic pressure (López, 2021; Polat & Arslan, 2022).

Cross-cultural adaptation is a complex process involving social adaptation and academic adaptation, among others. Research has shown that communication apprehension and social contact predict adaptation (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). In addition, greater WeChat usage is associated with better behavioral engagement in academic learning and academic adjustment over a six-month period (Cao et al., 2024). The social self-efficacy of international students in interactive environments is a significant predictor of cultural adaptation stress (Cao et al., 2023). However, exploring the influences on postarrival cross-cultural adaptation alone does not provide a comprehensive understanding of international students' experiences abroad.

A factor that is less studied is prior cross-cultural exposure before departure. Prior cross-cultural exposure can be direct and can be gained through visiting and knowing people from those countries. It can be indirect and can be gained through watching videos or reading books. Exposure to social media information about the host country can ease cross-cultural adaptation (Fang et al., 2020; Gu, 2010). Unfamiliarity with the host country culture heightens acculturative stress and reduces well-being (Htet & Mohanan, 2022; Poyrazli et al., 2004).

Thus far, research has focused on the prior cross-cultural exposure of expatriates. Because of the lack of studies on international students, past findings on expatriates are reviewed to provide a starting point for comparison. For instance, Lee and Sukoco (2010) reported that expatriates' ability to adjust to cultural differences can be moderated by prior international experience and information. The 210 expatriates working in Taiwan Province, China, were from Asian countries. Jurásek and Wawrosz (2024) reported that expatriates from China and Turkey who went to work in the Czech Republic have better cross-cultural adaptation and competence if they have international experience, but the study did not delve into the quality and quantity of international exposure. The

findings on expatriates may not be entirely applicable to international students whose purpose and social and economic conditions differ.

Our comprehensive literature search revealed a lack of empirical studies on international students' prior cross-cultural exposure and cross-cultural adaptation. Most were literature reviews. For example, Sit et al.'s (2017) systematic review of 35 studies revealed that cross-cultural training with both behavioral and cognitive components is more effective in helping university students with cultural adjustments. However, cultural similarities in the home country and host country may be an advantage. Luo and Zhang's (2021) systematic literature review revealed that cultural distance and host language proficiency affect cross-cultural adaptation, among other factors such as personality, adult attachment style, coping resources and style, social support networks, cultural intelligence, and a sense of discrimination. Length of stay in the host country was not among the factors studied.

To our knowledge, only three empirical studies have investigated how prior cross-cultural exposure and cultural distance influence cross-cultural adaptation, but they have not related these factors to length of stay in the host country. Two qualitative studies highlight the importance of host language proficiency. Song and Xia's (2021) interviews with 20 international students in Shanghai, China, revealed that cross-cultural adaptation is easier for those with better proficiency in Chinese and academic English and more interactions with local residents. The students were from the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Thailand, Yemen, and Rwandam. In addition, Fang et al.'s (2020) interviews with 11 students from China studying in Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States revealed that students tended to overestimate the adequacy of their prior intercultural learning before going abroad, and optimal adaptation takes place when the students engage in intercultural interactions. Prior cross-cultural exposure needs to be put into practice in actual social activities upon arrival in the host country (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024). Another questionnaire study (Khedr, 2024) revealed that cultural distance and the university environment significantly affected international students' adjustment at Alexandria University, Egypt. The 339 students from Malaysia, Iraqis, Palestinians, and Syrians experienced better academic adjustment than cultural adjustment.

Given findings indicating a link between cultural distance and cross-cultural adaptation, it is crucial to compare Asian and non-Asian students studying in China. For international students in China, the cultural distance is lessened if they come from countries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, where there are more citizens of Chinese descent (Szklarz, 2024; Tan, 2024). Many of them have great grandparents who migrated from China to settle in these lands in the 19th and 20th centuries (Harper, 2021). They may be in touch with what is happening in China through television news, movies, sporting events and entertainment programs.

This study examines the impact of prior cross-cultural exposure on the cross-cultural adaptation of Asian and non-Asian international students with varying lengths of stay in China. Such investigations will make valuable contributions to the literature on international student mobility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure

Prior cross-cultural exposure is the knowledge, experience and exposure to a new environment before traveling to the host country (Francois, 2015). Prior cross-cultural exposure enables individuals to better understand the cultural environment and behaviors of people in the host country and to have better interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds (Jurásek & Wawrosz, 2024). Students with international experience have better cross-cultural competence, interactions and adaptations, as they are psychologically prepared for adaptation difficulties (Gebregergis et al., 2020; Searle & Ward, 1990).

Conventionally, prior cross-cultural exposure is acquired through spending time in the host country and knowing people from there. However, in the digital era, the notion of prior cross-cultural contact needs to be expanded to include internet information. Researchers have written about how the accessibility of social media eliminates traditional geographic boundaries and provides cross-cultural interaction opportunities prior to actual travel to a foreign country (e.g., Mukherjee, 2023; Tombleson & Wolf, 2017). They have also highlighted the facilitating role of social media in creating awareness of different cultural values and enabling cross-cultural exchange (e.g., Hu et al., 2017; Tang & Chan, 2020). However, indirect contact with another culture via social media and the internet has not been incorporated into the definition of prior cross-cultural exposure in studies on cross-cultural adaptation.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Research on cross-cultural adaptation began with studies on culture shock, a period of anxiety experienced in a new culture before an individual feels comfortable (Oberg, 1960). Individuals with little knowledge of new sociocultural environments experience cumulative stress (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023; Yang & Xia, 2023). In China, WeChat provides international students with the support needed to navigate the difficulties of adjusting to a new environment and adjusting academically (Cao et al., 2024). Pino's (2024) interviews with five college students in a study abroad program revealed that personal and institutional support systems and resources enabled them to overcome adjustment barriers. Common factors affecting the process of cross-cultural adaptation include demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and education level (Mahmood & Burke, 2018). In addition, higher self-efficacy in the social domain contributes to better social, academic and psychological adjustment (Carmelel et al., 2021).

An individual's cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic and complex process that evolves over time (Shu et al., 2020; Ward & Szabó, 2023). Within this field, the stages of cross-cultural adaptation theory, proposed by Lysgaard (1955), have emerged as a seminal model of the process of cross-cultural adaptation over time. This theory posits that the adaptation process follows a U-shaped trajectory. The initial phase of cross-cultural transition is characterized by a period of enthusiasm

and fascination with the new cultural environment, often referred to as the "honeymoon" phase. This is followed by a crisis period characterized by pain, hostility and withdrawal. The subsequent transition phase is then followed by a period of adjustment, integration and enjoyment. In recognition of the phases of cross-cultural adaptation, the present study divided participants according to different lengths of stay in China (0-3 months, 3-6 months, 7-12 months, 1-2 years, and more than 2 years).

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Owing to the lack of studies on prior cross-cultural exposure of international students, a review of expatriates' prior cross-cultural exposure is included to provide a reference point for factors that may be applicable to international students, bearing in mind the differences between the two groups of sojourners. Expatriates stay abroad for work with a view toward professional integration and long-term residence, whereas international students stay abroad to gain a qualification and stay from a few months to three to four years. Kempf and Holtbrügge's (2020) analysis of 23 academic publications from 1966-2015 suggested that the impact of prior intercultural training on trainees is moderated by cultural distance, international experience, learning style, and personality and is mediated by cultural intelligence and cultural adjustment. Expatriates' ability to adapt to cultural differences can be moderated by prior international experiences and information (Lee & Sukoco, 2010). Takeuchi and Chen's (2013) meta-analysis of 43 studies revealed that expatriates who had more international work transfers and international travel reported greater satisfaction with adjustment than those with less international experience, defined as including both work and nonwork experiences. However, in these studies, prior international experiences referred to direct contact with the culture as spending time in the host country and not indirect exposure obtained through internet resources.

For international students, international experience, or rather, exposure to the culture of the host country, takes the form of predeparture training. Gebregergis et al. (2020) acknowledged that previous international experiences and training can facilitate the process of social learning for individuals to understand different cultural environments. Systematic literature reviews show that international students' cross-cultural adaptation is smoother if they have cross-cultural training (Sit et al., 2017) and visit a country that is culturally similar (Luo & Zhang, 2021). The importance of preparation before going abroad for quicker adaptation in the early stages of entering a completely new cultural environment was confirmed by Fang et al. (2020) through interviews with 12 Chinese students who had studied in the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries. On the basis of questionnaire and interview data from international students in North America, Bringle et al. (2023) suggested that predeparture preparation should include language, local culture and mores. For international students, there are indications that predeparture cross-cultural learning may enhance their cross-cultural competence and prepare them for the future adaptation process.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Asian and Non-Asian International Students (*N* = 430)

Category	Subcategory	Asian students (N = 333)		Non-Asian students (N = 97)	
		Freq.	*PCT*	Freq.	*PCT*
Gender	Female	245	73.6	59	60.8
	Male	88	26.4	38	39.2
Age	18 years old	6	1.8	6	6.2
	18-25 years old	302	90.7	75	77.3
	Over 25 years old	25	7.5	16	16.5
Education	Undergraduate	198	59.5	45	46.4
	Postgraduate	134	40.2	47	48.5
	Others	1	0.3	5	5.2
Major	Medical and Health Sciences	12	3.6	10	10.3
	Chinese Language and Literature	198	59.5	35	36.1
	Civil Engineering	22	6.6	3	3.1
	Business Administration	26	10.8	17	17.5
	Computer Sciences	14	4.2	7	7.2
	Others	51	15.3	25	25.8
HSK (Chinese language level)	HSK Level 1	0	0	0	0
	HSK Level 2	13	3.9	3	3.1
	HSK Level 3	7	2.1	1	1.0
	HSK Level 4	160	48.0	56	57.7
	HSK Level 5	92	27.6	26	26.8
	HSK Level 6	61	18.3	11	11.3
Length of stay in China	Less than 3 months	18	5.4	8	8.2
	3-6 months	48	14.4	15	15.5
	7-12 months	72	21.6	23	23.7
	1-2 years	129	38.7	35	36.1
	More than 2 years	66	19.8	16	16.5

Note: PCT = Percent

METHOD

The cross-sectional study involved 430 international students from four universities in western China, comprising 333 Asian students and 97 non-Asian students (Table 1). In both groups, there were more female participants (73.6% and 60.8%, respectively). For the Asian group, there were more undergraduate students (59.5%), but for the non-Asian group, there was a balance of undergraduate (46.4%) and postgraduate students (48.5%). For both groups, the participants were mainly aged 18-25 years, and their average length of stay in China was 3-4 months.

Purposive sampling was employed. The selection criteria were students from foreign countries who were enrolled in a diploma, degree or postgraduate degree program in China. Primary and high school students were excluded. The snowballing approach was used to reach more participants through international students' networks. Stratified random sampling was not adopted because it was not the purpose of the study to target particular demographic variables.

An online questionnaire for demographic background (8 items), prior cross-cultural exposure (6 items), and cross-cultural adaptation (29 items) was constructed. In the demographic section, information on the length of stay in China was elicited in view of Lysgaard's (1955) U-shaped trajectory of cross-cultural adaptation theory to identify the time frame in which the participants transition from one phase to another. This is the time frame for tracking their prior cross-cultural exposure and cross-cultural adaptation (less than 3 months, 3-6 months, 7-12 months, 1-2 years, or more than 2 years).

The prior cross-cultural exposure measure was adapted from Francois (2015) and Johnston and Hanson (2015). The cross-cultural adaptation measure adapted from Polat and Arslan (2022) uses a five-point Likert scale. The two scales in this study showed good reliability and internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values greater than .7 (Lavrakas, 2008). The structural validity of the items was also relatively good, with KMO coefficients greater than 0.7 and sig. $< .05$ (Nunes et al., 2020). For the prior cross-cultural exposure measure, the Cronbach's alpha was .708, the KMO measure coefficient was .736, and Bartlett's test of sphericity (sig) was .000. For the cross-cultural adaptation measure, the Cronbach's alpha was .985, the KMO coefficient was .983, and Bartlett's test of sphericity (sig) was .000.

The questionnaire link in Sojump (www.sojump.com), a Chinese online questionnaire website, was shared by lecturers at four universities in western China. Prior to completing the questionnaire, the respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and their voluntary participation. No personal contact details were collected. As a token of appreciation for their participation, each student was given the option to receive a WeChat red envelope after completing the questionnaire.

Out of the 438 responses received, eight were excluded because of incomplete information, leaving 430 for the analysis. SPSS 26.0 was used to compute descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), and Pearson

correlation tests were performed. All p values were considered statistically significant when they were two-sided and less than .01.

Table 2: Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure of Asian and Non-Asian International Students ($N = 430$)

Type of prior cross-cultural exposure	Category	Asian students		Non-Asian students	
		Freq.	*PCT*	Freq.	*PCT*
How many of your family members are Chinese (e.g., your parents, your grandparents, uncle, aunt)?	None	101	30.3	39	40.2
	1-2	130	39.0	36	37.1
	3-6	55	16.5	14	14.4
	7-10	19	5.7	5	5.2
	More than 10	28	8.4	3	3.1
Before you studied in China, how many Chinese friends did you have?	None	52	15.6	21	21.6
	1-2	148	44.4	45	46.4
	3-6	72	21.6	20	20.6
	7-10	30	9.0	7	7.2
	More than 10	31	9.0	4	4.1
Before you studied in China, how many times have you visited China?	None	19	5.7	29	29.9
	1-2	64	19.2	44	45.4
	3-6	84	25.2	16	16.5
	7-10	88	26.4	3	3.1
	More than 10	78	23.4	5	5.2
Before you studied in China, how many times have you watch movies/TV programmes/videos about China?	None	57	17.1	4	4.1
	1-2	47	14.1	28	28.9
	3-6	56	16.8	35	36.1
	7-10	83	24.9	8	8.2
	More than 10	90	27.9	22	22.7
When did you start using WeChat ?	Less than 3 months ago	57	17.1	20	20.6
	3-6 months ago	47	14.1	17	17.5
	7-12 months ago	56	16.8	14	14.4
	1-2 years ago	83	24.9	22	22.7
	More than 2 years ago	90	27.0	24	24.7
How often do you use WeChat ?	Less than 30 min per day	19	5.7	4	4.1
	30-60 min per day	64	19.2	24	24.7
	1-2 hours per day	84	25.2	19	19.6
	3-4 hours per day	88	26.4	26	26.8

	5 hours or more	78	23.4	24	24.7
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Type of cross-cultural adaptation	Daily Life Adaptation	4.04	0.84	3.88	0.97
	Academic Adaptation	3.97	0.80	3.85	0.97
	Socio-Cultural Adaptation	3.93	0.79	3.73	0.93
	Psychological Adaptation	3.91	0.82	3.69	1.01
	Overall	3.95	0.78	3.76	0.93

Note. *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation. The items were coded on a scale of 1--5, with intermediate values of 3 and above representing higher levels of the measure. PCT = Percentage

RESULTS

Level of Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure among Asian and Non-Asian Participants

Table 2 shows that both Asian and non-Asian participants had relatively little prior cross-cultural exposure. Asian students have relatively more direct exposure: 69.7% of Asian participants and 59.8% of non-Asian participants have some Chinese family members. Among the Asian participants, 39.0% had 1-2 Chinese family members, 16.5% had 3-6 family members, 5.7% had 7-10 family members, and 8.4% had more than 10 family members. For non-Asian participants, the percentage of Chinese family members also progressively decreased (37.1%, 14.4%, 5.2%, and 3.1%, respectively). Chinese family members familiarize the participants with the Chinese way of life and thinking.

Before they studied in China, more of the participants had Chinese friends than Chinese family members did. The results revealed that 84.4% of the Asian participants and 78.4% of the non-Asian participants had some Chinese friends. For the Asian group, 44.4% had 1-2 Chinese friends, 21.6% had 3-6 Chinese friends, and 18% had more than 7 Chinese friends. The non-Asian group showed a similar pattern (46.4%, 20.6%, and 11.3%, respectively). Friends are a good source of cultural information and can help ease cross-cultural adjustments.

Before going to China to study, most of the Asian participants (94.3%) had visited China, whereas 70.1% of the non-Asian participants had visited China. Geographical proximity facilitates visits to China. Moreover, having Chinese ancestors also lessens cultural distance. The older generation likes to join China tour packages and get their children to go with them. Approximately 19%-27% of the Asian participants had visited China for each of the four frequencies of visits

(1-2, 3-6, 7-10, and more than 10 times). The pattern clearly differs from that of non-Asian participants, whereby 45.4% visited China 1-2 times and 16.5% visited China 3-6 times before they went to China to study. Very few visited China more than seven times (8.3%). A substantial percentage (29.9%) had not visited China, and 21.6% did not have Chinese friends.

However, surprisingly, the non-Asian participants had good indirect prior cross-cultural contact with China. Before they studied in China, only 4.1% of non-Asian participants had not watched films, TV program or videos about China, but the percentage was 17.1% for Asian participants. These Asian participants may not have felt the need because of their assumed familiarity with Chinese culture and direct contact with Chinese family and friends. Non-Asian participants turn to China-related movies, TV programs and videos to prepare themselves before going to China. A total of 28.9% of non-Asian participants watched 1-2 programs, 36.1% watched 3-6 programs, 8.2% watched 7-10 programs, and 22.7% watched more than 10 programs. The non-Asian group gained good indirect prior exposure to Chinese culture through social media.

WeChat use is also connected to indirect prior cross-cultural exposure. Before they arrive in China, international students can sign up for WeChat and communicate with people about accommodations and other travel procedures, but most of the participants do not. Table 2 shows that 16.8% of Asian participants and 14.4% of non-Asian students had used WeChat for 7-12 months. However, Table 1 shows that 21.6% of Asian students and 23.7% of non-Asian students had been in China for 7-12 months. Upon arrival in China, there seems to be a time lag before international students start using WeChat. During the study, the participants relied on WeChat for communication and other facilities, such as financial transactions and information searches. Only 5.7% of Asian participants and 4.1% of non-Asian participants used WeChat for less than 30 minutes per day. There is an even spread of participants (19%-27%) using WeChat for longer durations (30-60 minutes, 1-2 hours, 2-4 hours, and 5 or more hours).

Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Asian and Non-Asian Participants

For cross-cultural adaptation, Table 2 shows that there are no obvious differences in the four types of adaptation for the Asian and non-Asian participants. For both groups, the means for daily life adaptation are the highest, followed by academic adaptation and sociocultural adaptation, and the lowest is psychological adaptation. Psychological adaptation (e.g., coping with anxiety) is a greater challenge for non-Asian students (*M = 3.69*) than for Asian students (*M = 3.91*). The range of means is narrower for non-Asian students (3.69-3.88) than for Asian students (3.91-4.04), who are better adapted. For Asian students, a smaller cultural distance reduces adjustment difficulties, including sociocultural, psychological, linguistic and communication challenges.

The independent samples t test results revealed that there were no significant differences between Asian and non-Asian students in terms of their academic adaptation (*t = -1.236, p = .217 > .05*) or daily life adaptation (*t = 1.588, p = .113*

> .05). Both groups can cope well in matters related to food, clothing, housing, and transport in China and receive adequate support at their university.

However, there were significant differences between Asian and non-Asian participants in terms of sociocultural adaptation ($t = -2.071, p = .039 < .05$) and psychological adaptation ($t = 2.222, p=.027 < .05$). Since the Asian participants come from an Asian country with a sizable Chinese population, they could adapt better in language, culture and social activities. Geopolitical ties, as well as distance from home and perceived safety, may cause Asian students to have higher levels of sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation than non-Asian students do (Fong, 2020).

Length of time in China

Length of Time in China and Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure of Asian and Non-Asian Participants

Figure 1 shows that both Asian international students and non-Asian international students have low levels of prior cross-cultural exposure overall (means of 3.4 or lower), irrespective of their duration of stay in China. The surprising finding is for students who had been in China for less than three months. Non-Asian participants ($M = 2.46$) had more prior cross-cultural exposure than Asian participants did ($M = 2.33$). Non-Asian participants may be concerned about entering a vastly different cultural environment and attempting to obtain more information about China through friends and social media (e.g., videos, blogs), unlike Asian international students, who assume cultural similarity. They have more prior contact with Chinese social culture, values, and ways of life, and some of them are also of Chinese descent. However, past the three-month mark, Asian participants reported higher levels of prior cross-cultural exposure than non-Asian participants did.
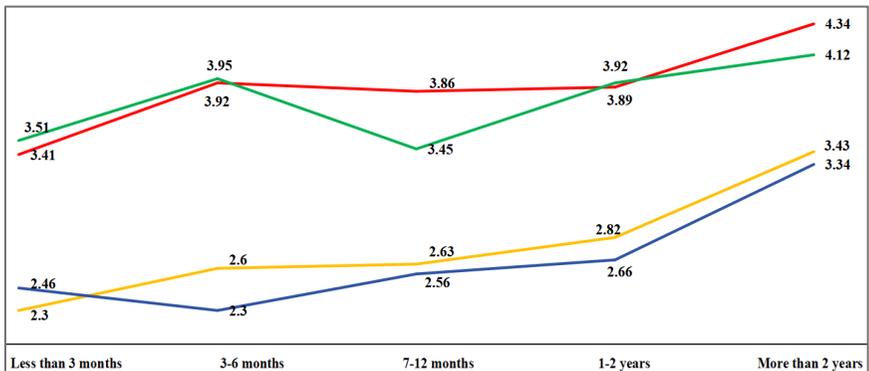

Figure 1: Comparison of Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Among Asian and Non-Asian International Students According to Length of Time in China

Length of time in China and cross-cultural adaptation of Asian and non-Asian participants

Lysgaard's (1955) stages of cross-cultural adaptation theory are used to explain the adjustment stages of international students. Figure 1 shows that Asian participants had better cross-cultural adaptation than non-Asian participants did after three months in China. Surprisingly, in the first three months, Asian participants (M=3.41) were less adapted than their non-Asian counterparts (M=3.51). Asian students who are expected to experience cultural similarity may find it unsettling to discover various cultural differences in China, and the first three months constitute the crisis phase of adjustment. Non-Asian students may initially adjust well to the unfamiliar cultural environment because they prepared for their stay in China (as seen in the higher level of indirect prior cross-cultural exposure). The rest of this section describes the trajectory of adjustment for the two groups (Figure 2).
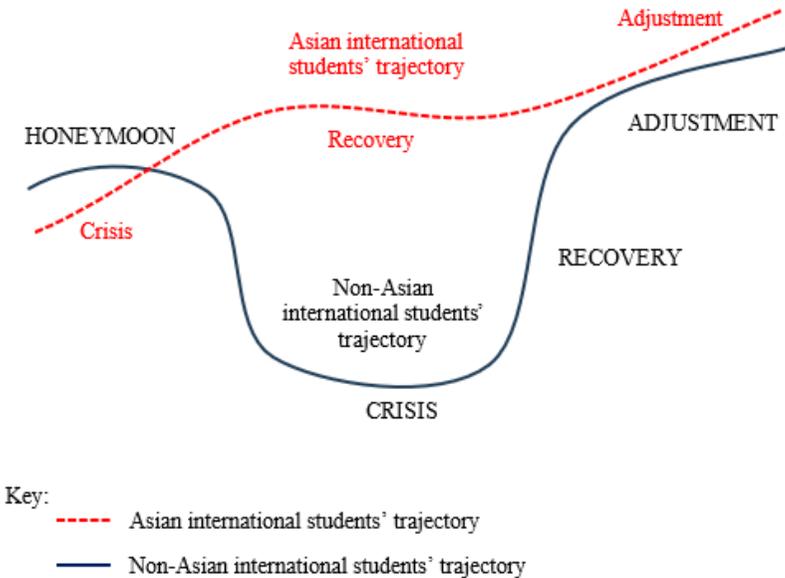

Figure 2: Stages of Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Asian and Non-Asian International Students in China Based on Lysgaard (1955)

The Asian participants did not have a honeymoon phase, the first phase, as postulated by Lysgaard (1955). After the crisis phase in the first three months of living in China, they begin to cope with the new environment after they have worked through the differences between the culture of their home country and China (3-6 months, $M = 3.92$). After the 6-month point, the Asian participants'

cross-cultural adaptation level plateaued (7-12 months, *M = 3.86*; 1-2 years, *M = 3.89*) before it shot up to *M = 4.34* at the two-year point. This means that the Asian participants' recovery phase from 3 to 24 months was gradual before they reached the well-adjusted phase. The cross-cultural adaptation trajectory for Asian international students is a stepwise positive linear trajectory with a plateau after the initial crisis phase.

For non-Asian participants, their cross-cultural adaptation follows the U-shaped trajectory in Lysgaard's (1955) stages of cross-cultural adaptation theory. They embraced the new cultural environment with enthusiasm and fascination, the honeymoon phase (Lysgaard, 1955). They can cope well in the 3-6 month period after arrival in China (*M = 3.95*). However, after six months of living in China, they encounter new issues in adjustment, evident in the drop in the cross-cultural adaptation level in the 7-12 month period (*M = 3.45*). This is indicative of a crisis phase in cross-cultural adjustment, characterized by pain, hostility and withdrawal due to stark differences in language, living habits, and customs. However, after staying in China for one to two years, they learn to overcome difficulties, which is indicative of a recovery phase before they reach a well-adjusted phase past the two-year point. The analysis by length of time shows that the non-Asian participants' cross-cultural adaptation is not smooth and that they face more ups and downs in their adjustment.

Correlation between Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

The Pearson correlation tests revealed that there were no significant correlations between prior cross-cultural exposure and cross-cultural adaptation for international students who had lived in China for different lengths of time. There is also no significant correlation between these two variables for the whole group without considering length of stay (*r = .163, p = .000*). The results suggest that prior cross-cultural contact with China does not assist in cross-cultural adaptation.

However, it is important to note that the level of prior cross-cultural exposure is generally low for international students because of limited international travel, prior intercultural contact and exposure via internet resources. If one variable has very little variation, there is not much fluctuation in that variable's values to correlate with the other variable, which can reduce the ability of the correlation test to detect a significant relationship.

DISCUSSION

A study on prior cross-cultural exposure and cross-cultural adaptation of Asian and non-Asian international students at four universities in western China revealed limited prior cross-cultural exposure and better cross-cultural adaptation of Asian students than non-Asian students past the third month of stay in China. By studying cross-cultural adaptation according to length of stay in China, we

obtain empirical evidence of the dynamic and evolving process of cross-cultural adaptation over time (Shu et al., 2020; Ward & Szabó, 2023).

First, both Asian and non-Asian international students had limited prior cross-cultural exposure before arriving in China. Asian students have more direct contact with Chinese culture through their family, friends and visits to China. On the other hand, non-Asian international students were more indirectly exposed to the Chinese environment by watching films, TV programs or videos about China. This granularity in findings goes beyond that of Takeuchi and Chen (2013), who concluded that prior international experience facilitates expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment without considering the type of contact with the host country. Other studies on expatriates have established the benefit of prior international experience for cross-cultural adaptation (Jurásek & Wawrosz, 2024; Lee & Sukoco, 2010), but our study revealed no significant correlation between prior cross-cultural exposure and cross-cultural adaptation.

The result of nonsignificance may be due to the limited range of scores for prior cross-cultural exposure, which resulted in insufficient variability to establish a meaningful correlation with cross-cultural adaptation scores. However, a thorough comparison with past related studies revealed differences in the measurement scales used to assess prior cross-cultural exposure, indicating that the same construct is operationalized differently, thereby affecting the results. Jurásek and Wawrosz (2024) used a 20-item cultural intelligence scale to measure the psychometric properties of general cultural exposure instead of direct questions on the direct and indirect forms of prior cross-cultural contact. Lee and Sukoco's (2010) measure of international experience is close to the notion of direct prior cross-cultural contact in the present study. Direct questions were used, that is, the number of years the respondents have been working internationally and the number of times they have visited other countries. However, Lee and Sukoco (2010, p. 978) had a caveat for their conclusion: "Having more international experience does not mean that expatriates will have higher levels of adjustment or cultural adjustment, unless they also have higher CQ [cultural intelligence]". This is because low CQ or unwillingness to face cross-cultural issues can adversely impact adjustment. In the present study, we did not investigate cultural intelligence, a variable that is often included in studies on expatriates. This factor is worth considering in future studies on international students because cultural intelligence can interact with prior cross-cultural exposure to affect adjustment.

Second, our study pinpointed the first three months as the unsettling cultural adjustment period for Asian international students, who later attained a higher level of cross-cultural adaptation than non-Asian students did. This is a new finding because past studies concentrated on the cultural similarity between home and host cultures and the ease of adjustment (Demir et al., 2025; Khedr, 2024; Ward et al., 2020) and overlooked the brief yet critical adjustment crisis period. By investigating cross-cultural adaptation by length of time abroad, we draw attention to the crisis phase for Asian international students in China. They expect their home culture to be replicated in China but find that people in China cannot understand the Chinese they speak, have different expressions, and normative

practices. This is the time when their assumption of cultural similarities is challenged. Fang et al. (2020) reported that students from China are inclined to overestimate the adequacy of their prior intercultural learning before going abroad. In the long term, Asian students may be better at establishing rapport with locals and integrating into the Chinese sociocultural environment. Ivanova et al.'s (2025) interviews with 15 international students in the United States revealed that friendships form more easily with students from the same country or region and that Asian students tend to befriend other Asians due to their similar cultural values. After Asian international students overcome these differences, they can overcome cultural similarities to cope with new challenges and make cross-cultural adjustments.

While the predeparture preparation of non-Asian international students may have alerted them to cultural differences, it cannot help them circumvent linguistic and cultural barriers after the initial fascination with the new environment in the "honeymoon" phase has worn off. López (2021) argues that the mere awareness of cross-cultural distinctions does not guarantee meaningful engagement in the social activities of locals. Consequently, non-Asian international students experience a crisis phase (Lysgaard, 1955) in the 3-6-month period before they transition to the adjusted phase at the two-year point. In the context of Lysgaard's (1955) stages of cross-cultural adaptation theory, international students with dissimilarity in home and host cultures experience a U-shaped trajectory characterized by a decline in well-being before eventual adaptation. In contrast, international students with similar home and host cultures experience a stepwise positive trajectory of adaptation. By differentiating between Asian and non-Asian students, our study makes a novel contribution to the field and extends theories of cultural distance and cross-cultural adaptation. A strength of this study is its detailed breakdown of adaptation trends over time, showing that non-Asian students initially adjust more easily but struggle later, whereas Asian students experience early challenges but adapt more effectively in the long run. This challenges the assumption that prior exposure always leads to smoother adaptation, and it provides a more distinct perspective on how international students navigate new cultural environments.

Implications

Given the increasing number of students choosing China as a study destination, the findings are highly relevant for universities seeking to better support their international student populations through effective predeparture and postarrival cross-cultural adaptation programs. Cross-cultural training is beneficial for international students' adaptation (Sit et al., 2017). Ward et al. (2020) suggested the use of video material, lectures, brochures, and travel guides for predeparture cross-cultural training techniques, but Fang et al. (2020) reported the effectiveness of training using general information that does not address the specific difficulties of sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Therefore, we recommend including specific information that international students seek predeparture, such as accommodation options, Wi-Fi and internet access, the cost

of living, and banking and transport systems. For international students from similar home and host cultures, predeparture training needs to debunk assumptions of homogeneity in Asian cultures, such as food preferences, fashion sense, and politeness norms. Virtual cultural immersion in predeparture programs is a feasible approach.

The findings also underscore the need for host universities to structure postarrival support services. There are more complex issues that crop up as international students become more entrenched into the academic, social and cultural life of the host country. Since the results show that psychological adaptation is an issue, postarrival programs should address how international students can fit into the social environment and enhance their ability to interact with locals and make things happen. Since sociocultural adaptation is also an issue, explicit teaching of values and cultural norms and appropriate ways to address aggressive people and unsatisfactory services will ease integration into the host culture. Alternatively, informal scaffolding through peer mentorship programs or targeted language training can help international students contact locals, who can guide them out of confusion and explain matters that cannot be found in internet searches.

Limitations

We acknowledge that the sample comprised far more Asian students than non-Asian students. It is worthwhile to employ stratified sampling to ensure a larger sample size of non-Asian students and students with extensive prior cross-cultural contact. This is because, in the present study, the level of prior cross-cultural contact is low, and the range is narrow, which can compromise the significance of correlations with cross-cultural adaptation. In addition, while the study investigated the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China with varying lengths of stay, it was a cross-sectional study. A longitudinal study would be better at tracking changes to analyze the cross-cultural adjustment process and its long-term impact. The same questionnaire can be given to international students at these junctures: 0 months upon arrival, 3 months, 6 months, 9 months, 12 months, 18 months, and 24 months. Adding a qualitative dimension via interviews will add unique perspectives on how prior cross-cultural exposure and predeparture cross-cultural training can alleviate culture shock and ease the transition. The interview data provide information on the quality or depth of prior exposure (e.g., having deep intercultural friendships rather than merely watching movies). This type of personal information is not available in the present quantitative study, where prior exposure is treated as a categorical variable (e.g., number of Chinese friends, number of visits to China). Cultural intelligence may overshadow the effect of prior exposure, as shown by research on expatriates (Jurásek & Wawrosz, 2024; Lee & Sukoco, 2010; Takeuchi & Chen, 2013). Therefore, the construct should be included in future studies on international students to obtain better insights into the antecedents and effects of cross-cultural adaptation.

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