



Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 10 (2026), pp. 247-268
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/wsdmvm58>



Navigating Cross-Cultural Experience of International Students in Traditional Chinese Medicine Universities: A Qualitative Exploration of Learning, Adaptation, and Institutional Support

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ABSTRACT

As China emerges as a leading destination for global higher education, its universities of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) have seen a surge in international enrollment. This study aims to explore the learning experience of international students within such culturally embedded, discipline-specific institutions. Using purposive sampling, 20 international undergraduate students participated in semistructured interviews, which were analyzed using conventional content analysis. Three themes emerged: academic experiences, social experiences, and institutional support systems. While students valued integrated TCM-Western training, clinical exposure, and cultural exchange, they faced challenges related to language barriers, discipline-specific curriculum demands, and institutional support. International students in TCM universities experience both enrichment and strain during their cross-cultural and

motivational adaptation process. Reforms emphasizing bilingual instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and enhanced student support could foster greater inclusion and engagement in China's specialized higher education context.

Keywords: International students, Learning experience, Cross-cultural adaptation, Institutional support, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) universities

Received: Oct 28, 2025 | **Revised:** Jan 14, 2026 | **Accepted:** Feb 10, 2026

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How to Cite (APA): Duo, E. N., Lei, P., Gao, Y., & Zhu, X. (2026). Navigating cross-cultural experience of international students in traditional Chinese medicine universities: A qualitative exploration of learning, adaptation, and institutional support. *Journal of International Students*, 16(10), 247-268. <https://doi.org/10.32674/wsdmvm58>

INTRODUCTION

An international student is an individual who crosses national borders for educational purposes (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009). With the globalization of higher education, research on the academic and cultural experiences of international students has expanded rapidly, emphasizing themes such as cultural adjustment, academic integration, and social support (Hong et al., 2025). In Europe and North America, international students have become a common group; similarly, in China, with the country's rapid development in recent years, an increasing number of international students are choosing to study there (Bai et al., 2023). According to statistics, the number of international students in China reached 495,000 in 2021, nearly double the number in 2010 (Li et al., 2023). After a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic, numbers rebounded following China's border reopening in 2023. However, China remains one of the main "receiving countries" for international students, ranking first in Asia and third in the world, second only to the USA and the UK (English & Zhang, 2020). This growth trend not only reflects the attractiveness of Chinese higher education but is also closely related to the support of national polices.

A significant aspect of China's landscape is the presence of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) institutions, which represent a unique context within health profession education. These institutions have evolved alongside the development of modern Chinese healthcare systems, creating a distinctive educational environment where ancient healing traditions intersect with

contemporary medical pedagogy (Keji & Hao, 2003; Lv, 2021). Established in the 1950s, these institutions now attract many international students seeking authentic TCM training through integrated curricula and clinical practice (Cui et al., 2024; Li et al., 2020).

Drawing on existing research on international students in mainstream Chinese universities, studies consistently show that international students encounter challenges such as language barriers, cultural adaptation difficulties, and unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. These challenges are likely to be further intensified in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) universities, where students must additionally engage with culturally embedded medical philosophies and complex disciplinary practices.

Despite this heightened complexity, international students' experiences in TCM-specific contexts remain largely underexplored. Recent empirical research has examined the multifaceted challenges faced by international students in Chinese higher education and their consequences for academic adaptation and well-being. A study (Zubair et al., 2025) conducted using a mixed-methods design across five Chinese universities identified language barriers as the strongest predictor of poor health outcomes, followed by social isolation, difficulties adjusting to China's educational system, and cultural distance. Similar studies (Ramadhan et al., 2024) highlighted context-specific stressors, including an unfamiliar examination system, inconsistent academic templates, cultural value conflicts, climatic adaptation, and linguistically mediated social barriers. Building on earlier studies (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Ngwira et al., 2024), these findings demonstrated that such challenges extend beyond academic performance to undermine psychological resilience, social integration, and overall quality of life.

To address these concerns, both studies emphasize the importance of targeted and culturally responsive institutional support. Zubair et al. (2025) advocate for strengthened language instruction, peer support networks, culturally competent counseling services, and inclusive campus policies that promote social integration. Ramadhan et al. (2024) further recommend standardized academic templates, transparent evaluation criteria, faculty training in cross-cultural pedagogy, improved accommodation conditions, and environmental orientation programs. Collectively, these interventions underscore the need for comprehensive institutional strategies that encompass the academic, social, psychological, and ecological dimensions of international students' experiences. Evidence from international contexts reinforces the global relevance of these challenges. Yin et al. (2024), in a systematic review of studies on Chinese international students in the United States, identified interconnected stressors, including acculturative stress, language-related academic difficulties, racial discrimination, and insufficient social support, all of which contributed to elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress. Notably, the review also identified stigma surrounding mental health services as a major barrier to help-seeking. Complementing this, Hong et al. (2025) reviewed over a decade of publications in the *Journal of International Students* and found that while themes such as cultural adjustment and mental health are well documented, research remains geographically skewed and lacks attention to underrepresented

populations and emerging challenges, such as post-pandemic transitions and virtual learning environments. Together, these studies underscore that international students worldwide face persistent, cross-contextual challenges requiring inclusive, culturally informed, and institutionally coordinated responses. However, while substantial research exists on international students in mainstream Chinese universities and global contexts, little is known about how international students navigate these dual cultural and medical learning demands or how institutional structures within TCM universities shape their academic and social integration.

Unlike general higher education institutions, TCM universities combine a culturally rooted medical philosophy with modern biomedical instruction, creating a hybrid learning environment that is academically intensive, linguistically demanding, and culturally mediated. This distinctive context requires students to acquire not only disciplinary knowledge but also culturally situated ways of thinking, communicating, and practicing medicine, conditions that amplify the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation. This gap highlights the need for context-sensitive qualitative inquiry into how international students navigate the academic, social, and institutional demands of TCM universities in China. Therefore, through semistructured interviews with international students, this study aims to explore the academic, social, and institutional experiences of international students at TCM universities in China, with a focus on cross-cultural and motivational adaptation, educational integration, and institutional support systems. Such analyses will contribute to broader conversations in international education regarding how specialized institutions can foster global competence, intercultural communication, and inclusion for diverse student populations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design using semistructured interviews to understand individuals' perceptions, emotions, and meanings derived from their experiences, making it suitable for investigating the essence of learning experiences from the participants' perspectives (Bliss, 2016), which aligns with the research objective of this study. While grounded in a phenomenological orientation, conventional content analysis was used to allow inductive theme development. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) were followed (Tong et al., 2007), ensuring transparency and methodological rigor in both the data collection and analysis processes.

Participants

This qualitative study was conducted at a university in Zhejiang Province, China, between January 2025 and February 2025. This study utilized purposive sampling to recruit 20 full-time international undergraduates from the university's

International Education College, ensuring variation in major, country, grade level, and gender. Eligible students volunteered, signed informed consent, and had sufficient English proficiency; those who withdrew before completion were excluded. To enhance credibility and reduce translation bias, the English-fluent interviewer conducted the interviews and applied member checking by allowing participants to review and confirm their transcripts. Sampling adequacy was guided by the concept of information power and ongoing comparison across subgroups (Malterud et al., 2016). Data saturation, defined as the point where no new codes, concepts, or variations emerged, was reached by the 18th interview, after which two further interviews were conducted to confirm saturation and subgroup representation (Saunders et al., 2018). The final sample provided stable thematic patterns across cultural backgrounds and academic years, consistent with criteria for phenomenological qualitative research. The profile of the study participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *A Profile of the Study Participants (n = 20)*

Pseudonyms	Gender	Major	Grade Level	Country
A	Male	Clinical Medicine	6 th year	Ghana
B	Male	Clinical Medicine	5 th year	Tanzania
C	Male	Nursing	6 th year	Uganda
D	Female	Clinical Medicine	2 nd year	Pakistan
E	Male	Nursing	2 nd year	Nigeria
F	Male	Pharmacy	2 nd year	Zimbabwe
G	Male	Clinical Medicine	5 th year	Botswana
H	Male	Nursing	4 th year	Ghana
I	Male	Clinical Medicine	3 rd year	Zambia
J	Male	Clinical medicine	4 th year	Nigeria
K	Female	Nursing	3 rd year	Yemen
L	Female	Nursing	4 th year	Zimbabwe
M	Female	Pharmacy	4 th year	Zimbabwe
N	Female	Nursing	3 rd year	Nigeria
O	Female	Clinical medicine	2 nd year	Tanzania
P	Male	Nursing	3 rd year	Rwanda
Q	Male	Nursing	3 rd year	Uganda
R	Male	Pharmacy	3 rd year	Sierra Leone
S	Male	Pharmacy	4 th year	Nigeria
T	Female	Nursing	4 th year	Liberia

Interview Outline

An interview outline was developed by considering literature reviews (Gao & Zhu, 2023) and expert consultation. The aim of the study is as follows: (1) Tell

me about your overall experience studying at a TCM university in China. (2) Can you share a specific experience you found particularly impressive or impactful during your study? (3) What key knowledge or skills did you gain while studying at a TCM university? (4) What do you think are the main benefits of studying at TCM universities in China compared to studying in your home country? (5) What do you think is the biggest gain from studying at a TCM university? What is the greatest difficulty, and why? (6) What factors do you think will promote your learning, and what factors will hinder your learning during your study at a TCM university, and why? (7) What suggestions do you have for improving the learning experience of international students at TCM universities in China?

Data Collection Methods

Semistructured interviews were conducted in quiet, distraction-free settings. Before each interview, participants were informed of the study’s purpose and confidentiality procedures, provided written consent, and assigned anonymized identifiers (A-T). The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, were audio-recorded with nonverbal cues documented, and were transcribed verbatim within 24 hours.

Data Analysis Methods

Data were analyzed using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), conducted concurrently with data collection. Two qualitatively trained researchers independently coded and categorized the transcripts and then compared and reconciled discrepancies through consensus with the corresponding author to ensure intercoder agreement. A sample coding table is provided to illustrate the analytic process (Table2). All authors reviewed the full coding matrix, but it is not presented here for brevity.

Table2. Sample coding table illustrating the conventional content analysis process

Transcript (Excerpt)	Codes	Sub-Theme	Theme
<i>Here at TCM university, we get the chance to learn and experience TCM disciplines side by side with Western medicine, which is more advantageous to us. (Respondent A)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exposure to both TCM & Western medicine • dual-approach broadens knowledge • academic advantage 	Integration of TCM and Western Medicine	Theme 1: Academic Experiences

<p><i>Hands-on training in clinics allows me to observe and participate in real patient care ... this has been a transformative experience. (Respondent G)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hands-on clinical experience • real patient care • professional identity growth 	<p>Practical & Hands-On Training</p>	<p>Theme 1: Academic Experiences</p>
<p><i>One impressive experience was Culture Day ... interacting with people from different countries helped me learn about other cultures. (Respondent H)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cultural exchange • learning diverse cultures • building social networks 	<p>Cultural Exposure & Exchange</p>	<p>Theme 2: Social Experiences</p>
<p><i>Some teachers are unable to communicate correctly because of limited English skills ... this causes misunderstanding. (Respondent C)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teachers' limited English • communication barriers • teaching challenges 	<p>English Proficiency Issues</p>	<p>Theme 3: Support Systems</p>

Note: Codes shown in **bold** highlight the analytical links to the corresponding subthemes presented in the Results section.

Quality Control Methods

The primary researcher had comprehensive qualitative research training and strong interviewing skills and was supervised by an experienced scholar in qualitative methods. After each interview, the researchers engaged in prompt reflexive review to reduce bias and refine the interview guide as needed.

Ethical Consideration

Ethics approval was obtained from the Medical Ethics Committee of Zhejiang Chinese Medical University (code: 20241108-5). The authors affirm that written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews. All procedures were carried out in full compliance with the relevant ethical guidelines and regulatory standards. Clinical trial number: not applicable.

RESULTS

Twenty international undergraduate students (7 females, 13 males) from a TCM university in China were interviewed. Participants were majoring in nursing (n=9), clinical medicine (n=7), and pharmacy (n=4), and all had been studying at the university for more than one year. Thematic analysis identified three overarching themes with six subthemes capturing both positive and negative aspects of their experiences. These themes described students' academic experiences, social experiences, and the support systems and resources available to them, outlining key challenges and opportunities within this educational context.

Theme 1: Academic Experiences

Positive Experience

Integration of TCM and Western Medicine

International students reported highly positive academic experiences at TCM universities in China, particularly valuing the opportunity to study traditional Chinese medicine alongside Western medicine. They described this dual training as enriching, expanding their medical knowledge, and offering a more holistic understanding of healthcare. Many regarded the integrated curriculum as a distinctive advantage of studying at TCM universities.

Respondent A: Here at TCM university, we get the chance to learn and experience TCM disciplines alone, side by side with Western medicine or the prospective program we are studying here, which is more advantageous to us than for those who are not at TCM university, whereby we have some courses being collaborated with our course to help us gain more additional knowledge in TCM.

Practical and Hands-on Training

Participants described practical experiences, such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, and direct patient interactions, as central to their professional development. Many emphasized that hands-on clinical exposure allowed them to apply theoretical knowledge and better understand medical practices in real-world settings.

Respondent G: I have been impressed by hands-on training in clinics and hospitals, which allows me to observe and participate in real patient care and see what traditional nurses or doctors are doing. At the hospital, I had the opportunity to interact with and learn from experienced health practitioners, which has been a transformative experience for me, providing valuable insights into my professional career.

Clinical Exposure and Learning Environment

International students described the university environment as peaceful, welcoming, and supportive of learning. Some noted that interactions with teachers and peers exposed them to Chinese culture and medical traditions. The availability of infrastructure such as libraries, laboratories, and learning facilities was also viewed positively.

Respondent B: Based on my perspective, the university environment and culture are nice, and even the teachers are trying their best to make us understand their own culture and the overall culture of China, especially in the aspect of their traditional Chinese medicine.

Respondent I: I can say there are a lot of good infrastructures, labs, and access to other learning facilities and resources here at TCM university compared to medical universities in my Country.

Personal and Professional Growth

Studying at TCM universities was perceived as a transformative experience that contributed to personal development. Participants reported improvements in communication skills, confidence, time management, and adaptability, which they associated with academic activities and extracurricular engagement.

Respondent N: The particular experience I found very impressive is the fact that TCM universities in China allow international students to express their talents and display their cultures by organizing events like the gala, speech competition, etc. Especially the speech competition of which I participated in a year ago, it was so amazing and educative whereby you select your medical related topic and discuss it. This specific experience improved my communication skills, built my confidence, provided cultural exchange opportunities, and developed some levels of leadership abilities within me.

Respondent B: The key knowledge and skills I gained is punctuality. Teachers at TCM universities are very good in this aspect of medical care, and this is one of the key skills students can learn while studying at TCM universities. Such skills and knowledge prepared me in my career to carefully manage some health conditions.

Language acquisition

Learning Chinese was identified as an important academic benefit. Participants reported that Chinese language courses supported daily communication, academic learning, and clinical practice.

Respondent I: For me, the teachers are doing a good job by allowing us to do HSK, a Chinese language course.”

Respondent E: Familiarizing myself with the Chinese language and having good communication skills to interact with my friends will promote my learning here at TCM university because having poor communication skills or not being able to speak or understand the Chinese language very well, such an aspect will hinder my learning experience.

Career prospects and global recognition

Some participants viewed their degree from a TCM university as internationally valuable and believed it would enhance future employment opportunities, particularly when combined with medical knowledge from their home countries.

Respondent B: I believe that studying at TCM universities in China and combining the knowledge gained from my home country with that of the traditional Chinese medicine curriculum will expand my knowledge, giving me the advantage of working efficiently within my country's healthcare setting.

Negative Experience

Language Barriers

Language barriers emerged as a pervasive challenge affecting multiple aspects of academic learning. Some participants reported difficulties understanding lectures, communicating with instructors, and engaging in clinical practice due to limited Chinese proficiency and, in some cases, limited English proficiency among faculty.

Respondent C: I can say, the difficulty is that some teachers are unable to communicate correctly, which causes problems in the way they want to give some information to us as international students because of their limited English language speaking skills. This is a difficulty not only for me but also for other international students because teachers are misunderstood or they are not able to teach as deeply as expected of them.

Respondent I: The difficulty is the language barrier in communicating with clinical supervisors at the hospitals, although you might know a bit of Chinese, but is not at the level of effective communication to discuss some clinical issues with Chinese nurses and physicians.

Curriculum and Workload Issues

Several participants reported concerns about curriculum balance, particularly during the early years of their study. They felt that excessive emphasis on Chinese language courses limited the time available for core medical subjects and increased academic pressure.

Respondent P: Another thing I have experienced during my first year is the aspect of the university focusing more on learning the Chinese language, of which we had more Chinese classes than our medical course classes. With this, I suggest that the university review the curriculum to ensure a better balance between Chinese language courses and medical subjects, ensuring that international students do not feel overwhelmed by language studies.

Cultural and Educational Adaptation

Participants described challenges adapting to unfamiliar teaching styles and academic expectations. Differences between educational systems in China and their home countries affected classroom engagement and learning approaches, particularly during the initial period of study.

Respondent G: Withstanding the greatest difficulties are cultural differences and adjusting to a new education system. These challenges made communication and understanding the complex concepts difficult for me initially, but now, due to the length of time spent here at TCM university, I have gained a lot of knowledge about TCM and the Chinese culture.

Logistical, Environmental Stressors, and Academic Engagement

Additionally, there are mentions of external challenges such as financial stress from fees and difficulties in utilizing university resources. Some students feel demotivated or lack passion, which hinders their learning. Participants in this study desired more evaluations, feedback mechanisms, and opportunities for interaction between local and foreign students (Respondent M).

Theme 2: Social Experiences

Positive Experience

Cultural Exposure and Exchange

Most participants described social activities and campus events as important opportunities for cultural exchange. Events such as cultural festivals, galas, and competitions allowed students to interact with peers from different backgrounds and learn about diverse cultures.

Respondent H: One impressive experience was what we called Culture Day, whereby you can interact with different cultures and people from different countries. It is a way of learning about each other's cultures, how they believe things, preparing their dishes, where you can even taste their food, and knowing how they dress in their regions.

University-supported Social Integration Activities and Personal Growth

Some participants mentioned the role of social experiences at TCM universities in improving communication skills, confidence, and understanding of different perspectives. The university's efforts in organizing social activities and integrating international students were appreciated, contributing to a conducive learning and social environment.

Respondent L: I had an excellent first year; the school organized a trip for us to visit a museum where I began to experience the good culture of the Chinese people.

Respondent D: Talking about what impressed me more was the activities at TCM university. I think it is better to engage international students more in extracurricular activities, such as speech competitions, because we learn more while participating and interacting directly with other students and the teacher than studying all the time.

Negative Experience

Cultural Shock and Adaptation Difficulties

Participants described experiencing culture shock during their early period in China. Challenges included adapting to local customs, dietary differences, accommodation arrangements, and climate. These factors sometimes affect emotional well-being and social adjustment.

Respondent T: At first, I found it difficult to balance academic learning and adjusting to life because of the culture shock and sharing or living in rooms with people from different backgrounds, which sometimes affected my mental health, especially when there was a misunderstanding.

Language barriers previously described in academic contexts were also reported to limit social interaction with local students, contributing to feelings of isolation.

Theme 3: Support Systems

Positive Experience

Supportive Academic Environment

Participants described the university as providing a generally supportive environment. Access to learning resources such as libraries, laboratories, and technology was viewed as helpful for academic success.

Respondent F: Describing the university environment, I can say it is very welcoming and peaceful. I was well welcomed by the TCM university teaching staff and other local students. The university provides us with more study materials, access to the library, science lab, hands-on practice, and language support; such aspects promote our learning.

Cultural Integration and Teacher Support

Some participants reported that teachers were approachable and willing to assist international students academically and socially, despite communication challenges.

Respondent N: TCM university provides us with good international teachers who are approachable and willing to guide students throughout their studies.

Scholarship Opportunities

Scholarship opportunities were described as an important form of support that reduced financial stress and allowed students to focus on their studies.

Respondent D: The biggest gain is that it was my wish to come and study in another country because the universities in my country do not give funds or full scholarships to students, but studying at TCM university in China allows you to study hard and benefit from the university's scholarships.

Negative Experience

English Language Proficiency Issues and Administrative Rigidity

Participants reported that limited English-language support in academic and administrative services created frustration. Communication difficulties with administrative staff and rigid institutional policies were perceived as barriers to effective support.

Respondent C: I can say, the difficulty is that some teachers are unable to communicate correctly, which causes problems in the way they want to give some information to us as international students because of their limited English language speaking skills. This is a difficulty not only for me but also for other international students because teachers are misunderstood or they are not able to teach more deeply than expected of them.

Academic stress and curriculum issues

Some participants described heavy workloads and scheduling challenges, particularly when clinical practice and coursework occurred on the same day. These issues contributed to fatigue and difficulty concentrating.

Respondent L: Sometimes we have so many courses to complete in one semester with limited time allocated, so we experience difficulty in understanding some courses because someday we have to visit the hospital and then return for evening class which is very difficult to do but if the school schedules clinical practice for a day at the hospital and then the following day for a class that will be okay.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted Young Yun Kim's (1988) cross-cultural adaptation theory as its core theoretical basis (Kim, 2012). While this theory explains how international students experience stress, adjustment, and long-term intercultural growth (see Figure 1), it pays less attention to the internal motivational process that shapes students' engagement during adaptation. To deepen discipline-specific analysis, this study integrated Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), which centers on learners' motivational drivers and psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness but does not fully account for the cultural and institutional pressures unique to cross-cultural environments.

Bringing the two frameworks together enables a more comprehensive interpretation of international students' experiences in TCM universities: Kim's model explains the external cultural, linguistic, and systemic challenges students encounter, while SDT clarifies how institutional structures and classroom practices either frustrate or support students' motivational needs. This theoretical integration is particularly relevant in TCM universities, where adaptation requires navigating both cultural-medical knowledge systems and unfamiliar pedagogical norms. By synthesizing these theories, this study demonstrates how cultural stressors and motivational dynamics interact to shape academic persistence, identity information, and overall adjustment, an interaction largely overlooked in prior research on international students in China.

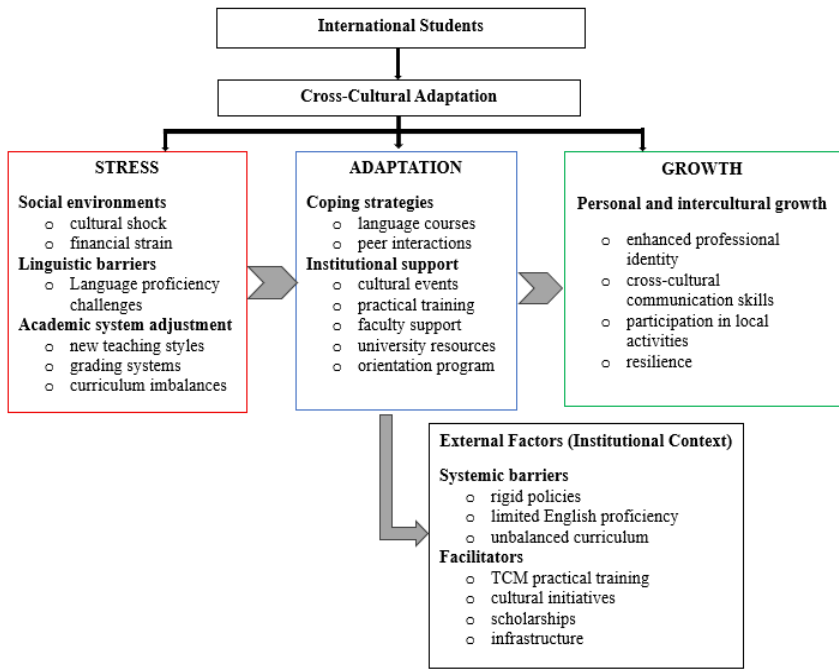


Figure 1. Young Yun Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

DISCUSSION

This study provides insights into the learning experiences of international students at TCM universities in China, situating their narratives within the broader context of global higher education. By drawing on cross-cultural adaptation and self-determination theory, the findings illuminate how international students navigate linguistic, cultural, and institutional challenges while developing resilience, professional identity, and intercultural competence.

Academic Experiences

Analysis of Positive Experience

International students described their academic experiences at TCM universities as shaped by the integration of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and Western medical training, which they perceived as professionally enriching. While prior studies conceptualize TCM-Western integration primarily as a clinical model (Wang & Zhang, 2017), participants in this study highlighted its educational value in broadening cross-cultural medical perspectives. The culturally embedded learning environment, combined with language instruction

and cultural exchange opportunities, supported academic growth, adaptability, and critical thinking, suggesting that discipline-specific cultural integration is more effective than general cultural exposure (El-Asri & Karfa, 2024). Participants also emphasized the global recognition of TCM degrees and hands-on clinical training as key contributors to professional identity formation and future career opportunities, reinforcing evidence that practical experience is central to medical education outcomes (Fan et al., 2020; Sutoi et al., 2025).

Analysis of Negative Experience

The interview data indicate that language barriers represent a primary challenge to international students' academic engagement at TCM universities, consistent with previous research on acculturative stress in international education contexts (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Within TCM institutions, however, language proficiency extends beyond everyday communication and is integral to understanding culturally embedded medical knowledge, thereby intensifying academic demands. Participants also reported curriculum imbalance, particularly during the early stages of study, when extensive Chinese-language coursework was perceived to limit time for core medical subjects. Similar concerns regarding curriculum design and academic adaptation have been documented in previous studies (Ng & Cheung, 2024).

These challenges are closely linked to the epistemological foundations of TCM education, where core theories and clinical knowledge are traditionally articulated through classical Chinese concepts and terminology, requiring sustained engagement with discipline-specific language. Differences in pedagogical approaches between Eastern and Western educational systems further complicated students' academic adjustment, aligning with cross-cultural education literature (Marginson, 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Financial pressures and limited academic feedback mechanisms were also reported as contributing factors. Collectively, these findings highlight the need for structured and scaffolded medical Chinese-language support, more balanced curriculum design, and clearer academic feedback systems that are responsive to the linguistic and disciplinary realities of TCM universities and the needs of international students.

Social Experiences

Analysis of Positive Experience

Analysis of participant accounts indicates that cultural exchange activities, inclusive events, and a safe campus environment supported social integration at TCM universities. Participants reported that festivals, museum visits, and daily interactions enhanced cross-cultural understanding, communication skills, and a sense of belonging. These findings align with previous research, which emphasizes that interactive, exchange-oriented university activities strengthen social networks and facilitate cross-cultural adaptation (El-Asri & Karfa, 2024).

Analysis of Negative Experience

International students reported negative social experiences related to cultural shock, language barriers, dietary and financial constraints, accommodation issues, and difficulties balancing academic and social life. Context-specific challenges, including adapting to local norms, climate, and communication platforms, further intensified stress and isolation. As mentioned in previous studies (Mulyadi et al., 2024; Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018; Zhang & Ting, 2025), these findings demonstrate how social adjustment in China is closely shaped by institutional conditions, thereby underscoring the need for more culturally responsive teaching, peer mentorship programs, and more flexible, inclusive university policies.

Support Systems

Analysis of Positive Experience

Participants benefited from a robust support system that integrated physical infrastructure, academic support, and social connections. Well-equipped laboratories, comprehensive libraries, and easily accessible educational resources provided a solid foundation for learning and helped students manage adaptation-related academic challenges, reflecting evidence that institutional support and resources enhance academic adaptation and performance among international students (Wu et al., 2015). Together, the findings underscore that effective support systems in TCM universities are multidimensional, integrating material resources, social relationships, and culturally embedded practices to foster students' academic engagement and sense of belonging.

Analysis of Negative Experience

Consistent with earlier research (Kuo, 2011), international students at TCM universities frequently reported language barriers in both academic and administrative interactions as a major source of frustration. These difficulties were compounded by rigid institutional procedures and limited English-language support, particularly in communication with teaching staff and administrative offices. While institutional flexibility has been identified as a key factor in reducing such challenges (Tavares, 2021), this study highlights additional discipline-specific constraints inherent to TCM universities. When viewed within the broader linguistic and institutional context of Chinese higher education, these administrative and communication challenges highlight structural limitations in full English-medium delivery rather than deficiencies in institutional commitment, pointing out the need for systemic responses, including targeted medical Chinese-language programs, bilingual academic and administrative support, and professional development initiatives that enhance faculty capacity for cross-cultural pedagogy.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that TCM universities create a distinctive cultural-medical learning environment shaped by language-intensive instruction, culturally embedded medical knowledge, and clinical training. International students' adaptation processes align with Kim's (2012) cross-cultural adaptation theory, while their motivation and professional identity development reflect key elements of self-determination theory (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). These insights underscore the need for institutional policies that strengthen language accessibility, balance curricula, and enhance communication to better support international students' academic adaptation and well-being within specialized, discipline-specific institutions such as TCM universities.

Study Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample size and qualitative design, which may restrict generalizability. Future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches across multiple TCM universities and include larger samples to capture more diverse perspectives. Longitudinal studies examining graduates' career trajectories and the application of TCM knowledge in their home countries would further enhance the understanding of the long-term impact of TCM universities.

CONCLUSION

Our study highlights the multifaceted learning experiences of international students at TCM universities in China, where culturally embedded medical philosophy, integrated TCM-Western medical training, and clinical exposure create a distinctive educational context. Participants benefited academically and professionally from this integrated model and related cultural immersion but also faced challenges linked to language barriers, curriculum imbalance, and administrative rigidity. Social activities fostered intercultural engagement, yet culture shock, dietary restrictions, and financial stress revealed the ongoing complexity of cross-cultural adjustment. Institutional support systems, especially scholarships and infrastructure, were valued, although limitations in teacher-student communication, English-language mediation, and academic feedback reduced their effectiveness. By foregrounding discipline-specific adaptation in a culturally embedded medical education setting, this study moves beyond generalized accounts of international education in China. The findings underscore the need for clearer institutional policies, including structured medical Chinese-language programs, more balanced curricula, multilingual academic advice, and faculty development in culturally responsive pedagogy. Such reforms should remain sensitive to the linguistic realities of Chinese higher education and the epistemological foundations of TCM so that internationalization efforts complement rather than compromise disciplinary integrity. Enhancing administrative transparency and feedback systems can further support international students' motivation, retention, and long-term academic and professional success at TCM universities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We want to express our sincere gratitude to the international students who generously took the time to participate in this study. In preparing this manuscript, artificial intelligence (AI) tools were utilized to assist with language editing and clarity in certain sections, following extensive human review and revision. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and academic integrity guidelines. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and take full responsibility for its content.

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