

**Chinese Students in Barcelona (Spain).
Culture Shock and Adaptation Strategies**

**Studenti cinesi a Barcellona (Spagna).
Shock culturale e strategie di adattamento**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the case of culture shock and adaptation among Chinese students in Barcelona. This is an empirical study conducted from a multicultural context with a research approach both qualitative and quantitative by randomly selecting a sample of 109 study participants, all Chinese students at the University of Barcelona. Information was collected through social software (WeChat/WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram), email and/or face to face to identify forms of cultural shock and to list and evaluate possible intercultural adaptation strategies and the most appropriate ones. This article utilises a part of the target sample and refers only to short period of time. The results open up a number of reflections with positive implications for international students who find it difficult to adapt to different cultures from the moment they arrive in Spain. The results also suggest new ideas with respect to student's form of participation and collaboration.

Keywords: Culture shock, Intercultural Adaptation, Chinese students, Intercultural Education, empirical study.

Sommario

Lo scopo del presente studio è quello di esplorare il fenomeno dello shock culturale e dell'adattamento tra gli studenti cinesi a Barcellona. Si tratta di uno studio empirico condotto in un contesto multiculturale attraverso un approccio di ricerca sia qualitativo sia quantitativo, selezionando in modo casuale un campione di 109 partecipanti allo studio, tutti studenti cinesi all'università di Barcellona. Le informazioni sono state raccolte attraverso il software sociale WeChat/WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, e-mail e/o relazioni personali per identificare le forme di shock culturale e per comprendere e valutare le possibili strategie di adattamento interculturale e quelle considerate più appropriate. Questo articolo si riferisce ad un breve periodo e solo ad una parte del campione di riferimento. I risultati aprono una serie di riflessioni con implicazioni positive per gli studenti internazionali che si trovano ad avere difficoltà ad adattarsi a culture diverse dal momento del loro arrivo in Spagna. I risultati suggeriscono, inoltre, nuove idee rispetto alle forme di partecipazione e di collaborazione degli studenti.

Parole chiave: Shock culturale, adattamento interculturale, studenti cinesi, educazione interculturale, studio empirico.

Introduction

In our globalised world, cultural exchanges between countries have become more and more frequent. Research on issues related to intercultural education and intercultural communication has certainly been arousing interest among researchers and practitioners in recent years. The experience of many Chinese students studying and living in Spain, and the inevitable culture and values shock they experienced, awakened the author's interest in researching the intercultural issues associated with it. According to data from the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration (2021), until 30 June 2021, 6,028 Chinese students are living in various regions of Spain with permission to stay for study, although this figure is 9,147, 9,533 and 11,124 for the same period in 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively, it is decreasing rapidly after the pandemic. Chinese students have

become the largest group of foreign students in Spain.

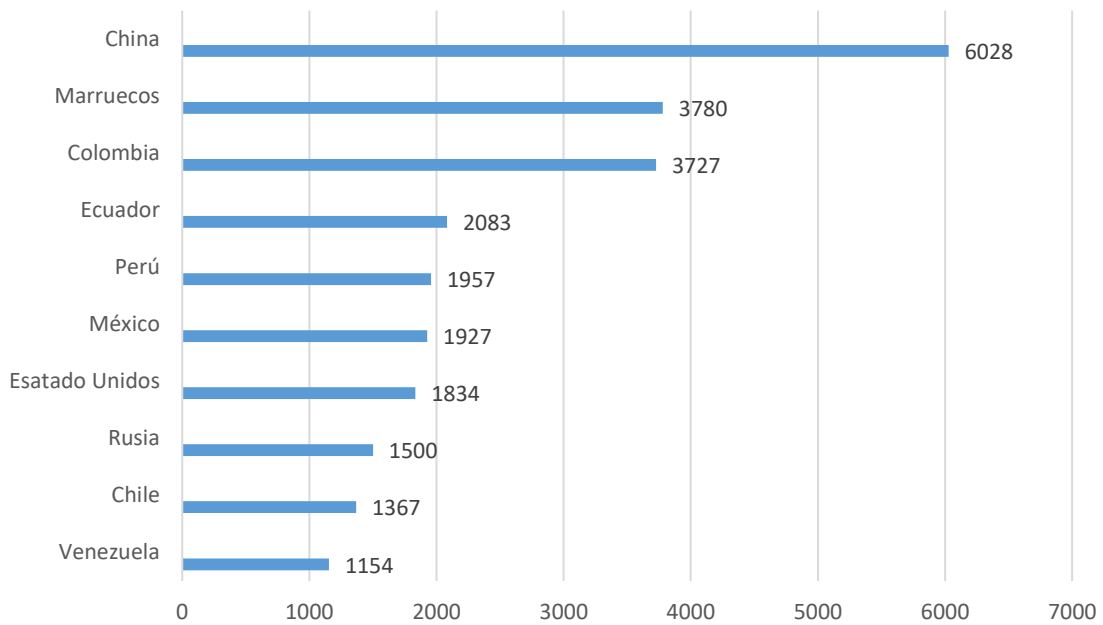


Fig. 1: Foreigners with authorisation to stay for study purposes by nationality (Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, 2021).

However, not all Chinese students can complete their studies, acquire knowledge and understand Spanish culture. According to Giménez (2002), culture is «the social organisation of meanings internalised by subjects and social groups, and embodied in symbolic forms, all in historically specific and socially structured contexts». Therefore, it can be concluded that culture is often related to the characteristics of a society. When a Chinese student from another society enters a new cultural environment, linguistic, identity and cultural conflicts are the most frequent problems they encounter in their daily life. Above all, we are in the era of globalisation and culture itself is affected by globalisation. As Larraín says (2006), it must be understood that cultural globalisation is not a teleological phenomenon, that is, it is not a process that leads inexorably to an end, which would be the culturally integrated universal human community, but it is a contingent and dialectical process that moves forward engendering contradictory dynamics. At the same time as it universalises some aspects of Western societies, it encourages the intensification of differences. This results in many students not achieving the desired learning outcomes and poses a challenge for Spanish teachers in the intercultural classroom. At the same time, in Llevot and Bernad's study (2019), we can see that in the case of Catalonia, for example, although it has one of the largest immigrant populations in Spain, proposals for intercultural education and the development of cultural diversity have been taken seriously, their ethnographic study shows that there is still a mismatch between theory and implementation. Many actions to solve the problem of cultural differences are superficial and their implementation depends on the number of foreign or immigrant pupils in the school.

Although they are based on different disciplinary traditions and to some extent on different meta-theoretical traditions, the author will attempt to explore the reasons for this dilemma of Chinese students through a study of theoretical contributions from sociology, social psychology, education and applied linguistics, to make connections between related work from different disciplines, conducting empirical research and meta-analysis, and pointing to some practical implications and areas for future academic research (Noels,

Yashima and Zhang, 2020, p. 52-66). The final findings will be presented in the form of a PhD thesis, concluding on: what factors affect learning outcomes in a country with a different culture from their own? How should they overcome their differences and integrate into local life? What is the culture shock they feel in the education system and the host society? In the current phase, the author will focus on observing Chinese students in Barcelona, focusing on identifying the culture shock they encounter, discussing and studying the adaptation strategies they adopt, to offer solutions and provide a model for subsequent research.

1. Literature Review

The term culture shock was first introduced by Oberg (1960), who first defined culture shock as «anxiety resulting from the loss of all familiar signs and symbols of social interaction» (p. 177). Since then, researchers have enriched the concept of culture shock in various ways. Bennett (1977) expanded the meaning of culture shock as a transition shock that occurs when an individual is unable to communicate effectively with an unfamiliar cultural environment. Zaharna (1989) added the concept of self-shock to the discussion of culture shock, emphasizing the «double-binding challenge of identity» (p. 501).

Intercultural shock is the result of cultural diversity. Culture shock is the emotional and intellectual experience of coming into contact with what is foreign to us. This translates into emotions such as incomprehension, fear and surprise. At this point, Margalit Cohen-Emerique recommends that culture shock should be processed systematically so that there can still be an open mind in this context. Cohen describes three steps that can help to overcome culture shock: Decentration, Entering into the other person's reference system and Negotiation (Cohen-Emerique, 1999, pp. 301-315). This method became the way to solve the problem of culture shock. These three processes – presented here in order by didactic logic – in reality, intertwine or are separated from one another, later on, only to meet up again.

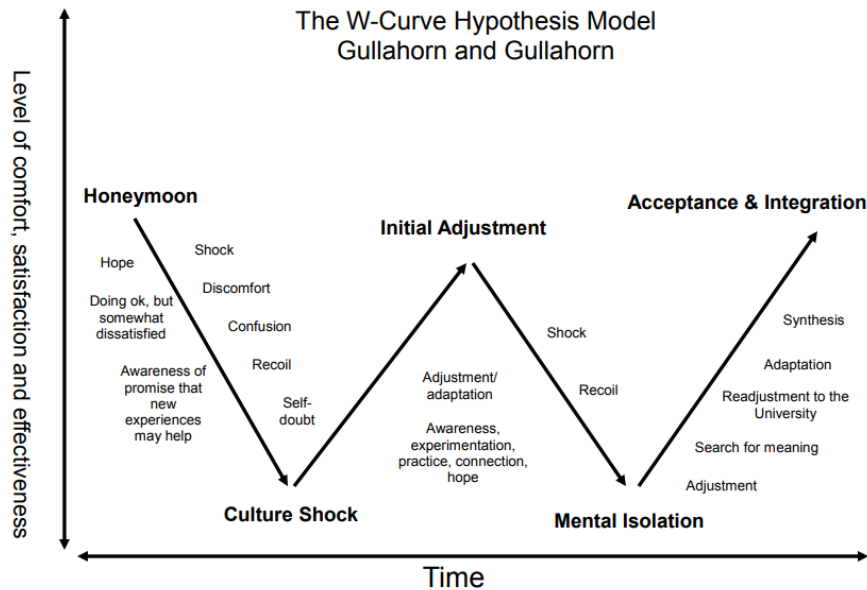
As for the culture shock encountered by the group of Chinese students in the Spanish educational system, we can see that Zabalegui and Crespo, in their work aim to show the cultural differences that occur in the Spanish teaching classroom of different universities in China. The research focuses on the students' assessment of the communicative approach, based on a mixed design of qualitative and quantitative data (Zabalegui and Crespo, 2021, pp. 177-216).

Kim (2001) defines the term cross-cultural adaptation as «a complex, dynamic, and evolutionary process, an individual undergoes vis-à-vis a new and unfamiliar environment – a process that 'moves with a structure of multidimensional and multifaceted forces operating simultaneously and interactively» (pp. xii).

Intercultural adaptation theory refers to the study of the psychological reactions and changes that occur in the subject's adaptation to a foreign culture from the perspective of the individual. The process of adaptation to an unfamiliar culture unfolds through the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic, a process that is deeply rooted in the natural human tendency to achieve internal equilibrium in the face of adverse environmental conditions. The process of adaptation generally begins with the psychological and physiological experiences of dislocation and duress commonly known as culture shock symptoms. Over time, through continued new cultural learning activities, most people can achieve increasing levels of functional and psychological efficacy in the face of the host environment (Kim, 2001).

Gullahorn and Gullahorn, in 1963, summarised and proposed a w-curve model of

cross-cultural adaptation based on the process of foreign students' adaptation to foreign cultures. This model reflects a basic pattern that most people show when exposed to a



foreign culture.

Fig. 2: w-curve model of cross-cultural adaptation (Glaser, Strauss and Strutzel, 1967).

2. Materials and Methods

Design

According to Ramírez-Montoya and Lugo-Ocando (2020), the use of mixed methods for research in the field of social sciences and education is becoming increasingly common, as they focus on key aspects such as the human factor, the educational process, and processes that combine quantitative and qualitative strategies. Qualitative methods can be used to understand the meaning of findings produced by quantitative methods. Using quantitative methods, it is possible to give precise and testable expression to qualitative ideas. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection is often referred to as mixed methods research (Diriwächter and Valsiner, 2006). This research method, as Cohen, Manion and Morrison say in 2000, is «an attempt to map, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one point of view», can increase the credibility and validity of the results (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p. 112).

As we have just mentioned, in the first phase we will carry out a qualitative analysis, based on in-depth interviews with 14 Chinese students who are studying in universities of Barcelona, then complement them with a focus group. The researcher invited six students from the University of Barcelona to form focus groups and provide valuable advice on how to adapt to intercultural shock and intercultural education, which has been included in the results and discussion section of this paper. In the second phase, we will carry out quantitative research, applying questionnaires to Chinese and native students of the Barcelona public universities selected for the sample. We would also like to point out that we will observe the ethical and deontological codes of research in all phases of this research.

On the other hand, we would like to emphasise that, in researching this topic, it is inevitable that we will have to take into account the contributions of multiple disciplines; we will conduct our research from a multidisciplinary perspective. For example, when it comes to interpersonal communication, words and facts pertain to anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc. Intercultural research will also include intercultural communication and sociolinguistics. In other words, our purpose cannot be achieved by one discipline alone, so we will inevitably have to draw on research results from different disciplines, from different intersecting perspectives, to help us complete the research.

Participants

In order to know the representativeness of the sample, we chose Chinese students between 20 and 29 years old, who can be considered at Bachelor's or Master's level, and whose time in Barcelona does not exceed one year. According to statistics from the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, until June 2021, there are a total of 5180 Chinese students between 20 and 29 years old in Spain. By provinces, 1239 of them are now studying in Barcelona, one of the provinces with the highest number of Chinese students. Study participants will be drawn from these identities, with 109 questionnaires. We use random sampling to select samples, as Zenaida says, it is the one that is carried out taking into account that all individuals in the population have the same probability of being chosen in the sample. With this type of sampling, the samples are representative, it is possible to know the errors made and inferences can be made. Random sampling is the one we are most interested in and will use whenever we can (Zenaida, 2012, p. 128).

The selection of the research objects will be done with the help of the Chinese Students' Union, and the questionnaires will be randomly distributed through social networks to comply with universality and randomness.

In the qualitative interviews of the first phase, (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984) neither the number nor the type of informants is known in advance. As the research progresses, new cases are added, illustrating a different reality or new realities that the researcher was initially unaware of until the full range is completed or until the researcher finds no more diversity. This form of sampling is called theoretical sampling (Glaser, Strauss and Strutzel, 1967, p. 364). The selection of subjects ends when the researcher considers that there is nothing new in what the participants say, i.e. when saturation has been reached. The six members of the focus group, all from the University of Barcelona, were in the first year of their master's degree, had not been in Spain for more than one year and had volunteered to participate in the research discussions

Data collection process

- First phase:
1. Design of the model.
 2. Random interview.
 3. Analysis of the interview records.
 4. Conducting a focus group and recording the speeches.
 5. Analysis of focus group records.
 6. Writing of the report.

Semi-structured interviews: in the second phase of in-depth interviews, we will invite several Chinese and local students to participate in the interviews. The interview process is personalised and has the potential to yield additional information. We will take the form of offline interviews and video interviews.

Focus groups: According to Sampieri, Collado and Lucio (2010), we will form focus groups of 6 people. The groups aim to answer relevant questions or obtain more information through the interaction of the group members in an informal setting.

- Second phase:
1. Validity testing of the questionnaires.
 2. Pilot testing of questionnaires.
 3. Modification of the results based on pilot testing.
 4. Application of questionnaires.
 5. Analysis of the results of the questionnaires.

Questionnaire: to find out about the Chinese students’ culture shock experience at the University of Barcelona and how they adapt, their attitudes towards the intercultural environment. The questionnaires will be distributed offline and on social networks using Whatsapp and Wechat. The distribution of the social network questionnaires was done with the help of the Chinese Students’ Association in the Barcelona area, through WeChat and the Whatsapp group, which distributed the question links and invited responses. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed and 109 were returned.

3. Result and discussion

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very strong, even difficult to adapt	4	3.7	3.7	3.7
Obviously	36	33.0	33.0	36.7
Valid Yes, but it doesn't affect my studies or life much	54	49.5	49.5	86.2
Not obvious, i can hardly feel it	10	9.2	9.2	95.4
I don't feel any culture shock	5	4.6	4.6	100.0
Total	109	100.0	100.0	

Tab. 1: The Proportion of intercultural shock.

As shown in Tab. 1, Chinese students in Barcelona were categorised into five levels of perception of culture shock. 109 questionnaires were returned and it can be seen that the majority of them said that they had experienced culture shock, although very few of them were *difficult to accept*. Nearly 50% of these students felt that they could feel the culture shock but that it would have a limited impact on their studies and lives.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
First month	58	49.2	49.2	49.2
Month 1 to 3	36	30.5	30.5	79.7
Valid Month 3 to 6	9	7.6	7.6	87.3
Month 6 to 12	7	5.9	5.9	93.2
Not felt yet	8	6.8	6.8	100.0
Total	118	100.0	100.0	

Tab. 2: Interculture shock time.

When it came to the question of when the culture shock was most noticeable after arriving in Barcelona (Tab. 2), 118 responses were collected, like multiple choice as possible. 49.2% of the sample indicated that they felt the culture shock during the first month of their arrival in a new environment. It is also clear from the data that the

probability of this impact decreases over time, with the percentage dropping to 5.9% six months after the arrival of Chinese students in Barcelona.

The form of effects of the intercultural shock and possible Intercultural Adaptation Strategies

In order to answer the research/case question, This study investigated the forms of intercultural shock experienced and how they overcame this shock by the different study participants through a sample interview. They were asked about the occasions when they felt unpleasant upon arrival in Barcelona, a feeling that could be interpreted as culture shock, and in what way they will choose to overcome this unpleasantness, or with some help. After receiving several answers until no new ones emerged, the discussion in the six-person focus group that followed explored the possible forms of intercultural shock in these contexts in concrete terms, as described below:

Food culture shock: local food styles are very different from Chinese food and can be difficult to adapt to. Later meal times for local people.

Daily life shock: unfamiliarity with the transport system, unfamiliarity with local travel patterns, shopping, possible differences in treatment of foreigners when renting an apartment, differences in working hours, etc.

School shock: the way local teachers teach in the classroom, the way you get along with your classmates, and the way the curriculum is set up is different from the way it was in China.

Interpersonal impact: accents, language habits, communication styles of locals, the distance between people, etc.

Religious shock: beliefs and religious and cultural differences.

The researchers included five common intercultural shock occasions in the questionnaire, with a total of 107 questionnaires returned. The results show that interpersonal communication, study-related and food culture are the three areas that have the greatest impact on Chinese students. The highest percentage of interpersonal communication problems was 62.39%.

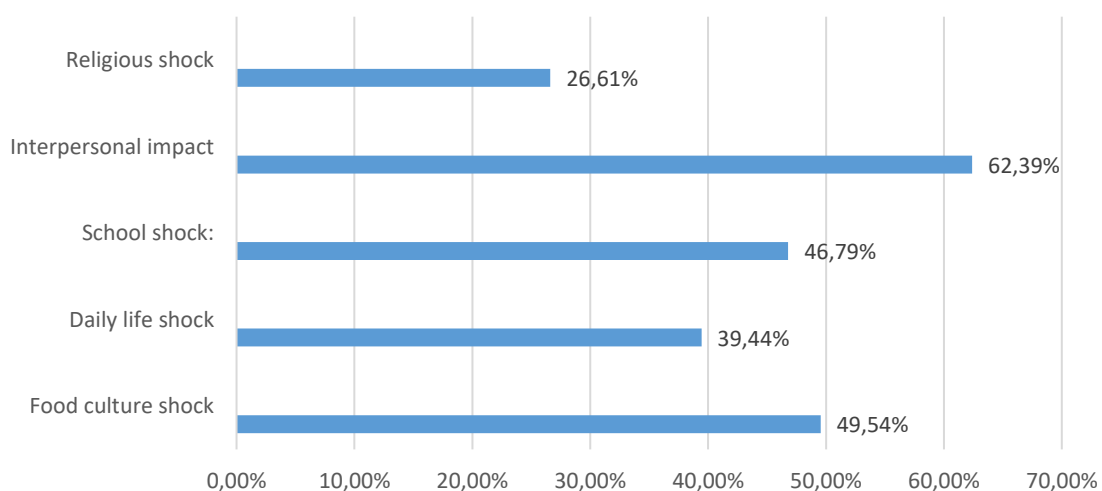


Fig. 3: The form of effects of the intercultural shock.

Some common adaptation strategies are also included in the questionnaire. As can be seen from the figure, self-psychological regulation and building relationships with locals were the most recognised adaptation strategies. It is worth noting that 77% of the study

participants have experienced self-psychological adjustment in the face of culture shock. The fewest, 23.85%, chose to adapt to culture shock through the welcome activities provided by the school.

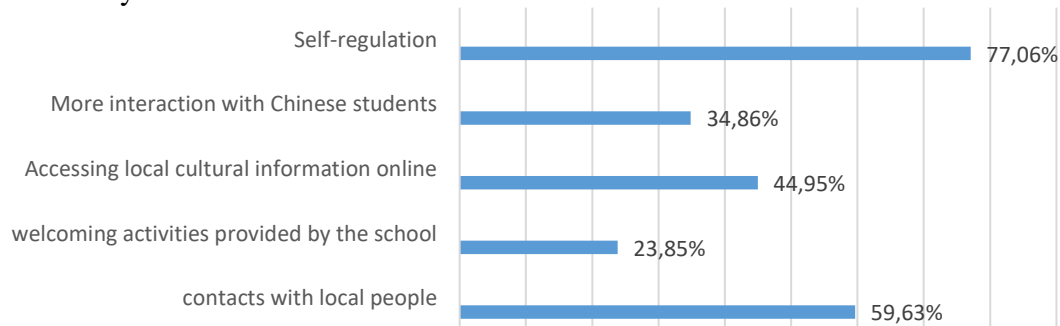


Fig. 4: Intercultural Adaptation Strategies.

Conclusions and possible adaptation strategies

The first thing that this study established in the first phase was that the majority of Chinese students, do feel the presence of culture shock when studying and living in Barcelona, and only 5% of the students in our survey thought that they were not feeling culture shock. This figure is in line with the researcher's suspicions. Culture shock seems to be an inevitable topic when students from a country with a typical Eastern cultural background enter Spain, the European country of ancient cultures. Also when exploring the timing of the emergence of culture shock, we can conclude that for Chinese students, the first three months after arriving in Barcelona is when they feel the most intense culture shock, with data showing that 86% of students feel uncomfortable in their first three months in a new environment, although this discomfort does not significantly affect their studies and lives. This discomfort can come from everyday life or from entering a Barcelona educational environment for the first time, and after the first few months, they will find ways to adapt to the culture shock they feel. It is therefore evident that if some orientation or reception activities are offered during this period, the first three months of arrival in Spain, this will greatly speed up their cultural adaptation process, allowing them to have better learning and living experience and to integrate into the local community, as well as helping students to build their confidence and to carry out their study career with a more positive attitude.

When discussing which aspects generate the greatest impact of culture shock, it can be concluded through interviews and focus groups that is the interpersonal communication. This result is also in line with the findings of Zlobina, Basabe and Páez (2004). In their study, immigrants from Eastern Europe, South America, and Arab countries all felt culture shock from interpersonal communication. Among them, the Arab countries felt more strongly about the local sexual and religious cultural differences, which is very similar to the feelings of Chinese students. And in addition to interpersonal distance, intimacy and friendship, the research participants in the survey also provided the idea of language shock. It can be understood that, unlike international students or immigrants from South American countries for whom Spanish is their mother tongue (albeit with some differences), it is difficult for Chinese students to use the Spanish they have learned to communicate correctly in a variety of situations, and sometimes the barriers of communication can lead to frustration and therefore a natural resistance to intercultural communication. For the locals, they may also misunderstand Chinese students as being uncommunicative and too closed-minded. The most fundamental solution to this problem

is to improve language skills, and not to be shy about expressing themselves, which is something that Chinese students need to try to breakthrough.

In addition to interpersonal communication, the culture shock was also felt by almost half of the Chinese students in the areas of food and study. In terms of food, the characteristics of the Mediterranean style of eating are different from those of Chinese food, with a limited choice of spices and spicy foods. The school scene is also worthy of attention, as the teaching system is different and in China, there is often an emphasis on the class format, where students are more closely connected and many school announcements are passed from the teacher to the class leader of the class, and then through social networks. Many school announcements are passed from the teacher to the class head' and then to each student via social networking software. In Spanish schools, however, students need to be more aware of email notifications and learn how to deal with administrative departments such as the secretariat. In terms of teaching, Chinese centres place more emphasis on the role of textbooks and books and on students' mastery of the knowledge provided, whereas Spanish classes are more diffuse.

When discussing strategies to adapt, it is surprising to see that 77% of the students' chosen methods have self-psychological regulation, while only 23% have participated in welcome activities from the school as a way of coping with cultural conflicts. Although some schools have gradually begun to pay more attention to the reception of international students and even Chinese students in recent years, such as the Autonomous University of Barcelona, this figure shows that the education system does not care enough for international students in the face of increasing globalisation. Self-regulation alone is not enough to cope with cultural conflicts, and even if one improves one's adaptation by socialising with the locals, it may not help much in adapting to the differences in studies. This is why it is important to provide some orientation or acceptance activities for international students, especially Chinese students, on a school basis. Such orientation can include both living and studying, providing much-needed help and guidance for Chinese students who are new to Barcelona.

The internationally accepted theory of intercultural adaptation is based on Berry's two-dimensional model of adaptation and is divided into four intercultural adaptation strategies, namely assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation, according to the willingness of intercultural adapters to maintain their own culture and identity and to integrate into the dominant culture (Berry, 1997, p. 5-34). The research shows that Chinese students in Barcelona are both actively integrating, but more likely to choose to separate, i.e. return to their home culture. This adaptation strategy can certainly give them a sense of security in the beginning, but over time, it results in a constant failure to have a positive experience in the new cultural environment.

In response to the above intercultural influences, we propose some appropriate responses to intercultural adaptation, intending to develop more intercultural integration skills in Chinese students.

Improving language skills

In the course of the questionnaire, we found that the sample who studied language and literature or who had strong foreign language skills tended to be more adaptable to culture shock, had a shorter adaptation period and were more efficient in intercultural communication. Therefore, when dealing with the problems of culture shock that may come, it is recommended that Chinese students receive adequate language training before arriving in Spain. This language training should not only focus on daily communication, but also academic language skills, such as literature reading, essay writing and

presentation. After arrival in Spain, students should also pay attention to the continuous improvement of their language skills and, if necessary, attend language courses offered by universities to better communicate across cultures and cope with any possible cultural shocks.

Recognising and understanding cultural differences

Respect, understanding, tolerance and acceptance of cultural differences between peoples is an important and necessary part of the intercultural adaptation process. Given the cultural differences between the East and the West, Chinese students in Spain will undoubtedly need a longer intercultural adaptation process. For Chinese students who have not yet arrived in Spain, it is advisable to participate in cultural activities organised by the Instituto Cervantes in China, for example, or through *language corners* in different cities, in order to get to know Spanish culture, national conditions and customs in advance. It is also possible to experience as much of the Spanish culture as possible in advance through online videos. This will help them to overcome their feelings of unfamiliarity, nervousness and anxiety when they are in a similar situation again during their studies and will help them to understand and accept cultural differences on a psychological level.

Building an offline and online reception platform

Through the questionnaire survey, we found that communication and socialisation with local people is an effective way to solve the problem of culture shock and accelerate intercultural adaptation. Expanding one's social range to build a wide range of solid social relationships is conducive to the early integration of international students into the study life of their country of study and smooth intercultural adaptation. This is why it is important to provide several social activities for international students to start socialising as soon as possible. In addition, considering the personalities of individual students, there are still some Chinese students who are introverted and shy to meet local people, which makes it impossible for them to establish new social relationships in offline social settings, and since the pandemic is not completely over yet, the establishment of an online platform for reception is also extremely necessary. Compare this to other countries, such as Singapore, which has a successful online social support system called the Living in Singapore Group (LSG). This online social support platform helps international students to adapt to life in Singapore in a short period by providing information and assistance during their stay in Singapore. The platform allows international students to communicate, make friends and solve various cross-cultural adaptation problems, and it has been effective in solving the cross-cultural adaptation problems of the international student community to a large extent. It is also a good way to help Chinese students in Spain to adapt to interculturalism by improving the online hospitality platform.

Some limitation and future research directions

Incidentally, the sample size of this study is small, the time is short and the subjects selected are limited to the author's region of Barcelona, which could be covered in future studies throughout Spain. Therefore, the generalisability of the results of this study is limited. Due to time constraints, other variables such as psychological adjustment, social adjustment, different personalities and attitudes towards another culture were not further reported in this study. In the full PhD thesis, in addition to focus groups and interviews,

ethnography, a qualitative research method, will be adopted for the study. The results of the ethnographic research will allow for a deeper contact with the daily life dynamics of the research participants, from which the impact of all this on improving intercultural adaptation and intercultural education outcomes can be derived. The impact of all this on improving intercultural adaptation and intercultural education outcomes.

As a result, future studies should consider examining other variables, and in conclusion, this study raises several questions.

Does the impact of culture shock on Chinese students ebb and flow cyclically and diminish over time, or does it diminish linearly over time? For example, although many students reflect that they can feel culture shock within the first three months, if the frequency of observation is changed to once a week, does the culture shock curve take the form of an undulating or linearly decreasing.

How culture shock affects Chinese student learning outcomes. Whether better intercultural competence can help improve learning results.

If adaptation strategies are divided into psychological adaptation, and objective social adaptation to life, what is the best adaptation strategy of the two? When developing intercultural adaptation strategies, should the focus be more on psychological counselling of the objectives, or should it start with social communication?

All of this is in search of a model of education in the contemporary era in which no one is left behind, with equal opportunities, social cohesion and coexistence to promote the inclusion of all.

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