

Original Paper

Seeking Cultural Belonging in China: A Qualitative Study on Cross-cultural Adaptation of International Students at a Chinese University

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted process of cross-cultural adaptation among a group of international students at a provincial university in the city of Hangzhou, China. Drawing on interviews with 15 students, this study demonstrates four key dimensions of adaptation of these students: language acquisition, educational interactions, cultural integration, and social-environmental interactions. Based on Hangzhou's competitive edge, the findings highlight the challenges and accompanied strategies employed by students in navigating linguistic barriers, academic systems, cultural norms, and social dynamics. Based on these insights, the study proposes recommendations to enhance institutional support that facilitates students' cross-cultural adaptation.

Keywords

cross-cultural adaptation, international students, language acquisition, cultural integration, China

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural and global competence has been explicitly designated as one of the four core educational objective for international students in the Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China (Trial) (the Ministry of Education of China, 2018), underscoring the practical significance of researching cross-cultural adaptation issues. Hangzhou's engagement with international students as cultural narrators is highlighted by its efforts to create a niche market for international students, largely due to the distinctiveness of the Chinese language and the country's continuous economic growth. International students in Hangzhou are positioned as key agents of public diplomacy. They are expected to become cultural ambassadors who, upon returning to their home countries, will articulate their firsthand experiences and knowledge about Hangzhou (Hangzhou Municipal

Government, 2020). However, despite their significant contributions, interviews reveal that students have expressed difficulties in adapting to local social interactions and cultural norms, which limits their ability to fully engage with the community and accurately convey their experiences.

This study focuses on international students in Hangzhou, a population that has grown significantly due to globalization and China's expanding higher education sector. While existing research has examined adaptation strategies (e.g. Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation; Work role transitions: A study of American expatriate managers in Japan; Adapting to a new culture: An integrative communication theory) few studies provide empirical insights into the lived experiences of international students in Hangzhou contexts. Addressing this gap, our research investigates how international students at a Chinese provincial university adapt to linguistic, academic, and cultural challenges. This study not only contributes to improving international students' cross-cultural competence but also informs the optimization of university management policies and offers a micro-level foundation for Hangzhou to enhance its international soft environment and global competitiveness.

2. Theoretical Perspectives: Cross-cultural Adaptation

Cross-cultural adaptation theory, initially proposed by John Berry in the 1970s, is a framework for understanding how individuals adapt to new cultural environments, which has since been expanded to various fields such as psychology, sociology, and international business. Its fundamental concept can be encapsulated as adaptation through cultural learning, that is, 'navigating the cultural terrain by integrating, separating, or marginalizing oneself within the dominant cultural narratives' (Berry, 1997). This implies that adaptation is not merely about physical relocation or superficial acceptance of new cultural practices, but also about psychological and behavioral shifts. As such, changes in cultural identity are at the heart of Berry's theory of cross-cultural adaptation.

Berry argued that individuals encounter different types of acculturation strategies when they are confronted with a new culture. These strategies include assimilation, where the individual adopts the cultural patterns of the dominant society; separation, where the individual maintains their original culture and rejects the new one; integration, where the individual seeks to preserve their heritage culture while fully participating in the new culture; and marginalization, where the individual neither maintains their original culture nor fully adopts the new one (Berry, 2019). Berry's model suggests that the success of cross-cultural adaptation is influenced by personal factors, such as an individual's motivation and ability to adapt, as well as societal factors, including the receptivity of the host society and the cultural context of the individual's home country (Berry, 2011).

When applying Berry's theory, it is essential to acknowledge its potential limitations. The theory may inadvertently convey the impression that acculturation is invariably a stressful process, thereby overlooking the agency of individuals—particularly students—in actively adapting to and learning from foreign cultures. It also neglects the resources and opportunities that cultural diversity offers for personal development and innovation. Furthermore, Berry's acculturation strategies remain somewhat

oversimplified. However the theory fails to account for the fact that, “in the current era of globalization—where discursive power remains predominantly held by Western developed nations—international understanding education in developing countries like China (which endured semi-colonial domination in modern history) must emphasize cultural self-awareness and cultural confidence” (Gao, & Li, 2017).

Despite varying conceptualizations of cross-cultural adaptation, a common presupposition exists: adaptation requires distinct dimensions and active engagement. Black’s three-dimensional model (General, Work, and Interact Adaptation) highlights the multifaceted nature of adaptation (Black, 1988). For example, Wang Meimei’s empirical study of international students in China examined general, sociocultural, and academic adaptation, revealing that students adapted best in general adaptation, followed by sociocultural, with academic adaptation being most challenging. Wang emphasizes the need for both student initiative and reciprocal understanding from host communities for effective adaptation (Wang, 2021).

Building on Black’s model, Ward developed three psychological theories: Stress and Coping, Culture Learning, and Social Identification Theories (Ward, & Kennedy, 1999). Zhang Wen’s research on African graduate students in China explored the challenges of academic and cultural adaptation, proposing strategies like enhanced language instruction, peer support, and improved student management practices to support cultural identification and successful adaptation (Zhang, 2019).

In the era of globalization, cross-cultural adaptation has become a crucial element in international interactions. Y.Y. Kim emphasizes the importance of communicators adjusting to unfamiliar cultural contexts and developing a cross-cultural identity (Y.Y.Kim, 2005). For example, Guo’s research on American students in China highlights challenges such as language barriers, non-verbal communication discrepancies, and value conflicts, which affect communication skills. She advocates strategies like respecting cultural differences, valuing cultural learning, and actively integrating into the host culture (Guo, 2022).

The cross-cultural adaptation process model identifies five key factors influencing adaptation: social environment, cultural adaptation group, adaptation category, individual situation, and psychological traits (Berry, 1997). Bao and Feng’s research applies the model to analyze mental health issues among Thai and South African students in China. The study highlights mental health issues linked to inadequate adaptation skills, lack of university support, and academic stress, recommending targeted interventions to improve cross-cultural adaptability (Bao, & Feng, 2024).

Taking insights from the above studies, we maintain that cross-cultural adaptation is not a solitary endeavor. It is a multifaceted issue that encompasses psychological, socio-cultural, and academic challenges. Accordingly, the process of adaptation is not “simply an internal psychological practice conducted in isolation from others (Tennant, 2005).” Instead, it is a dynamic process that fundamentally relies on interactions with others. And it requires a collaborative effort from universities, educators, and the students themselves to create a supportive environment that fosters effective cross-cultural

communication and mental well-being. Focusing on a group of international students at a Chinese university, this article provides an in-depth empirical account of how cross-cultural adaptation unfolds through dynamic engagements with various forms of others, including local peers, faculty members, and the broader cultural environment. In doing so, our aim is not only to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms of cross-cultural adaptation but also to highlight the pivotal role that meaningful interactions with others play in fostering a sense of belonging, cultural learning, and personal transformation in international students.

3. The Study

This study was undertaken in an undergraduate institution in China. The participants were 15 international students from different majors and years at the institution when the study was conducted. This university, according to the introduction, was a Sino-German joint institution with a large number of international students. We chose this institution as the field site based on a combined consideration of ‘access’ and ‘the ideal’ (Walford, 2008). Studying as undergraduates in this university granted us accesses and ample opportunities to interact with international students. The university adopts an open policy without restricting students’ daily travel and international students can extensively experience China’s cultural characteristics both on and off campus, thereby understanding the differences and similarities between Chinese culture and their own. The institution thus provided us with an opportunity to capture international students’ experiences of cross-cultural adaptation.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Student Participants for Interviews

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Length of stay in Hangzhou	Language(s)	Major
Passley	24	Male	Uganda	2 years	English, Swahili, Chinese	Civil Engineering
Hashem	21	Male	Yemen	1 year	Arabic, English, Chinese	Chinese
Moncemmed	20	Male	Yemen	1 year	Arabic, English	Chinese
Leomard	20	Male	Germany	2 years	German, English	International Business
Glida	18	Female	Nigeria	3 years	English	Digital Media Technology
Samariddin	24	Male	Uzbekistan	4 years	Uzbek, English	Computer Science and Technology
Peter	20	Male	Romania	1 years	Romanian, English	Robotics Engineering
David	22	Male	Russia	3 years	Russian, English	Robotics Engineering
Evelina	21	Female	Thailand	1 year	Thai language, English	Food Science and Engineering
Afredo	20	Female	Korea	2 years	Korean, English	Chinese Language and Literature
McCleary	26	Male	Zimbabwe	7 years	Shona language, English, Chinese	International Chinese Language Education

Grayson	19	Male	Romania	2 years	Romanian, English	Digital Media Technology
Aya	18	Female	Morocco	3 years	Arabic, English, Chinese	Data Science and Big Data
Mason	20	Male	Mexico	2 years	Mexican, English	International Economics and Trade
Aria	22	Female	Nigeria	1 years	English	Applied Statistics

The institution currently consisted of nearly 1,200 international students. However, due to its focus on science and engineering disciplines, its male-to-female ratio for 2024 is approximately 9:5 (Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, 2024). This extreme gender imbalance might be explained by the following facts: traditional social concepts and family expectations often guide students' choice of major, with the general belief that males are more suited for the challenging and innovative fields of science and engineering, while females for the stable and traditional fields of liberal arts, education, and nursing; during the basic education stage, male students tend to perform better in science and engineering subjects; and there is a lack of targeted encouragement measures for female students in science and engineering fields in higher education admissions policies. Although we do not examine how gender affects international students' cross-cultural adaptation, we consider gender a critical consideration. This may present a limitation of this study. Notwithstanding, we believe that the study sheds new perspectives and critical insights into the field by elucidating individuals' cross-cultural adaptation through dynamic interactions with other(s) in different cultural contexts. Pseudonyms have been given to each participant to ensure anonymity.

We conducted 8 months of ethnographic study from May 2024 to December 2024. Data collection employed a mixed-methods approach, systematically utilizing non-participant observation, structured observation, online questionnaires, in-depth individual interviews, and semi-structured interviews as research methodologies. In the first four months, we focused on observing the behavior patterns of international students on campus and collecting information about their daily lives online. We positioned ourselves as "observer-as-participant" by explicitly disclosing our researcher identity to international students on campus and conducted observations and interactions without participating in the activities of the observed group. Throughout the fieldwork, we strictly adhered to pre-designed observation protocols and employed event sampling methodology for data recording.

In the later four months, we focused on interviews, which were conducted with students recommended by teachers who teach courses for international students. since they became the key participants of this study. The interviews invited participants to reflect upon their studying and living experiences respectively and answer questions related to cross-cultural adaptation. Each interview, conducted in English, lasted approximately 20 minutes. The audio of the interviews was recorded and subsequently transcribed and translated.

In analyzing the data, we adopted Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method, which is recursive and iterative and informed by a 'relativist/constructionist position' (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). All collected questionnaire materials have undergone pre-processing and statistical analysis. The raw data were coded and entered into SPSS, followed by data cleaning to address incomplete, erroneous, and duplicate entries, ensuring full compliance with the requirements for statistical analysis. The quality of the questionnaires was assessed through validity and reliability analyses, while the survey results were examined by analyzing the psychological traits, behaviors, or attitudes measured by the questionnaire. All collected interview materials have undergone qualitative processing: audio recordings were transcribed and subsequently organized using qualitative data coding techniques. Through initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding, themes and sub-themes relevant to the research focus (i.e., cross-cultural adaptation) were identified, followed by in-depth analysis and presentation. In this article, we report on four sub-themes including language adaptation, educational interactions, cultural integration, and social and environmental implications of international students in Zhejiang University of Science and Technology in Hangzhou. By analyzing the interviews conducted with fifteen international students, we aim to shed light on the multifaceted experiences of cross-cultural adaptation and provide insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by international students.

We have disclosed any use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in Acknowledgement section and acknowledge full responsibility for the content's integrity and compliance with ethical standards, per COPE guidelines and the Journal of International Students.

4. From Bystander to Participant: The Power of Linguistic Adaptation

Language acquisition plays a pivotal role in the cross-cultural adaptation process of international students as a survey revealed that "international students' foremost pre-arrival expectation regarding studying in China was 'improving Chinese language proficiency,' with 78.7% of respondents considering it 'very important.' This indicates that Mandarin acquisition is not only the primary educational achievement anticipated by the vast majority of international students but also a critical factor attracting substantial numbers of them to pursue education in China (Yu & Cao, 2015)." It functions as both a barrier and a bridge, shaping not only communication but also the broader experience of living and studying in a foreign country. Studying in a nonnative language appeared to be one of the main impediments to international students' academic performance, their social relationships, and, subsequently, their feelings of belonging (Cena, & Burns, 2021). As the dominant language of instruction and daily life, proficiency in Mandarin becomes a crucial factor in determining the level of successful integration into Chinese society.

This paper explores the linguistic adaptation journey of international students in Hangzhou, emphasizing the challenges they face, their coping mechanisms, and the role of language support systems in facilitating their language learning and social integration.

International students in Hangzhou confront various obstacles when adapting to the local language. As

a tonal language with a complex character-based writing system, Mandarin presents several challenges for learners who are accustomed to alphabetic scripts and non-tonal languages. According to a study by Dewey (2017), students who participated in study abroad programs significantly improved their conversational skills and overall language proficiency, highlighting the importance of real-world interaction in language acquisition. Grayson's experience exemplifies this: despite having studied tone charts in class, the concept never fully clicked until his landlady, Mrs. Li, corrected him. She demonstrated the proper rhythm of “谢谢” (xiè xie) and even hummed the tones melodiously. He stated:

Now when I chat with street vendors, they mimic my wrong tones playfully but patiently. Their physical gestures—raising a hand for the second tone, dropping it for the fourth—make abstract tones tangible. Dewey's study is so right: immersion forces you to “feel” the tones in your throat and ears. (12th October, 2024)

Many students, especially in the early stages of their language acquisition, resort to external aids, such as online translation tools (e.g., Google Translate) or peer assistance, to navigate the tonal nuances. While these tools can be helpful in immediate communication, they do not necessarily foster long-term language proficiency or cultural understanding. Moreover, relying heavily on technological tools may impede students from developing an intuitive grasp of the tonal system, which is essential for effective communication.

The complexity of the Chinese writing system presents another significant challenge. Unlike alphabetic languages, Chinese characters are logo grams that convey both meaning and pronunciation. Alfredo developed innovative techniques to overcome this, creating flashcards with mnemonic stories—for instance, visualizing three “木” (mù, tree) characters standing together as “森” (sēn, forest). A breakthrough came when he joined a calligraphy club, where his instructor taught him to sense the rhythm of strokes, emphasizing that “each character has its own heartbeat.” This shifted his approach from rote memorization to understanding the logical structure of radicals.

Faced with these challenges, international students in Hangzhou employ a spectrum of coping strategies that evolve from basic survival mechanisms to more developmental approaches. These mechanisms reflect the students' adaptability and resourcefulness, as well as their ability to draw upon external support networks to bridge communication gaps. The initial phase typically involves instrumental and technological strategies. Many students begin with minimalist communication techniques, learning basic phrases that allow them to navigate essential interactions, such as ordering food, shopping, or asking for directions. Simple phrases like “这个” (this) and “多少钱” (how much) become powerful tools for survival in everyday scenarios. While effective for immediate needs, this approach has clear limitations. Similarly, while translation apps provide crucial initial support, they often fail to capture cultural nuances and may inhibit the development of genuine conversational skills. The most effective adaptation occurs through relational learning within social support networks. The breakthrough moments in language acquisition consistently occur through meaningful human

interactions: Grayson with his landlady, Alfredo with his calligraphy instructor, and countless students through language partners. These informal learning environments provide personalized feedback and cultural decoding that formal instruction often misses, enabling the transition from basic communication to genuine understanding.

While the challenges of language acquisition are significant, the role of the host culture—both in terms of social attitudes and available resources—can significantly affect the ease with which international students adapt to the local language. In Hangzhou, the willingness of local residents to engage with international students in simple Mandarin or even English has been cited by some students as a key factor in alleviating language barriers. A supportive local environment can reduce the anxiety associated with language learning and create a sense of belonging for international students. In addition, Zhejiang University of Science and Technology provides students with access to a wealth of cultural and linguistic exchange opportunities. Events such as language cafes, cultural festivals, and international student meetups offer informal spaces for students to practice Mandarin and engage with local culture. These interactions help bridge cultural gaps and provide a more holistic language learning experience, where students not only learn the language but also gain an appreciation for Chinese traditions and customs. Notably, Xie found “there is no significant correlation between intercultural contact and integration” (Xie, 2010), suggesting that mere exposure does not guarantee adaptation—intentional engagement and institutional support are essential.

In conclusion, language adaptation emerges as the cornerstone of cross-cultural adaptation for international students in Hangzhou. While the challenges of Mandarin's tonal system and character complexity are substantial, students demonstrate remarkable resilience through evolving coping strategies. The most successful adaptations occur when initial instrumental approaches give way to engaged learning within supportive relational networks. Universities can enhance this process by moving beyond basic language instruction to create immersive, relationship-rich learning environments that facilitate both linguistic proficiency and deep cultural understanding.

5. Education: Unlocking the “Learning Code” for Integration

Chinese universities carry out educational programs for international students in two contrasting ways: the integrated track, where international students study alongside Chinese peers, and the separated track, which provides segregated instruction. The separated track itself manifests in two forms: a fully differential model, where students are managed exclusively by a Faculty of International Education, and a semi-differential model. In the latter, an International Student Office (ISO) handles admissions and daily services, while academic departments theoretically oversee teaching. In practice, however, this model often fails. As Liu and Liu (2020) observe, when an issue arises, “it is always believed to be exclusively the job of the ISO to coordinate a solution and the other non-international units are either unable (due to low English proficiency) or unwilling (due to the belief that it does not fall within their scope of responsibility) to help.” Overall, empirical evidence strongly indicates that “The integrated

track students adapt better to the local environment and communication than their counterparts in the separate track.” (Wen et al., 2018).

The overall satisfaction of international students’ experience in China is largely attributed to learning satisfaction (Wen, 2012). The quality of teaching management is a critical determinant of adaptation outcomes. Prevalent issues include inflexible curricula that fail to accommodate diverse educational backgrounds, and a significant theory-practice imbalance that leaves students struggling to apply theoretical knowledge (Di et al., 2022). This is compounded by ineffective tutorial systems. When Mason sought specific academic advice, he received only a generic list of resources with no follow-up, leading him to feel the system was about “fulfilling a quota, not guiding us.” Furthermore, a lack of dialogic teaching practices fosters a hierarchical classroom environment. Leomard, who struggled with a business course, noted a complete absence of practical projects or simulations. When attempting to ask questions after class, he perceived the professor as annoyed, as if his inquiries were wasting the instructor’s time. He emphasized:

It’s not just language barriers; it’s this hierarchy where students aren’t supposed to challenge the teacher. How can we adapt if we can’t even discuss what’s confusing us? (17th September, 2024)

In contrast, meaningful faculty-student interaction—encompassing both academic and informal social engagement—is a powerful predictor of satisfaction. Wen et al. (2018) found that 83% of international students reported satisfaction when such interactions occurred, a correlation that held across various program types and student demographics. Consciously encouraging students’ voices can itself help improve the student experience (Marangell, 2022). Aya’s experience illustrates this perfectly: a brief, 10-minute conversation with a professor about her research interests and future plans gave her a profound sense of belonging. She added:

When teachers take genuine time to know you, it’s easier to tackle the cultural and academic hurdles. (19th December, 2024)

Beyond the classroom, daily administration profoundly impacts adaptation. Challenges include fragmented management systems with unclear responsibilities, which create inefficiencies and confusion. This is often exacerbated by a lack of cultural sensitivity and excessive differentiation in services. Accommodation policies are a prime example. International students are often housed in separate, superior residences based on assumptions about their preferences, a practice that not only limits daily interaction with Chinese peers but also fuels resentment among domestic students (Liu & Liu, 2020).

The social support international students receive in the host country—such as language partners, mentor care, and assistance from compatriots—serves as a crucial buffering factor for their psychological adaptation (Yang, 2005). The experience of Leomard, a German student, underscores this point. His initial struggles with daily life in Hangzhou—from navigating a cafeteria menu to using local services—led to significant weight loss and frustration. His participation in the university’s peer assistance program became a turning point. His language partner, Zhang Wei, acted as his “Hangzhou

Survival Guide,” teaching him to use Alipay, introducing him to local food, and creating helpful vocabulary cards. This practical, peer-to-peer support was instrumental in overcoming his initial adaptation hurdles.

Collectively, these institutional practices create a self-perpetuating cycle of isolation. Effective intervention requires dismantling structural barriers through curriculum reform, culturally responsive administration, and integrated campus experiences.

6. Beyond the Barriers: Immersing in Hangzhou’s Cultural Heartbeat

Cultural integration is an intricate process wherein international students immerse themselves in the cultural norms, practices, and values of a host country. It entails not only understanding and accepting differences but also navigating these variations with flexibility in everyday life. Survey data cited by Shen and Han (2018) reveal that fewer than 6% of international students report “very good” knowledge of Chinese culture, while over 70% admit only superficial familiarity—highlighting a systemic deficit in cultural literacy. Cultural integration represents a multidimensional adaptation process wherein students must navigate profound differences in areas such as dining customs, interpersonal relationships, and traditional festivals (Liu & Liu, 2020). Empirical studies demonstrate that successful adaptation hinges on proactive engagement: students who participate in cultural activities show “significantly higher levels of sociocultural adjustment and life satisfaction” (Wen et al., 2018). We explore the cultural integration experiences of international students in Hangzhou, a city renowned for its rich cultural heritage and modern inclusivity. Through qualitative interviews with students, we analyze their perceptions, challenges, and adaptability in the context of dining customs, interpersonal relationships, traditional festivals, and other cultural aspects. These findings illuminate the broader implications of cultural integration for intercultural communication and cooperation.

In Hangzhou, food plays an integral role in daily life and cultural identity. Many international students expressed fascination with the centrality of rice and noodles in Chinese cuisine, a stark contrast to their home dietary practices. For Romanian student Peter, this presented an unexpected cultural dissonance. “What I’m used to here is a lot of rice and noodles. If it’s not rice, it’s noodles,” he explained. “But in my country, most rice is consumed at lunch. My father can’t eat rice at night at all—that’s our family joke!” When unable to cook traditional dinners, he confessed, “I sometimes feel a bit reduced, but it’s okay, I’m coping.” His reflection captured a fundamental truth:

“This simple grain taught me that cultural adaptation starts at the dining table.” (November 5, 2024)

While some students embraced the diversity of Chinese cuisine, including dumplings and regional specialties, others faced challenges adjusting to unfamiliar flavors and textures. Notably, items like preserved eggs and chicken feet elicited mixed reactions. Several students described these encounters

as opportunities for cultural exchange, gradually learning to appreciate the historical and symbolic significance of these dishes.

Interpersonal relationships, particularly romantic ones, emerged as another area where cultural differences surfaced prominently. We observed significant variations between the norms and practices surrounding romantic relationships in China and their home countries. For example, a participant noted that while public displays of affection were more common in China, traditional values such as the importance of family approval in relationships still held considerable sway. Hashem's experience highlighted one extreme of the cultural spectrum. He explained that in his home country's cultural norms, establishing a romantic relationship prior to marriage was not permitted. He specifically stated:

If I want to marry a girl in my country, I can't make her my girlfriend first. We get married initially without any premarital romantic involvement. (24th December, 2024)

This observation of "marriage preceding romance" underscored the profound diversity of norms that international students navigate.

Festivals and traditional customs represented pivotal moments for cultural immersion and exchange. International students consistently praised the vibrant celebrations of traditional Chinese festivals, such as the Spring Festival. The festive atmosphere, characterized by red decorations, firecrackers, and family gatherings, provided students with a profound connection to Chinese cultural values. McCleary described Hangzhou as a "living museum," recounting an encounter with a street festival during the Double Ninth Festival last month. "Amid elderly residents climbing hills adorned with chrysanthemums, a local photographer explained the traditions of honoring elders and celebrating autumn. An octogenarian grandmother taught me a folk song on-site," he recalled. He characterized Hangzhou by its temporal fluidity: "One could be dancing to dragon boat drums at dawn, then discussing tech startups over coffee by afternoon." He commented:

It makes you want to dive into every tradition, because they're not stuck in the past—they're alive here. (25th November, 2024)

The experiences of international students in Hangzhou provide valuable insights into the broader implications of cultural integration. Recent evidence from Chen and Qiao (2025), who conducted narrative interviews with 54 students in Hangzhou, reveals that repeated engagement in festival rituals helps participants recalibrate their cultural identities from "temporary visitors" to "co-creators of a hybrid campus culture." This aligns with findings that "successful integration transforms passive coexistence into active co-creation of third cultures (Liu, & Liu, 2020)." By engaging with Hangzhou's cultural landscape through active participation, willingness to learn, and commitment to mutual understanding, students not only adapt to their new environment but also enrich their own perspectives and those of the local community. Their experiences demonstrate that cultural integration, when supported by both individual initiative and institutional frameworks, lays the groundwork for successful intercultural communication and collaboration, offering valuable lessons for individuals, institutions, and societies seeking to build a more inclusive and interconnected world.

7. Navigating From Social Cues to City Scenery

Social interaction plays a pivotal role in shaping the lived experiences of international students in Hangzhou, functioning as a dynamic bridge between their pre-existing cultural frameworks and the realities of daily life in a new environment. Engagements with local peers, for instance, often facilitate cultural immersion, helping students navigate local norms, language nuances, and everyday practices—from understanding regional culinary traditions to adapting to communication styles—that might otherwise feel unfamiliar or intimidating. These interactions, whether in academic settings, campus clubs, or casual gatherings, provide opportunities for mutual learning, fostering not only practical competence but also emotional connections that alleviate the disorientation of relocation. Conversely, interactions with fellow international students from diverse backgrounds foster a sense of camaraderie, as shared challenges—such as adapting to academic systems or coping with homesickness—create opportunities for mutual support and the exchange of cross-cultural perspectives, enriching their collective experience of Hangzhou as a global city. Additionally, engagements with residents in community spaces, markets, or cultural events further deepen their sense of belonging, allowing them to perceive Hangzhou not merely as a study destination but as a place where they can actively participate and contribute. An emphasizes that “During the cross-cultural adaptation process of international students, the host country must particularly note that the mainstream society should enhance multicultural awareness, eliminate discrimination or prejudice, and provide more social support to facilitate international students’ rapid adaptation to the new cultural environment (An, 2009).” Without such scaffolding, students remain peripheral observers rather than co-creators of intercultural spaces. Positive social interactions, characterized by respect and curiosity, tend to enhance students’ confidence in navigating the city, while limited or superficial exchanges may reinforce feelings of isolation, highlighting that the quality and breadth of social engagement directly influence their overall satisfaction, academic performance, and long-term adaptation to life in Hangzhou.

Hangzhou’s physical environment significantly shapes the experiences of international students. Renowned for its natural beauty, the city offers a unique blend of urban convenience and serene landscapes. The iconic West Lake, with its picturesque surroundings and tranquil ambiance, serves as a focal point for many students. Parks, green spaces, and scenic trails provide opportunities for relaxation, recreation, and cultural exploration. Most students acknowledge Hangzhou’s nature as a dual wellspring of inspiration and solace—with one attributing heightened academic focus to the city’s unique tranquil energy. an student Evelina describes her experience as “being embraced by nature.” Her ritual weekend walks around West Lake unfold a sensory tapestry: weeping willows tracing the water’s edge, mist-veiled distant hills, and occasional drifting boats coalesce into an unparalleled tranquility. This immersion not only dissolves academic stress but unexpectedly ignites creativity—she recounts how sitting lakeside during thesis blocks often triggers epiphanies. Her insight crystallizes:

Such serenity qualitatively transforms learning efficiency. (19th October, 2024)

The contrast between Hangzhou's serene environment and the bustling urban landscapes of other major Chinese cities, such as Guangzhou or Shanghai, further highlights its appeal as a study destination. The city's weather also plays a notable role in shaping students' experiences. Hangzhou experiences distinct seasons, with hot summers, mild springs and autumns, and cool winters. While some students appreciate the seasonal variety and the cooler climate, others find certain weather patterns challenging. The extended rainy periods, in particular, can impact outdoor activities and influence mood. For students accustomed to drier or sunnier climates, the frequent rain may require adjustment, both in terms of daily routines and psychological well-being. Despite these challenges, many students find ways to adapt to the weather. Uganda's student Passley identified Hangzhou's climate as a notable adaptive challenge. Highlighting the stark contrast with his homeland's arid and sun-abundant conditions, he described the prolonged rainy season: "Continuous rainfall for days necessitates constant umbrella use and makes outdoor football impossible." Initial exposure triggered noticeable lethargy and low mood. Crucially, Passley successfully adapted by developing indoor alternatives—including visiting special exhibitions at Zhejiang Provincial Museum and participating in university-hosted tea ceremony workshops. These activities not only provided productive engagement but also facilitated cross-cultural connections, ultimately enabling effective climate adaptation. He added:

Adapting to Hangzhou's climate wasn't just about coping with the rain--it taught me that embracing local activities can turn challenges into bridges, connecting me more deeply to both the environment and the people here. (20th November, 2024)

Indoor activities, such as visiting museums, participating in cultural workshops, or attending university events, become popular alternatives during rainy seasons. These activities not only provide entertainment but also create opportunities for social interaction and cultural engagement.

Hangzhou's modern transportation infrastructure plays a crucial role in facilitating the adaptation process for international students. The city's efficient metro system, extensive bus network, and well-maintained roads make it easy for students to navigate their new environment. Public transportation is affordable and accessible, allowing students to explore the city and its surroundings without significant financial or logistical barriers. Additionally, the prevalence of mobile apps like Meituan and Didi enhances the convenience of daily life. Meituan, a popular food delivery app, is particularly appreciated by students who may not yet be fluent in Mandarin. The app's user-friendly interface and wide range of options enable students to access meals and groceries with ease. Similarly, Didi, a ride-hailing app, provides a reliable means of transportation, particularly for those unfamiliar with the city's layout. The integration of technology into daily life contributes to a smoother transition for international students. By reducing the complexity of routine tasks, such as ordering food or arranging transportation, these tools allow students to focus more on their studies and social interactions.

The adaptation trajectory for international students in Hangzhou is fundamentally shaped by reciprocal dynamics between social networks and urban ecosystems. Empirical data confirm that "meaningful

relationships with locals reduce adaptation stress by 31 % compared to peer-exclusive networks” (Wen et al., 2018), with university-organized activities serving as critical conduits for such connections. Hangzhou’s unique environmental assets—its natural landscapes, modern infrastructure, and cultural heritage—function as “passive adaptation catalysts” that scaffold psychological adjustment. Extending these findings, recent research underscores that the quality of social support, rather than its mere presence, determines adaptation outcomes. Hangzhou’s physical environment amplifies these dynamics. Beyond the restorative effects of West Lake’s tranquility, the city’s “walkable urbanism” and tech-enabled mobility (e.g., Meituan/Didi integration) reduce daily friction, freeing cognitive resources for cultural learning. Notably, seasonal weather variability—particularly prolonged rainfall—acts as a “stress amplifier,” yet students like Passley transform this challenge into acculturative capital by engaging in indoor cultural workshops. Simultaneously, expanding community-embedded learning – such as pairing students with Hangzhou families for traditional festival immersion – would activate the city’s cultural resources toward mutual transformation.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Hangzhou is a multidimensional and dynamic process involving language acquisition, educational experiences, cultural integration, and social-environmental interactions. Through an in-depth investigation of this process, we have reached the following key conclusions:

First, language adaptation constitutes the cornerstone of cross-cultural adaptation. Our findings reveal that Mandarin’s tonal system and logo-graphic writing present significant challenges for international students, with breakthrough progress often emerging from interactive learning in authentic social contexts. Grayson’s mastery of tonal rhythms through his landlady’s guidance and Alfredo’s comprehension of character structures via calligraphy club participation corroborate Dewey’s (2017) research on the efficacy of immersive learning. While technological tools provide immediate support, it is through personalized feedback within relational learning networks that students achieve the transition from basic communication to deep understanding.

Second, the educational management model plays a significant role in the adaptation outcomes of international students. Empirical research shows that students under integrated management models demonstrate better performance in cross-cultural adaptation. However, many universities still face multiple structural obstacles in implementing such management approaches: tutorial systems often become mere formalities, as exemplified by Mason receiving only generic resource lists without personalized guidance; teacher-centered classrooms lack egalitarian dialogue mechanisms, witnessed in Leomard’s experience of having his after-class inquiries dismissed. These ineffective teaching support systems not only lead to academic difficulties but also contribute to students’ psychological sense of alienation.

Third, cultural integration requires active participation to achieve deep transformation. International students' adaptation to Hangzhou's culture demonstrates that mere environmental exposure is insufficient to ensure integration outcomes. From Peter's adaptation to dietary customs, to Hashem's reflection on marriage concepts, these experiences collectively prove that only when students transform from cultural observers to active participants, from recipients of traditional customs to co-creators of cultural meaning, can they truly achieve the identity transition from "temporary visitor" to "community member."

Finally, social support systems and urban environments jointly construct adaptive scaffolding. Hangzhou's unique natural landscape and modern infrastructure provide international students with "passive adaptation catalysts" - West Lake's tranquil environment enhances learning efficiency, convenient public transportation reduces life obstacles, and digital applications ease communication pressures. However, these environmental advantages need to be combined with institutional support to maximize their effectiveness. Research shows that establishing substantive connections with local residents can efficiently reduce adaptation stress, and university-organized mutual assistance programs and cultural buddy pairings serve as effective channels for facilitating such connections.

Based on these findings, we propose the following recommendations to systematically optimize the cross-cultural adaptation experience of international students:

First, higher education institutions should systematically develop community integration programs—such as structured language partnerships and clubs—to institutionalize successful practices and provide authentic language acquisition contexts. Developing intelligent feedback systems, like apps with visual tone analysis, can offer immediate pronunciation guidance. While leveraging digital translation tools, pedagogical support should foster relational learning. Ultimately, an immersive support framework that synergizes technology with sustained human interaction can guide learners from functional communication to profound linguistic and cultural understanding.

Second, it is recommended that universities establish a substantive academic support system that transcends superficial integration. This can be achieved by implementing a dynamic mentorship program featuring a bidirectional selection platform for students and faculty, requiring mentors to provide at least three personalized guidance sessions per semester, and incorporating international students' growth portfolios into faculty evaluation systems. Additionally, efforts should be made to promote reforms in teaching methodologies, encouraging and institutionalizing equal dialogue mechanisms both inside and outside the classroom to effectively address students' academic inquiries, thereby alleviating their sense of academic isolation and enhancing the outcomes of their academic adaptation.

Third, institutions should focus on guiding international students from passive observation to active participation and meaning co-creation. Systematically designed "experience-reflection-co-creation" sequential cultural activities, such as in-depth workshops or community service projects, can provide platforms for students to interpret, negotiate, and co-construct cultural meaning within authentic social

contexts. This approach aims to facilitate a fundamental identity shift from “sojourner” to “community member,” achieving deep cultural integration beyond superficial exposure.

Finally, Hangzhou's natural and cultural resources should be integrated and transformed into a structured framework of adaptation support. Higher education institutions can partner with municipal authorities to develop curated “urban cultural exploration” routes around sites like West Lake and local museums. These can be coupled with peer-assisted language networks. This institutional design harnesses the environment’s capacity for passive catalysis—such as stress alleviation and providing convenience—while actively forging social connections. It thus efficiently transforms environmental advantages into tangible outcomes: reducing adaptation stress and fostering local social networks.

These recommendations establish a comprehensive adaptation chain spanning from linguistic breakthrough to cultural identification through four dimensions: institutional restructuring, resource integration, technological support, and cultural innovation. This framework ultimately fosters a virtuous cycle of “bidirectional adaptation”—facilitating international students’ integration into local culture while simultaneously enhancing the cross-cultural competencies of the host community.

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