

# *Acculturative Stories of International Students from Belt and Road Countries in China*

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**Abstract**—This article focuses on international students from Belt and Road (B&R) countries at a university in central China. Since the B&R initiative was proposed, the number of international students in China from B&R countries has increased rapidly, but related research is seldom found. To analyze the problems and difficulties these international students face in their daily life and study in China, and to explore culture shock and acculturation process of them, an ethnographic approach was applied using the combined methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews which ethnography characterizes. It is found that language barriers are a prominent problem. Different students had different experiences in social connection. They also had different opinions on Chinese faculty members and courses. Besides, culture shock is normally mentioned in the interviews. In the end, some implications of improving the acculturation of these international students are discussed. In addition, this study is also a supplement of the existing research on international students in China.

**Keywords**—*ethnographic study; international students; culture shock; acculturation; the Belt and Road initiative*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Culture shock is a result of cultural differences. American anthropologist Oberg defines “culture shock” as “a person's sense of uneasiness caused by the loss of familiar language and social customs in a new cultural environment” [1]. Culture shock is a problem that almost everyone who works, studies and lives abroad will encounter. This is an exciting field for ethnographers. Since China's the Belt and Road initiative was put forward, the number of international students from B&R countries has continued to grow. However, most of current studies on culture shock among international students are from western countries [2~3]. Qualitative study on international students in China is seldom found.

This study adopts ethnographic approach and attempts to explore culture shock and cultural adaptation process of international students from B&R countries in China. It analyzes the difficulties they encounter in the process of acculturation, and puts forward suggestions to help B&R

international students adapt to China. In addition, this study supplements the existing research on culture shock, and can be used for reference by other research.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have different expressions of culture shock, but the basic expressions are the same: cultural collisions in values, codes of conduct, habits and other aspects caused by individuals or groups living, studying and working in a familiar cultural environment to another unknown cultural environment [1]. It is one of the most traumatic events for people to settle in a new environment, especially for sojourners, as culture shock is inevitable. The definition of culture by C. Hofstede can illustrate this problem. He believes that culture is the collective mental programming of a group living in the same community. This kind of psychological process are different among countries, regions and groups, which leads to the remarkable characteristics of people in different cultural circles in terms of beliefs, values, codes of conduct and customs.

Acculturation refers to the phenomenon that the original cultural pattern of one or both parties changes due to continuous and direct cultural contact. While from the definition of acculturation, acculturation process actually can influence the two different cultures, but the influence degree is greatly different, little impact on the group had been living in the mainstream culture and many impacts on the new arrivals to the cultural environment, the process can even affect all aspects of their life, so the acculturation of the existing research mainly discusses the impact of the acculturation process on these new immigrants or sojourners to a cultural environment.

Current studies on culture shock and acculturation are mainly about the Third World countries students who study in the First and Second World countries. For example, Brown and Holloway in the UK conducted a 12-month ethnographic study on the acculturation process of 10 international students from the Third World, discussed the emotions of international

students in the initial stage of their stay [2]. An American scholar conducted an ethnographic study of 18 students from 6 different Third World countries to discuss the acculturation pressure of international students in the United States [3].

Since B&R initiative was proposed, Chinese researchers began to study culture shock of B&R countries people. Xueru Huang studied cross-cultural adaptation of Burmese migrant workers in Ruili city [6]. This study only applies field investigation and the participants are migrant workers who are different from international students. Zukui Fan and Jiong Hu studied culture shock and adaptation among Chinese students from central Asia and applied quantitative analysis [4].

### III. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to draw out and present the acculturative stories of B&R students in China and to obtain the insider perspective on their adaptation process. The researchers applied ethnographic approach which offered the opportunity to study students in the natural setting over a long period using the methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews [2].

#### A. Research Context and Participants

The setting chosen for this research was a large university in central China (C University). C University accommodates 2900 international students and 80% of them are from B&R countries. International students in C University receive Chinese-style management and are equipped with Chinese counsellors. College of International Cultural Exchange of C University is a specialized school of C University. Researchers worked there as volunteers to do participant observation. Convenience sampling was used to choose 7 B&R students from the school of International Education Technology as participants. Table I provides the participants' basic information.

TABLE I. STUDENTS' BASIC INFORMATION

Name	Gender (F/M)	Nationality	Degree	Have studied abroad before(Y/N)
S	F	Mongolia	Master	N
L	M	Mongolia	PhD	N
Q	F	Zimbabwe	Master	N
P	M	Rwanda	Master	N
A	M	Pakistan	Master	N
E	M	Kenya	PhD	Y
M	F	Namibia	Master	Y

All the participants study the same professional classes taught in English by returnee faculty members and other faculty members with overseas study experience.

#### B. Data collection

During participant observation in the classroom, video recording, photo taking and audio recording were taken with the permission of professors and students. Field notes were made in each class. Researchers also participated in College of International Cultural Exchange as volunteers, working in administrative offices and communicating with faculty here.

An individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. Participants were asked to share their own experience in China, personal feelings and opinions upon courses, professors and so on.

#### C. Data Analysis

The recorded interview data was transcribed and then encoded using NVivo software to identify recurring phrases and patterns in the audio data. In order to enhance the validity of this study, all the initial codes strictly followed the concepts used by the interviewees. Grouped the codes into axial codes to establish common themes, that were: (1) the impression on China; (2) the difficulties about courses; (3) the difficulties in life; (4) what and how they expect to improve. Categorize all data and code for each scenario by theme. Each data theme encoded for each topic was then cut and combined into a category. Then keep comparing each topic, searching for similarities and differences. The data were analyzed and compared by two researchers using the triangle analysis method to ensure internal validity.

### IV. RESULTS

Below are some results of our ethnographic approach. First, the researchers learned about each participant's personalities and learning performance. S is introverted and does not communicate with the observers on her own initiative, but will do that with the faculty. L is also introverted and hardly speaks in the classes. Q is outgoing and listens actively and carefully in class. P is introverted and also listens carefully in class. A is very active in the classroom and likes asking professors questions, but he does not take the initiative to communicate with Chinese people mainly because he lacks confidence in speaking Chinese. E is outgoing and speaks Chinese fluently. He is the first student who talked with the observers. Besides, he performs well in class. M is willing to communicate with observers and focuses in class.

During participating in College of International Cultural Exchange as volunteers, researchers found that the normal graduation rate of international students in C University is low and phenomenon of delayed graduation is relatively frequent. Warning and punishments are given to poorly behaved international students every week. Moreover, the number of administrative staff who deals with affairs concerning international students was significantly insufficient.

#### A. Language barriers

Language barriers were found to be a prominent problem, as all the participants are from non-Chinese speaking countries. They shared that though they can express everything in their mother language, translating into Chinese has been a significant challenge.

In the interviews, participants were asked to share their experience of coming to China at the first time. All said that they found language was the biggest problem. E mentioned: *My first time to China is really a weird experience, I could not read Chinese and I didn't understand a lot of culture.*

Language barriers can also cause various difficulties in these students' first trip. For example, P stated: *It was hard because I don't understand Chinese language and I was so*

*hungry because I was not accustomed to Chinese foods, in Guangzhou airport all they served was Chinese food.*

In addition, negative feelings occurred during the long journey to China. As M mentioned: *It does so long. I was so tired, and scared I'll get lost.*

It is necessary for international students to learn a second language, but it is extremely difficult for international students in China to grasp Chinese. E complained: *There are always communication problems with all the teachers. A stated: I only know greetings in Chinese, not any more than this. I only grasp basic Chinese. I can only try to speak. I also want to learn Chinese language.*

Chinese language proficiency is one of key factors of international students' acculturation. Incompetence in Chinese is frustrating, but it can change by making a Chinese friend or companion. As E mentioned: *Now for my PhD, it is not difficult, but for my bachelor and my master, it was very difficult. So I translate into English. It used to be really hard, but actually I become experienced. Actually I had a Chinese girlfriend, we stayed together four years for my bachelor.*

#### *B. Experiences in social connection*

All the participants stated they usually get along with their country mates and then their classmates. They only have a small social network. When E was asked whom does he usually get along with, he said: *Not a lot of people, especially in my country and my classmates. And as friends when you're talking about friends, those are the people you usually associate with. Other than that, I'm always alone.*

However, female international students can be accosted by Chinese counterparts in the campus. M said: *I can make Chinese friends just by walking around. I have so many Chinese friends... I remember last week two Chinese ladies approached me, like they want to change something. They showed me some readings. We can discuss. That's how I make friends just by walking around the school.*

Homesickness and loneliness are considered as common symptoms for international students, especially in the initial stage of the process of cultural adaption [3]. However, friendship networks help to ease loneliness during international students' adaptation process [2]. But it is difficult to make friends and create a new friendship network in a new environment at the beginning, as E honestly said: *Right now I don't really have close friends. I haven't found one yet.* A also stated his confusion about making Chinese friends: *I don't have any Chinese friends except one my lab mate. I just don't meet many people. I live in my room most of time.*

#### *C. Learning difficulties*

Participants' comments on Chinese faculty members and courses are varied, as participants are from different B&R countries and have respective educational backgrounds and personalities. For example, P from Rwanda expressed his satisfaction about Chinese faculty members: *Teachers here are very kind, because back in Rwanda, teachers are like leaders in the classroom. You have to obey them. But in China, you can ask them any question and talk to them.*

Professors can be divided into two groups in terms of teaching style. Some professors are not fluent in English or not willing to talk too much. They just read what they had prepared in class and seldom interacted with students. As E complained: *Teachers should let the students speak. If students don't speak, they will get bored. If teachers just explain, read everything, explain everything, nothing will go to me. Sometimes they're so serious. We are scared to talk to, to ask any question because they are too serious, so it's really something that's bad.*

By contrast, other professors prefer to interact with students. Students in their classes were obviously more active and dedicated. They commonly stated that they could learn more and enjoyed these classes. One participant remarked on one of these professors: *I like his teaching style. He is really free. He is open and makes you relax. You can ask whatever you want. You feel like you're almost the same, but he's older and he is smart.*

In addition, participants commonly prefer returnee professors. These professors speak fluent English and instruct students to answer questions. They have more interactions with students. Participants frequently expressed their affection and preference for these professors and their courses. As P said about one professor: *I really feel good, because he is a good teacher and I like his way of teaching. And the class is interesting.* M said directly: *It's the best class.* These findings support what was reflected by the students in the classroom.

From observations, the researchers also found students responded differently to each lesson, depending on the professor's style of teaching. For example, Dr. L has overseas learning and work experience for many years and got her PhD in America. She usually asked students to answer questions, sometimes mentioning them by name. Students also spoke in class freely and most of them like to make a response to Dr. L as well as asking questions in the class. As researchers noted, there are many interactions between students and professor in this kind of classes. By contrast, Dr. T hardly ever asked questions in her class. In her class, students seldom spoke and easily got bored. Their frequency and time of watching their mobile phone are more than other classes.

Some participants, especially those from Asian countries were silent in the classroom and avoided speaking. In one class, the professor asked an Asian student to answer her question. The student kept his smile but stayed silent for a period of time. It seemed that he was shy and could not give a certain answer so felt embarrassed at that time. Then another African student answered the question automatically.

#### *D. Culture shock*

Most of B&R students expressed their confusion about greeting and contacting with Chinese people. They felt uncomfortable about what Chinese people behaved and did not understand Chinese people's behavior towards them initially. For example, P from Rwanda asked researchers about shaking-hands manner: *Why don't Chinese people shake hands with each other? In my hometown, whoever you meet, you always shake hands with them. No matter it's a new friend or close friend. I think it's rude and impolite.*

Generally, participants commonly stated that Chinese people are less active and hospitable than their country mates and seem to be unwelcoming. A complained: *Your Chinese girls are too rude in the way you respond.* P stated the differences in treating guests: *I think my country mates are more hospitable than Chinese. For example, if you come to my place in my home country, we will offer you food, drinks and something like that, but China is different.* M said: *In my country, it's not good to pass by someone without greeting them. You have to greet them whenever you pass by. But here, it's not like that.* E expressed his opinions towards Chinese people: *They hide everything inside. They usually have a lot to say, but how to say is a problem.*

Moreover, religion is an unavoidable issue when it comes to cultural differences. In the interviews, M mentioned: *In African culture there are more religious. The religion is different, I think. We are Christian.*

On the other hand, international students feel excited at some cultural differences. For example, E from Africa mentioned: *I think Chinese culture is very broad. And its dressing, clothes. Here it is hardly to meet Chinese wearing a Chinese dressing, but in Africa, everybody wears traditional clothes, the fabric, the design and the culture.* He also shared his excitement when seeing Chinese girls wearing dresses above knees, which is not accepted in his country.

Participants from African countries experience the impact of stereotyping and misconceptions about black people. One African student mentioned that: *some kids call me "heiren (black people in Chinese)"... I feel uncomfortable at that time.*

International students sometimes tell a lie to their Chinese professors for fear of being misunderstood. On 4th April, P did not attend the class. His professor told us that P had asked for sick leave. But actually, it was Rwandan Genocide Day that day, which is the real reason for his absence. However, he did not tell the truth to his professors probably because he thought his professors would not understand his culture.

## V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Several limitations should be considered. First, this ethnographic research can only be carried out on a small scale. Second, participants and researchers are not from English speaking countries but they have to communicate in English. Finally, whether participants are willing to express their inner thoughts and true feelings is unclear. Therefore, future research and more in-depth analyses are needed.

Following are some implications given by this research.

1) Provide extracurricular courses and activities related to Chinese language learning. As language barrier is the most significant problem for international students, it is necessary for related departments to arrange extracurricular courses that help improve international students' Chinese. Activities are related to Chinese language learning which involves international students and Chinese students should also be encouraged. This can have a positive influence on establishing the relationships among these students and getting a better

understanding mutually. Moreover, it can also ease the loneliness or alienation of these students by creating welcoming social environments at school [3].

2) Recruit Chinese students as longtime volunteers for international students. An increasing number of international students from B&R countries coming to China and this poses a challenge to administrative departments in Chinese universities. Most administrators found it difficult to manage these international students. Also, most Chinese students are still unfamiliar with students from B&R countries. In this proposed volunteer system, Chinese students are expected to do volunteer work to help international students in all aspects in the long term rather than only at the beginning of a semester. This can not only benefit international students, but also provide Chinese students with an opportunity to learn more about B&R countries and improve their English by communicating with international students.

3) Take advantage of returnees and assign some international students' courses teaching tasks to them. The number of returnees in the faculty at Chinese universities increased steadily. Returnees are proficient in English and more open-minded and tolerant about culture differences, so they can communicate with international students easily and are likely to understand them and satisfy their needs. As a result, international students can overcome many difficulties in their study and even in their daily life.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This article takes an ethnographic approach to understand the difficulties and challenges faced by international students from B&R countries during the acculturation process. It depicts current situation of international students at a Chinese large research university. This study supplements current study on these international students, and it is also innovative to study these international students in China from Chinese researchers' perspectives.

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