



# The Cultural Adaptation Process of Chinese International Students in the United States

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**Abstract.** Studying abroad exposes Chinese students to diverse cultural environments. Acculturation refers to adjusting individuals to distinct cultural patterns, meanings, and values, considering aspects such as language, culture, and background. Increasing numbers of Chinese students prefer to study overseas as China develops. The acculturation of Chinese international students deserves consideration due to cultural distinctions between Chinese and American. Besides, this paper focuses on Chinese international students since there are many students in the United States and American culture is complicated. Therefore, this systematic review is interested in the adaptation of Chinese students studying and living in the United States. This article adopts the W-Curve Model of Cultural Adaption proposed in 1963. The review is intended to analyze the experiences of Chinese students studying in the United States from five different stages: (1) The “Honeymoon” phase; (2) The “Culture Shock” phase; (3) The “Initial Adjustment” phase; (4) The “Isolation” phase; (5) The “Integration” phase. Additionally, this review examines whether the model’s five stages can still adequately explain how Chinese overseas students integrate into today’s shifting social context.

**Keywords:** cultural adaptation · Chinese international students · United States

## 1 Introduction

Studying abroad is one of the prevalent methods of entering the international community. Twenty-first-century undergraduate education has seen a dramatic shift in the importance of studying abroad [1]. Numerous international students are exposed to a wide range of cultural influences from locations all over the world due to foreign schooling, migration, and other international endeavors. There are numerous benefits to studying abroad. Firstly, a report published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) stated that studying abroad expands career possibilities and positively impacts career progression and promotion [2]. This means students who participate in an international program improve their communication, teamwork, and timeliness, all in high demand by employers [2]. Secondly, intercultural competence, adaptability, curiosity, and self-awareness were all considerably enhanced or developed due to study abroad experiences [2]. Then, students who spend time studying in other countries have a more well-rounded understanding of how the world functions when they return to their own countries. Overall,

studying abroad is a trend that has persisted throughout the history of higher education since it helps develop careers and intercultural competency.

Even though studying abroad has some advantages, it also brings challenges. Firstly, it is difficult for students to adapt to new social and educational structures when attending a university in a distinct culture from their own. To be specific, during their journeys, students voiced concerns about their capacity to communicate with local people as well as their academic performance [3]. In addition, the individual cases of despair, emotions of homesickness, and feelings of isolation that international students experience have become considerably more prevalent [4]. This is because they usually lack knowledge of the native language and are alienated from their families, which means they are easily getting lost in different cultural environments [4]. Lastly, another drawback of studying abroad for students from countries economically less developed is the high cost of education and living fees [5]. In general, studying abroad still has many disadvantages, including the consequences of mental health issues, language barriers and high living expenses.

Based on the intricate positive and negative effects of studying abroad described above, cultural adaptation is bound to be a long and complex process. *Acculturation* occurs when people from diverse cultural backgrounds have sustained, direct interactions, leading to changes in one or both groups' social values [6]. An excellent method to analyze this phenomenon is to break down this process into its different stages and examine them individually. Perhaps the earliest staged approach to studying acculturation phenomena was the U-Curve model of cultural adaptation, which was first proposed by Lysgaard [7]. He described that the process of cultural adaptation through time follows a U-shaped curve. This process consists of 4 distinct phases. As time goes on, people progressively get over their initial feelings of dissatisfaction and learn how to communicate effectively within the context of the new culture [7]. The initial stage is the "Honeymoon period," the individual is astonished by all the new cultures that he or she experiences. After the honeymoon period, there is a phase of frustration and disappointment (the "Culture Shock phase"). Then, individuals tend to gradually adapt to the new environment and accept cultural diversity (the "Adjustment" phase). During the fourth stage (the "Mastery" period), the individual's capacity to function in the new culture gradually improves [8].

After the U-shaped curve had been developed, Gullahorn and Gullahorn extended the U-shaped curve to the W-Curve Model of Cultural Adaption in terms of five distinct stages using the same theoretical framework in 1963 [9]. The difference between U-curve and W-Curve is that W-Curve extends the adjustment phase after returning from an individual's home country. Gullahorn and Gullahorn added the "Mental Isolation" and "Integration" periods to the adaptation process. When individuals feel relaxed in the host country, they have the same obstacles in adapting after returning to their own culture [9]. This is called the "Mental Isolation" period. Lastly, individuals are pleased with the new culture and can integrate different cultures (the "Integration" period).

In fact, the above five stages were proposed in the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, the various conditions have undergone tremendous changes in today's society. For example, traditional education has been replaced by online education to a certain extent due to the continuous development of technology and the Internet. It is still

unclear whether the characteristics of the above five stages can still explain the cultural adaptation of international students or whether they have new manifestations in the new period. Therefore, this article takes the education of Chinese international students in the United States as an example to discuss in-depth and systematically the cultural adaptation of international students in the new era. This discussion is mainly divided into the following five stages of the cultural adaptation process: (1) the stage of honeymoon; (2) the stage of culture shock; (3) the stage of initial adjustment; (4) the stage of isolation; (5) the stage of integration.

## 2 Five Stages of Cultural Adaptation Process

### 2.1 The Stage of Honeymoon

In the first stage, the honeymoon period, students may have pleasant feelings while simultaneously gaining an understanding of a new culture. At the same time, focusing on the similarities and ignoring the differences is a common human tendency [10]. This period lasts around three months and is characterized by enthusiasm for acquiring and mastering new skills [10]. To be specific, students are fascinated by everything new in their environment, including the language, people, and food available to them for the first time. As a result, they can deal with cultural differences positively [11].

Chinese international students who first arrived are full of passion because there are several reasons why they choose to study in the United States.. Firstly, they believe staying in the United States will enhance their academic development [12]. There is evidence that they are dissatisfied with their lives in China and have the desire to escape the unfair treatment there. The United States, with its world-class higher education, is their preferred study abroad location because it allows students to demonstrate their uniqueness while also expanding their professional and intellectual horizons [13]. Apart from that, they are attracted to come to the United States because of the improved living and working circumstances. Many Chinese students praised the US's green environment, job advancement, and personal liberty [13]. As a result, Chinese international students eagerly anticipated their new lives in the initial stage.

Chinese students receive assistance from their living roommates or peers when they initially arrive in the United States. In addition, they engage in recreational activities such as pursuing hobbies, volunteering, and working part-time employment. These activities aim to enhance one's quality of life by exploring interests outside of one's academic field, allowing participants to get immersed in a new culture and live a new experience [13]. So far, Chinese international students still exhibit the characteristics described above at this stage. Social networks have enabled many students in today's society to develop significant interactions with other students. International and local students share a common interest in exploring new cultures and making new friendships. It is also crucial to the process of adapting to the culture.

### 2.2 The Stage of Culture Shock

The second stage is characterized by feelings of frustration and disappointment. *Culture Shock* is the physical and mental stress a person experiences in a new cultural environment [14]. Complaining about the instability and negative aspects of a new culture is

common. Specifically, their home culture is different from the host country's culture, making them anxious or angry, and their behaviors towards the new culture may be misunderstood. [11]. The following is a detailed discussion of the culture shock that Chinese students encounter in the United States.

After a limited honeymoon period, Chinese students started to become disoriented and confused for various reasons. Firstly, students from China have a strong social, cultural, and patriotic attachment to their home country, and this attachment does not change throughout their experiences in the United States. The lack of familiarity with American culture, coupled with strong ties to one's native land, might result in significant social isolation [15]. Hence, there is a lack of social engagement between Chinese students and Americans. Secondly, most students have voluntarily chosen to maintain their structural or social segregation. They tend to seek familiarity and support from companions with the same cultural background. This phenomenon will slow down the cultural adaptation process. For example, most professors in the United States emphasize critical thinking and promote discussion and debate. However, Chinese students believe that the student's concentration must be entirely on the knowledge delivered by teachers since they possess power and authority. Consequently, they gravitated toward individuals of a similar cultural background to make communication by speaking mandarin. This indicates that most of the honeymoon period's feelings are eliminated, followed by increased irritation and anxiety. Thirdly, the most significant obstacle for Chinese students is overcoming language hurdles, which frequently occur during the "Culture Shock" period. A lack of fluency in American English can hamper a student's ability to interact with peers, which can occasionally lead to misinterpretation and the difficulty to develop friendships [16]. Thus, Chinese students living in the United States experience more acculturation stress.

This is still the most challenging stage for Chinese students to go through in contemporary. Some students can optimistically deal with cultural differences, such as living habits, whereas other cultural problems, such as conflicting decision-making norms, are more challenging for them to reconcile. An example is that Americans tend to make judgments quickly with relatively little analysis. In contrast, Chinese students prefer to think twice before making decisions. In summary, the "culture shock" period is a stage that Chinese students cannot avoid when they choose to study in the United States.

### **2.3 The Stage of Initial Adjustment**

After experiencing a "Culture Shock" period, international students may find efficient ways to solve the difficulties encountered and be able to engage positively with others [9]. This is called the "initial adjustment" period. At this stage, the most prominent feature is that international students succeed in acquiring sufficient language skills to communicate with people of that culture [17]. They will be able to cope with a cultural shock through language acquisition. Besides, this stage features increasing curiosity and sensitivity to the host country's culture. Individuals exhibited a willingness to learn about their home culture and new culture. They are able to perceive the positive and bad aspects of both cultures and are ready to participate in new experiences with a growing awareness of themselves and others. Confidence, respect for others, and a generally warm attitude are some of the sensations and emotions experienced during this development period

[10]. As a direct consequence, people develop increased tolerance and confidence in themselves.

In terms of Chinese international students in the United States, they have discovered some methods to adapt to a new culture. One common way is to maintain connections to co-nationals or persons who come from the same culture. Providing emotional support has become increasingly more accessible due to the Chinese community. As most Chinese students find themselves under much stress in the US educational system, their Chinese buddies are a tremendous source of emotional support [18]. In addition, by the third year of undergraduate studies, the tension caused by the language barrier had virtually dissipated [19]. They were able to cope with their academic pressures because of their strong academic backgrounds in China. Students from China will eventually discover that accented English does not signify a language deficiency or a lack of intelligence. This progressively increases their confidence in their English proficiency and encourages them to initiate communication with local students. Due to the progressive increase in living time in the United States, the English environment in daily study and life also allows international students to alleviate some of the strain imposed by language difficulties. Hence, Chinese students feel more comfortable and acclimate themselves better on an emotional level at the “initial adjustment” stage.

However, Internet and computer-mediated communication have increased in importance during the last several decades. With the development of online education patterns, Chinese students believe that distinct cultural tendencies online have some detrimental impacts on their learning. Due to the time difference and the inability to converse face-to-face, the differences between American and Chinese students’ thinking patterns become ever more pronounced. Therefore, finding the appropriate coping techniques during the earliest phases of cultural adaptation becomes more difficult.

## **2.4 The Stage of Isolation**

Chinese students tend to adopt the required pattern that is suitable to their new cultural system due to their resocialization experience in America. In fact, if their interactions while studying in the United States were especially rewarding, they may identify strongly with the new cultural patterns [9]. As a consequence, international students frequently discover that they have lost touch with their native culture when they return to China. A similar adjustment process occurs when they return to their home environment, which is known as the “isolation process.”

Chinese students are frequently disoriented when they come back to China. One of the reasons is that as they connect with and adjust to new social structures, they discover that their own patterns of expectations and some of their values have shifted in subtle ways. They have never encountered such a shift in value identity, so they feel uncomfortable when they return to their prior surroundings [9]. At the same time, Chinese students who return from overseas may be alienated if they cannot learn how to express their new values and aspirations without insinuating that they are superior to those students in their home country [9]. Thus, during this period, Chinese students must find a proper strategy to cope with the psychological changes that they are experiencing.

In the 21st century, this phase is becoming more and more prevalent. Overseas students often choose to avoid acting in inconsistent ways with their new developed

values. A typical example is that the returnee may prefer to work for a foreign company rather than a state-owned one. This is due to their knowledge of business methods and concepts, as well as the personal resources they have gathered over their years of school and employment in the United States [20]. Moreover, communication with global companies has improved as the English expressive abilities of these international students have improved. Besides, research showed that students who plan to work outside of academia and research had a 90% probability of pursuing careers in the United States after graduation [21]. This is because most international students are able to adjust to their new environment because of their familiarity with the American educational system. Therefore, Chinese students at this stage are still struggling with acculturation since they do not know how to integrate Chinese and American cultures together.

## 2.5 The Stage of Integration

The last period of the cultural adaptation process is called “integration.” During this stage, students are able to overcome obstacles, work through issues of conflicting identities, and reclaim their own unique selves. This is also the process of recreating and redefinition of their distinct personalities while incorporating appealing aspects learned from others [10]. After critically reviewing their experiences in the U.S. higher education system, these students can establish their new identities by considering who they are in their home country and host country [10].

Students at this stage have the following characteristics. Firstly, identity-integrated students are self-confident throughout their lives, not tethered to their parents or peers, whereas creating connections based on mutual support [10]. For example, on and off-campus, they participate in various extracurricular activities to learn more about the people around them and their interests. Secondly, in the university setting, they acknowledge and appreciate the existence of all kinds of different groupings, as well as the significance of individual variations in educational and cultural settings [10]. These differences include ethnicity, race, gender, nationality, religion and moral values. Thirdly, they are ready to embrace and comprehend both their home culture and the culture of their host nation and are ready to move on to more remarkable cultural change and the exploration of cultural diversity [10]. Overall, students can develop intercultural ideals and expectations while just a few have reached this stage.

Even now, Chinese international students still struggle to get to this stage in their study abroad experiences. One of the reasons is that they suffer from a condition known as the “marginal syndrome,” in which they are conflicted between their cultural roots in China and the ideals of the West [21]. Most Chinese students who study abroad experience homesickness and adhere to their native culture due to the unfamiliarity and alienation of real western living [21]. However, students have gained a unique and deep feeling toward American culture after staying in America for several years. Consequently, most of them are culturally ambiguous, swinging between Chinese and American cultures. They seldom participate in cultural reflection, and the entire cultural adaptation process still takes an extended period.

### 3 Conclusion

As studying abroad becomes increasingly popular, many international students are influenced by a wide range of cultures around the world. This article aims to analyze the acculturation process of international students from China studying in the United States. The W curve model introduced by Gullahorn and Gullahorn in 1963 divides the process of acculturation into five stages: (1) the stage of honeymoon; (2) the stage of culture shock; (3) the stage of initial adjustment; (4) the stage of isolation; (5) the stage of integration. However, the model of cultural adaptation needs to be re-examined and re-evaluated with the continuous development of information and technology today. It was found that during the first period of “Honeymoon,” Chinese students showed curiosity and interest in the new environment. At the same time, with the use of social networks, Chinese students still maintain a positive attitude toward American culture when they first come to the United States. The “Culture Shock” period describes those Chinese students studying in the United States are still unable to escape due to the influences of nationalism, social isolation, and language limitations. After spending more time in the US, Chinese students found more efficient strategies to deal with their challenges during the initial culture shock stage. This is called the “Initial Adjustment” period. As their English skills improve and they can reach out for support within the Chinese community, which helps alleviate some of their anxieties. However, finding the appropriate coping strategy at the initial stage can be difficult because of the widespread adoption of online education in recent years. The “Isolation” period describes the fourth phase of the cultural adaptation process. Returning international students to China often report feeling disoriented because of the impact of American culture and values on their own. This is a more typical occurrence currently since many foreign students decide to either work in the United States or return to China to work for multinational corporations. In the last stage, known as the “Integration” period, Chinese students consider their experiences in both China and the United States to form a new sense of identity. Most Chinese students still struggle to properly integrate Chinese and American cultures due to homesickness for China and their own distinct perspective of American culture. Thus, cultural adaptation is still a lengthy process.

Besides the above discussion, there are still some limitations of this paper. For Chinese overseas students, it appears that not all stages of the W-curve model apply to their situations. As a result, many factors need to be considered when analyzing the adaptation process of Chinese international students. Then, there may be many similarities in living customs between the two countries even though there are variances in terms of acculturation. This could influence how Chinese students understand America. The future study in this area should focus on how Chinese international students’ cultural adaption is influenced by the evolution of various social contexts and digital technologies. Chinese overseas students studying in the United States would benefit from hearing some recommendations and strategies for adjusting to American society. For example, what American universities can do to assist Chinese students in speeding up their cultural adjustment process. The findings in this paper have significant consequences for Chinese international students, university administrators, and anyone interested in studying in the United States.

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