

## **EFFECTS AND REMEDIES OF CULTURE SHOCK ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN CHINA**

**Patrick, Ogechukwu Blessing** (Corresponding Author)

Faculty of Education, Department of Education, Leadership, and Management

Southwest University, Chongqing, 400715, **CHINA**

Corresponding author's email address: patrickblessingogechukwu@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0129-3776

Facebook and LinkedIn: Oge Patrick

### **ABSTRACT**

The increasing cultural diversity within the tertiary education requires students to be knowledgeable and effective in cross-cultural adjustment and managing potential acculturative stress. One of the ways to increase their cross-cultural adjustment and mitigate culture shock is via cross-cultural training (CCT). The research findings also shows that awareness campaign and cross cultural training as most essential in intercultural communication and alleviation of culture shock – 67.4%, followed by co-operation – 48.4%, language proficiency classes – 38.9%, counseling – 28.4%, and Acculturation – 22.1%.The researcher, by this paper hopes that in dealing with one of the most common problems of intercultural communication – culture shock, the intercultural communication competence of the international students in China will be improved, as well as their abilities to manage it.

**Keywords:** Culture shock, higher education, cross-cultural training, international students, China.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019), student mobility has expanded massively over the last two decades, it rose from 2 million in 1998 to 5.3 million in 2017, growing at an average annual rate of 5% among OECD countries and 6% among non-OECD countries, and this number keeps growing. The rapid development of technology and the popularity of the Internet has driven globalization and internationalization (Shieh, 2014). International students get admitted into Chinese higher institutions in increasing numbers from all regions of the world (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013), and with them comes dissimilar socio-cultural backgrounds, and varying levels of academic preparedness (Sánchez-Sánchez et al, 2017). These foreign students are confronted by several difficulties and problems while living in China, such as language challenges, conflicts, adjustments to food of host country, anxiety, and loneliness. As they cannot master the social conventions of their new environment in a short time, are uninformed and lacks knowledge of the rules of social behavior that influences and guides social and interpersonal conduct, they eventually experience culture shock (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Saylag, 2014).

To this end, international competence, which entails integration with different cultures, emphasis on academic background as the minor, and stresses on international communication capabilities, i.e. ability to relate with people with distinct and different cultures, has changed from a “plus” into a “must” (Shieh, 2014, p.58). Numerous research on the adjustment of foreign students into foreign cultures showed that international students faced not only academic pressure but also psychological, social, and cultural pressure from being in different environments (Aileen et al, 2010; Shieh, 2014). The transition from a culture to another not

only presents odd and strange set of variables and experiences for international students, it significantly results into psychological stress, bad living quality, culture shock, academic pressure, and produce feelings of depression and anxiety (Saylag, 2014; Shieh, 2014; Wang, 2015).

With regards to mitigating culture shock, Ferraro (2006) opines the importance of migrants preparing as much as possible before entering a new cultural environment. It might be impossible to eliminate the stress of culture shock completely but studying the new culture in as many aspects as possible prior to the actual physical acculturation process could help. It also becomes critical that individuals in leadership, teaching and non-academic professions be sensitive to and aware of foreign students who are in this process. They must not make the assumption that all students will undergo the process in an identical manner or within the same time frame. Since even vague and indistinct events may cause additional stress, the understanding of these events by school leaders in charge of international students, where possible, may reduce tension and stress, and help resolve negative emotions (Saylag, 2014).

### **Statement of the problem**

Many of the foreign students studying their different majors at the higher institutions in China usually remain within their own groups, stick to their own communities, and often fail to make contact with local students and local people. Bochner & Orr (1979), Pritchard & Skinner (2002) found that foreign students generally maintain close, intimate friendships with co-nationals when abroad and their contacts with host nationals tend to be focused on their professional or academic goals. Although these student come to China with high hopes of making new friends, broadening their horizon and their range of experience, their lack of knowledge in personal adjustment can be disappointing, consequently resulting to culture shock, and may be counterproductive in academic terms. Furthermore, Language is inexorably another important challenge faced by foreign students in China and one linked to the degree of comfort that the international students feels in their new environment and their desire to interact with it (Saylag, 2014). International students having good spoken Chinese are those most likely to socialize, be socialized and identified with. They receive strong credit for their efforts to relate, engage, and practice perseveringly, leaving the category of students who are comfortable, as expected, in their own communities and do not seek to initiate interaction with the Chinese and are typified for self-exclusion, being unfriendly, distant, rude or arrogant. Even as Chinese universities make efforts to provide high-quality educational opportunities for international students, providing sociocultural contexts and varying programs to accommodate and encourage students' full participation in the formal and informal social activities of the campus with the humanitarian purpose of helping the international students to settle in more happily and simultaneously mitigate culture shock and loneliness (Pritchard & Skinner, 2002) and perhaps giving them some insight into the factors for forming positive human relationships in a foreign culture, but still, Culture shock remains an inevitable experience for international students studying in the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) especially for non-Asians in relation to the wide gap of differences in language, the diet, culture, and environment, and this experience of culture shock and foreign-language-induced introversion inhibits a proper adjustment to the academic and social environment leading to prejudice, complaints, depression, and ethnocentrism.

### **Significance of research**

The findings from this research will be useful to:

- Teachers, because they would be able to better empathize with their international students.
- Counselors, because they would be more knowledgeable in knowing what situations are most likely to crop up with international

students and can plan to address these situations. • Research Psychologists, so as to know more about students' behavior and attitude and how the environment could affect them. • International students, because it would serve as a means of reflection for them. It would also help them remember that they are not alone in the challenges they may have faced or have had to face.

### **Research aim**

The aim of this research is to investigate the culture shock experiences and its effects on international students, possible mitigating remedies to culture shock for international students in China, and discuss how Intercultural training or Cross-Cultural Training (CCT in tertiary education can help mitigate culture shock and enhance cross-cultural adjustment. These aligns with the statements of the Russian scientists, Valeeva & Valeeva (2017), who considered the aim of intercultural education to be the formation of a person capable of active life in a multicultural environment, having a strong sense of understanding and respect for others, the ability to live in peace and harmony with people of different nationalities and beliefs. To this end, the research questions to be addressed goes as follows:

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the effects of culture shock on international students in China?
2. What are the remedies to culture shock for international students in China?

This research will be organized in four sections: the first will be a review of literature on culture shock and its implications, cross-cultural adaptation and adjustment capturing cross-cultural training as a mitigation measure and a summary on the theoretical concept. Second, the proposed quantitative research design of this study will be presented; third, data collection and discussion; and, fourth, conclusion and directions for future research in the area of intercultural adjustment of international students in China will be offered.

### **Culture shock.**

Culture shock is the affective, behavioral, and cognitive disorientation that sojourners experience when in an unfamiliar culture (Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). Culture shock can be seen as an unfamiliar event, which is not only under-defined, is little understood but also is unpredictable. Saylag (2014) referred to culture shock as a period of psychological distress, readjustment and stressful demands, a time when people process many powerful emotions, both positive and negative, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

### ***Implications of culture shock***

#### *Ethnocentrism*

In a global world with intense migration and ethnic revival, there is a sharp problem of young people's tolerant attitude towards other cultures, as well as productive interaction skills with people belonging to different cultural groups' development (Bizumić, 2012). Ethnocentrism refers to intergroup expressions of preference and a superiority complex view that considers one's own ethnic identity in the superlative, i.e. that one's own culture is better than anyone else's culture (Bizumić & Duckitt, 2012; Marbaniang, 2016; CheggStudy, 2018). Culture shock contributes to foreign students in China often creating a hierarchy of cultures with their own being supreme (Saylag, 2014).

#### *Learning dissatisfaction*

Learning dissatisfaction is another consequence of culture shock for higher education students. Huang (2012) defined Learning Satisfaction as the perception and attitudes of learners engaged in learning activities or the satisfaction with learning demands, resulting from learners' choices,

goals, and satisfaction with the whole learning activities. Chi (2011) regarded Learning Satisfaction as when the learners' learning expectations before learning activities are achieved with saturated pleasure and active attitudes. Therefore, learning dissatisfaction refers to when a learner's expectations before or during learning activities were not achieved. Culture shock inhibits achievement of expectations and satisfaction of learners.

### *Conflicts*

In an intercultural context, conflict is the explicit or implicit emotional struggle and frustrations between people from different cultures over perceived and assumed incompatible goals, norms and values, scarce resources, and/or communication outcomes (Njogu, 2017). Like Akarowhe (2018) rightly noted, Cultural shocks also induce conflict. Conflict experienced by a foreign student as a result of culture shock may be internal, arising within an individual - depression and frustration, or external, referring to aggression towards other and isolation from friends.

### *Emotional imbalance*

Emotional balance of an individual is another important factor that helps foreign students to adapt meaningfully to the everyday activities of their new lives in China. The emotional reactions may include loneliness, homesickness, poor self-confidence, mood swings, disorientation, anxiety, insecurity, depression, etc. This inability to adjust positively to the new culture emotionally handicaps students and can degenerate to depression, personality and behavioral disorder.

### *Deviance*

Deviance refers to behaviors that do not conform to the "institutionalized set-up or code of conduct" (Akarowhe, 2018, p.1) and caused by the inability of foreign students to adjust effectively to the culture of the new place. These behaviors that may be caused by young students' response to culture shock may include disobedience to constituted authorities, fighting, and illicit relationships. The inadequacy to positively respond to culture shock may induce the student to be tagged a deviance.

### *Foreign-Language-induced introversion*

This was referred to by Akarowhe (2018) referred to as "communication defectiveness" (p.2). Language differences is one of the key causes of culture shock on foreign students. As earlier mentioned, language is inexorably linked to the degree of comfort and ease of cultural adaptability and adjustment by foreign students (Saylag, 2014). Zafar & Meenakshi (2012) confirmed a relationship between second language acquisition and introversion, with language here referring to the language of the host culture, Chinese language, and induced introversion referring to the tendency of turning inward as a result of inability to express oneself in a new environment, and Picardo (2012) pointed out that foreign students will be more eager to adapt to a new environment if they could speak and understand the language of the host culture. Poor language abilities do not only cause culture shock, affect communication and culture adjustment, it also affects academic performance of students. The inability to assimilate the current culture language affects teaching and learning process as students find it difficult to communicate effectively and feels isolated during class discussions. The implication of this is communication defectiveness and introversion caused by poor language abilities.

## **Cross-cultural Adaptation and Adjustment**

Cross-cultural adaptation is a concept used to represent various other terms such as assimilation, acculturation, integration, and adjustment has been defined as a complex, multi-staged process of cultural encounter which an individual has to go through to be able to work effectively and

live comfortably in a place that is new and unfamiliar to them. (Udrea & Dumitriu, 2015; Oregon State University International Affairs, 2020). Saylag (2014) noted that when people identify with a particular group, and they begin to socialize, many personal changes take place; the mental health status of the individual improves and there is an increase in the sense of personal competence.

#### *Cross cultural training, formal and informal*

Intercultural awareness helps individuals to understand the target culture and adjust to the new environment. Psychological studies have identified a wide range of variables which includes knowledge, language proficiency, attitudes, and previous experiences, levels of ethnocentrism, social support, cultural similarity, and self-controls as all playing a significant role at one time or another (Bennett, 1993; Bennett, 2007). Among these, three factors have consistently emerged as leading contributors to adjustment: knowledge of host and home culture, ethnocentrism, and language proficiency, supporting the research which intends to posit that ethnocentrism is one of the results of culture shock, and language proficiency and cultural awareness are important for cross-cultural adaptation and adjustment. Leask (2009) referred to the formal and the informal curriculum as “a dynamic interplay of teaching and learning processes, content, and experiences in and out of the classroom because together they shape the lived experience of all students” (p.208). The aforementioned study notes that the formal curriculum is fundamentally a ‘sequenced programme of teaching and learning activities and experiences organized around defined content areas, topics, and resources, the objectives of which are assessed in various ways including examinations and various types of assignments, laboratory sessions, and other practical activities, while the informal curriculum refers to those optional activities that are not part of the formal requirements of the degree or programme of study, which nevertheless contribute to and in many ways define the culture of the campus and host culture and thus are an important part of the landscape in which the formal curriculum is enacted’ (Leask, 2009, p.207). Besides the cross-cultural training (awareness campaign), other means of mitigating culture shock and assist foreign students with adjusting to China includes counseling, acculturation, co-operation, and language proficiency classes.

#### **Theoretical framework**

The cross-cultural adaptation theory from Kim (2001) provides the conceptual basis for this research. The theory proposes that cross-cultural adaptation is a ‘dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments’ (p. 31). The theory also emphasizes that when foreigners begin residence in a new culture, they will naturally go through a cross-cultural adjustment process. Similarly, Gudykunst & Kim (2003) defined adaptation as the process of adapting to a new and unfamiliar culture that is fundamentally a journey of personal change in which strangers who are enculturated in one culture ‘cultivates an inroad into another culture’ (p. 373), making cultural and social proficiency, therefore, necessary skills for foreigners in order to achieve their aims and objectives in their host countries concerning their career, academics or health goals.

#### **2. Materials and Methods**

This research population included the international students studying at the different universities in China. The study sample included 285 international students from different age groups, ethnic backgrounds, different universities in different provinces in China, and different academic majors. The data collection instrument used was an adapted and self-constructed survey developed from previous research and the bulk of relevant literature review. The questionnaire included 2 major parts: participant personal profile and culture shock interaction

in China. The data collection instrument was pilot tested and reviewed according to valid feedback and suggestions received. 285 international students participated in the research and percentages of data received were calculated on the SPSS 20 program. This research was aimed at investigating the culture shock experiences and its effects on international students, possible mitigating remedies to culture shock for international students in China, and discuss how Intercultural training or Cross-Cultural Training (CCT) in tertiary education can help mitigate culture shock and enhance cross-cultural adjustment.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### Participants' profile

Gender	N	%
Male	168	58.9
Female	117	41.1

**Table 1:** Gender of the participants

Source: Field data, 2020

Ages	N	%
21-29	180	63.2
30-39	99	34.7
40-49	6	2.1

**Table 2:** Ages of the participants

Source: Field data, 2020

Duration of stay in China	N	%
Less than a year	39	13.7%
1-5 years	222	77.9%
6-10 years	24	8.4%

**Table 3:** Duration of Stay in China of the participants

Source: Field data, 2020

Chinese language proficiency level	N	%
HSK 1-3	42	14.7%
HSK 4-6	153	53.7%
Fluent, no certifications	12	4.2%
Basics only	45	15.8%
No proficiency at all	33	11.6%

**Table 4:** Chinese Language Proficiency Level of participants

Source: Field data, 2020

Knowledge of Chinese culture	N	%
Formal teachings	207	72.6%
No formal teachings	39	13.7%
Taught, but not formally	39	13.7%

**Table 5:** Knowledge of Chinese Culture of the participants

Source: Field data, 2020

<b>Cultural Misunderstandings</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Experienced	117	41.1%
Not experienced	129	45.3%
Unsure	39	13.7%

**Table 6:** Cultural Misunderstandings experienced by the participants

Source: Field data, 2020

1. What are the effects of culture shock on international students in China?

Culture shock, being an inevitable experience for foreign students in China, is experienced in different ways. From the results of the survey, 50.5% of the participating international students (n=151.5) reported “language differences” to be one of the ways in which they have experienced culture shock. 31.6% reported “need for sudden adaptation” (n=90) as source of culture shock. For 60% of the respondents (n=171), “differences in food and eating customs” formed a big challenge. 67.4% (n=186) of the participants reported their culture shock source to be as a result of the “locals taking pictures of them stealthily”. These are few examples of culture shock experienced by foreign students in China. With these experiences come certain unavoidable effects and consequences on the foreign students. On investigation, 50.5% of the participants (n=144) reported “foreign induced introversion” as one of the effects of culture shock on international students in China. This can be deduced to mean that international students agreed that in the process of adapting to the new environment, poor grasp of the host country’s language in this case, Chinese language, affects their ability to express themselves thereby resulting to withdrawnness and isolation. This implies that when foreign students become frustrated making efforts to communicate, they keep to themselves, and by this, foreign students, even those with extroverted personalities might become introverted in certain conditions. 41.1% of the participating students (n=117) pointed out “learning dissatisfaction” as one of the consequences of culture shock. Learning dissatisfaction refers to the non-achievement of a learner’s expectations set before or during learning activities. As some foreign students receive their lectures in the Chinese Mandarin, culture shock from poor language proficiency affects learner’s expectations. 33.7% (n=96) referred to “ethnocentrism and conflict” as a factor responsible for culture shock on the foreign students. Intolerant attitude towards other people’s culture and the consideration of one’s identity in the superlative is often a mutual situation in a mixed cultural setting. These internal and external conflicts experienced and perceived by the international students can be as much as their lack as the lack of others (foreigners and locals) in welcoming a culture different from theirs. Incompatible norms, values, and unexpected communication outcomes puts great pressure for adjustment to the international students, leading to culture shock. 35.8% of the students (n=102) indicated “emotional imbalance” as a cause of culture shock on them. The pressure to adjust quickly to the new culture with also the strong need to perform well academically encumbers students’ progress. Depression and behavioral disorder results when foreign students are hindered by their inability to adjust well to Chinese culture. 31.6% (n=90) reported “Deviance” as one of the consequences of culture shock on international students in China. Before understanding the system and structure in China, some international students are liable to disobey (often, unintentionally) the constituted rules and regulations. Others may include fighting as a response to unawareness or poor knowledge of who to report unfair treatments to. The inadequacy of young students to adjust and accept the new culture leads to certain deviant behaviors.

2. What are the remedies to culture shock for international students in China?

To improve the quality of life for foreign students in China, foreign students were surveyed to determine which factors could aid in remedying and alleviating the effects of culture shock.

67.4% (n=192) of the participants suggested awareness campaign and cross cultural training. Awareness campaign and cross cultural training is a state of conscious public enlightenment. This is an avenue to reveal certain facts/information to a predetermined number of persons/people. Culture shock among foreign students can be tackled by increase in knowledge and information. On trainings such as these, guidance counselors, psychiatrists, experts, and teachers through organized workshops or orientations brief the foreign students on a number of ways they could adjust positively to the new culture of the place one find him/herself. Events like these avail international students the opportunity to ask questions pertaining to the challenges they face during acculturation, then the experts in attendance will respond to the questions providing the students aids and supports necessary on a long run for positive adapting to the Chinese culture. Electronic agents of communication resources like radio, televisions, and social network platforms can also be employed for the awareness campaign and dissemination of information.

48.4% (n=138) of the participants suggested co-operation. The maxim ‘Tell me and I will listen; show me and I will understand; engage me and I will learn’ is of deep relevance here. This is because it is only through the practice of co-operation that foreign students can become competent communicators and develop the skills and attitudes to complement the theories they are exposed to in intercultural communication classes (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007). Studying abroad is a period of stress, therefore making co-operation an indispensable factor to a proper adjustment to a new culture and environment. As people move from one cultural environment to another, adaptation and adjustment to the new culture will not be automatic, and through the gradual process, co-operation is necessary to provide and cultivate a mutual relationship between the different individuals in that given context aimed at achieving assimilation into the new culture. The cooperative process for the foreign students would require encouraging the students to be friendly, participation in group works and class discussions to encourage synergy, helping fellow students, and adhering to institutionalized code of conduct. Cooperation will breed less ethnocentric and less biased students who become culturally impartial and flexible to policies, at this point, practices will become increasingly congruent with the culture of the students. This way, the foreign students would adapt to the new culture and enjoy the process.

38.9% (n=111) of the participants suggested language proficiency classes. The role of languages in intercultural engagement cannot be overemphasized. No meaningful connection with the Chinese environment will be achieved without a meaningful proficiency in Chinese mandarin as it serves as a medium for understanding different ways of interacting, communicating and working with other students, teachers, and Chinese locals. Learning the mandarin do not only facilitate good study experiences, it also enriches cultural experiences, and serve to enhance their employability (Tran & Pham, 2015). The language barriers encountered by some students in China can be perceived to be as much as their lack of ability in welcoming a kind of language different from theirs. The Chinese proficiency exam, known in Chinese as Hànyǔ shuǐpíng kǎoshì 汉语水平考试, with levels 1-6, is a very good program for building and improving one’s Chinese proficiency all international students in higher education should be encouraged to do so.

28.4% (n=81) of the participants participants suggested counseling. Counseling refers to a professional assistance offered to resolve another individual’s difficulties. Counseling can help students deal with personal challenges, difficulties with studies, and also with re-adjustment problems (Keller, 2014). Through counseling, an assigned guidance counselor assists a foreign student in remedying his/her culture shock, hence helping him/her to cope with the new culture.

The foreign student will be enlightened by the counselor on ways he/she can positively acclimatized to the new culture within and outside the school environment. The student is expected to cooperate with the counselor with the view of having insight on how to meaningfully adjust to the new culture, the counselor offer advice to the student based on received/perceived data and information (Akarowhe, 2018). The counseling process requires a constant check-up by the counselor on the adolescent student concern. Within the process of time, the counseling process is anticipated to yield a positive outcome, by making the student to deliberately surmounting challenges possess by the new culture by adjusting meaningfully to the new culture.

22.1% (n=63) of the participants suggested Acculturation. Acculturation is a process in which an individual adopt, acquires and adjust to a new cultural environment (Akarowhe, 2018). According to Igbo (2003) acculturation is the process of acquiring or taking on by an individual or groups the culture traits of another culture. Acculturation is the adoption of new traits or patterns as a result of contact with another culture. Intercultural awareness includes: (1) knowledge of the effects of culture on the beliefs and behaviors of others; (2) awareness of one's own cultural attributes and biases and their impact on others; and (3) understanding the impact of sociopolitical, environmental and economic context of others. In a medical setting, intercultural awareness requires the knowledge and interpersonal skills that allow health care providers to understand, appreciate and work with individuals from cultures other than their own. Intercultural awareness involves an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences, a degree of self-awareness, and knowledge of the patient's culture and the adaptation of skills. Acculturation includes learning the language dressing and belief system of the new culture, mode of interaction, arts and skills of the new culture. The time taken for full adaptation to a new environment may vary from one student to another and from one personality to another.

#### **4. Conclusion and recommendations for further research**

Cultural shock is inevitable in the life of the foreign students in China (Akarowhe, 2018), therefore paying attention to developing ways to assist foreign students surmount its effect is very crucial. Based on the literature review and research findings, it can be deduced that culture shock is real for foreign students in China. The research findings also shows that awareness campaign and cross cultural training as most essential in intercultural communication and alleviation of culture shock – 67.4%, followed by co-operation – 48.4%, language proficiency classes – 38.9%, counseling – 28.4%, and Acculturation – 22.1% . It is also important that there should be a keen collaboration between school authorities and students, in order to assist the latter cope with cultural shock and make meaningful advancements on their academic goals and adjustment to China. The limitations to this research includes limited access to students. It is recommended to conduct the research with more participants. It is also recommended that further research be carried out in selected areas as their findings can be contextualized and implementations of findings will be more effective.

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