

Cultural Experience and Confusion Study of International Students in Chinese Universities

Donghong Li¹, Min Yang^{2,*}, Tongtong Lyu¹, and Bo Li³

¹ International College, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China

² School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

³ School of Electronics and Information, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China

Email: lidonghong@nwpu.edu.cn (D.L.); yangmin1979@163.com (M.Y.); lyutt@nwpu.edu.cn (T.L.); libo803@nwpu.edu.cn (B.L.)

*Corresponding author

Manuscript received June 18, 2024; accepted August 15, 2024; published April 25, 2025.

Abstract—The surge of international students in China in recent years has highlighted the challenges of cultural adaptation. A mixed-methods approach, combining interviews with a quantitative study, was used to gather information. The interviews were conducted initially with a subgroup of international students, and their responses informed the design of a questionnaire completed by 345 participants. Findings show that 61.45% of participants reported no difficulties practicing their personal beliefs in China, while 38.55% encountered challenges such as legal obstacles and the language barrier within Chinese society. To address these issues, solutions are proposed to help minimize confusion related to personal beliefs faced by international students living in China.

Keywords—international students in China, cultural experience, adaptation, higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

International students from all countries encounter a wide range of cultural differences in China (mainland of China in this article). Their experiences vary, and so do the problems they encounter. When faced with these problems, it leads to various forms of confusion. The main objective of this article is to focus on these confusions from a cultural perspective based on faith.

There has been a worldwide surge in the number of students studying in various universities abroad with Chinese universities being no exception [1]. International students (studying in China) have constituted a growing population in Chinese higher education in the past few decades. The number of international students studying at universities in China (Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan not included in the report) almost reached half a million with 492,185 students in 2018, according to the latest figures from the Ministry of Education of China released on 12th April 2018. China has become the biggest study destination in Asia with students from South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan in the top 3 countries to study in China as of 2018 [2].

Before leaving for China, some students assume they will be traveling to a country with a large and diverse culture. However, once entering China, they find that a great variety of elements in Chinese culture, many of which are experienced on their university campuses, are very difficult to comprehend or manage. Religion is one of the most sensitive aspects of culture and can play an important role in human civilization and social development [3]. Introducing international students to the religious situation in China is an inevitable challenge for university management and is approached in various ways by Chinese universities. Challenges experienced by international students may relate

to unfamiliar academic practices, language barriers, and financial pressures, including unfamiliar cultural practices of the host country [4]. In this article, only the religious aspect of culture is studied. To our best knowledge, a lot of research has been done on international students in tertiary institutions regarding their culture, studies, or life adaptation in China, but none on their religious adaption.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of cross-cultural adaptation refers to the psychological and behavioral changes that individuals experience when they move from one cultural context to another. It involves the process of adjusting to and functioning effectively in a new cultural environment. Cross-cultural adaptation encompasses various aspects, including changes in attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviors, and social interactions. It is influenced by factors such as the individual's cultural background, the characteristics of the host culture, the level of contact and interaction between the two cultures, and the individual's personal resources and coping strategies [5].

International students' cross-cultural learning situations not only affect their academic level during schooling, but also relate to the quality of Chinese international education and talent cultivation. Surveys show that international students still face adaptation problems. This not only affects their learning quality and experience, but also affects their evaluation of the chosen school and study destination, and may even affect the school's and country's international reputation. Therefore, studying the issues of cross-cultural learning adaptation of Chinese international students is not only urgently needed now but also has long-term significance [6, 7].

III. METHODOLOGY

A. A Combination of an Interview and a Questionnaire

The authors did an interview polit study. The analysis of the interview findings was used to design the questionnaire on what kind of questions to ask. The questionnaire is the main way of obtaining answers from participants for the rest of the study. The interview was conducted at a university in Xi'an.

B. Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire section was made based on the results of the interviews done earlier. The following important factors were considered in the questionnaire design:

All the questions in the questionnaire are tailored to the purpose of the study by referring to the results of the interviews done earlier. The length of the questionnaire, question order, terminologies used, etc. were taken into consideration to make sure the questions asked were relevant and appropriate for the participants. The English proficiency level of international students from non-English speaking countries was also taken into account.

C. Questionnaire Content

There are 2 parts to the questionnaire. Part one asks questions about the basic information of the participant while part two asks questions about their faith.

The main purpose of this research is to find out what aspects most influence the faith activities of international students in China. There were enough closed questions and open questions in the questionnaire to meet the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was designed with the theoretical ability to largely meet the study’s objectives.

D. Data Collection

The questionnaire design was made using Google Forms and was distributed in June 2021 with a 15-day deadline after its distribution. The target group was international students from two universities in Xi’an. A total of 345 valid questionnaires were returned.

IV. RESULTS

A. Basic Information about the Participants

There were 345 participants in this study, as shown in Table 1, of whom 268 were male, accounting for 77.68% of the total, and 77 were female, accounting for 22.32%. The ratio of males to females was 3.5:1.

Table 1. Number and percentage of male and female participants

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	77	22.32%
Male	268	77.68%
Total	345	100.00%

As for age range, the largest number of participants were aged between 26 & 30 years, representing 139 participants or 40.39% of the overall total, and the smallest number were aged between 17 & 19, representing 12 participants or 3.48% of the overall total, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Age range and percentage of the participants

Age range	Number	Percentage
17–19	12	3.48%
20–22	31	8.99%
23–25	120	34.78%
26–30	139	40.29%
> 31	43	12.46%
Total	345	100.00%

In terms of length of time in China, the largest number of participants, 110 in number, representing 31.88% of the overall total had been in China for 3–4 years. The smallest number, 39 in total representing 11.37% of the overall total had been in China for less than one year, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Length of stay in China

Years	Number	Percentage
1–2 years	106	30.72%
3–4 years	110	31.88%
< 1 year	39	11.30%
> 4 years	90	26.09%
Total	345	100.00%

For the type of study, i.e., the type of degree pursued, the largest number of participants were Master’s students, 187 in total or 54.20% of the overall number, and the smallest were Ph.D. students, 37 in total or 10.72% of the overall number, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Student type of participant

Degree Candidate Type	Number	Percentage
Bachelors	121	35.07%
Masters	187	54.20%
PhD	37	10.72%
Total	345	100.00%

Concerning the location of the participants, shown in Table 5, most participants were largely based in Xi’an, with 339 participants in Xi’an, representing 98.26% of the overall total.

Table 5. Participant’s city

City	Number	Percentage
Xi’an	339	98.26%
Others	6	1.74%
Total	345	100.00%

B. Information about Faith Practice of the Participants

The information on the religious background of the participants is shown in Table 6. Islam was the largest of all participants, representing 148 people, or 42.90% of the overall total. The least number of participants were atheists, representing 6 people or 1.74%.

Table 6. Participant’s religion types

Religion	Number	Percentage
Islam	148	42.90%
Christianity/Protestant	129	37.39%
Catholic	37	10.72%
Buddhist	16	4.64%
Hindu	9	2.61%
Atheist or Agnostic	6	1.74%
Total	345	100.00%

Results from the questionnaire based on whether participants could practice their religion without difficulty can be seen in Table 7, with 212 participants (61.45%) saying they could practice their religion without difficulty.

Table 7. Whether participants can practice their faith without difficulty in China

Practice Religion	Number	Percentage
Yes	212	61.45%
No	133	38.55%
Total	345	100.00%

As to whether any unpleasant occurrences had taken place during religious activities, 302 of those who participated claimed nothing unpleasant had happened, accounting for 87.54% of the total, while 43 people, or 12.46% of the total, had experienced unpleasant events, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Whether experienced unpleasant religious things

Unpleasant Religious Things	Number	Percentage
No	302	87.54%
Yes	43	12.46%
Total	345	100.00%

The questionnaire was very important in terms of mentioning the kind of difficulties that participants encountered in their religious practice. As seen in Table 9, 149 (40.27% of the total) experienced no difficulties. 148 (40.00% of the total) had difficulty finding a legal place to pray. 37 (10.00% of the total) claimed they had no religious places to go for prayers. 36 students (9.73% of the total) said they had difficulty understanding the Chinese language.

Table 9. Difficulties met in practicing faith

Difficulties	Number	Percentage
A. No difficulties experienced	149	40.27%
B. Difficulty in finding a legal place to pray	148	40.00%
C. No religious places to go for prayers	37	10.00%
D. Difficulty in understanding the Chinese language	36	9.73%
Total	370 ^a	100.00% ^b

^a The total number of participants here exceeded 345 because participants could choose more than one option for this question.

^b The denominator of this percentage is 370, not 345.

According to the law, religious activities on Chinese campuses are illegal. As seen in Table 10, the results of the questionnaire show that 213 (61.74% of the total) of the participants knew this, while 132 (38.26% of the total) did not know that this is illegal.

Table 10. Whether know that practicing faith on campus is illegal

Know Illegal	Number	Percentage
Yes, I do	213	61.74%
No, I don't	132	38.26%
Total	345	100.00%

It is also important to know how much the participants know about the laws related to religion. From Table 11, it can be seen that 203 (58.84%) only knew a little. 100 (28.99%) claimed not to know the relevant laws. 24 people (6.96%) knew about the laws. A further 18 people (5.22%) said they knew most of the laws.

Table 11. Whether participants know the laws and regulations concerning faith

Whether Know the Laws	Number	Percentage
I know a little	203	58.84%
No, I don't	100	28.99%
Yes, I do	24	6.96%
I know most of them	18	5.22%
Total	345	100.00%

V. DISCUSSIONS

A. Interpretations

1) The research

In this paper, the authors studied undergraduate and postgraduate international students from universities in China, with sampling done mostly in Xi'an. The purpose is to study the cultural confusion from a faith perspective encountered in their everyday activities, try to find out the causes of the confusion, and propose some ways to mitigate or eliminate the confusion.

Interviews and questionnaires were used to find out the cultural confusion met by the international students in universities in China. 345 international students participated in the questionnaire. The main findings of this research are interesting. There are 4 main and other findings.

2) Main findings

- 1) 212 of the 345 participants (61.45% of the overall) claimed they had no difficulties attending religious activities in China, while 133 (38.55% of the overall) experienced some difficulties.
- 2) 12.46% of participants had unpleasant religious experiences.
- 3) Religious venues are the biggest concern of their difficulties.
- 4) 87.83% of the participants just know a little or do not have knowledge of the religious laws and regulations.

3) Analysis

a) Analysis of finding 1

The proportion of participants who had difficulty practicing religious activities did not correspond to the weighted percentage of the number of students practicing that religion in the university. The proportion of Christian participants experiencing difficulties (20.00%) is relatively higher than the weighted percentage of all participants (14.41%), which is 38.49% higher. That is, the proportion of Christians experiencing difficulties is more relative to the proportion of the number of Christians. In contrast, the proportion of Muslims experiencing difficulties with Islam (15.94%) is slightly lower than the proportion of Islam weighted in the total number of all participants (16.54%), which is the same, at a negligible 3.63% lower.

From this finding, 38.55% of the participants encountered difficulties when practicing their religion, and hence, a very strong indication of the necessity of this research.

b) Analysis of finding 2

12.46% of the participants had *unpleasant religious experiences*. Although this result is lower than the 38.55% above, unpleasant is a pejorative term, and difficult is a neutral one. However, 12.46% is a figure that should not be ignored.

Only followers of two religions i.e., Muslims and Christians, indicated they had *unpleasant religious experiences*. The number of Muslims was 37 and their proportion (10.72%) was much higher than the weighted proportion of Muslims among all participants (5.35%), which was about twice as high.

At the same time, the proportion of the number of Christians (1.74%) was much lower than the weighted

proportion of Christians among participants than among all participants (4.66%), which was 37.39% of the latter. This suggests that Muslims are more likely to experience unpleasant encounters when practicing their religion.

c) Analysis of finding 3

The kind of difficulties encountered in religious activities is another very important aspect of our research. As shown in Table 9, students who had difficulty in finding a legal place to pray and no religious places to go for prayers added up to 185, which is exactly 50% of the total number of participants. This means that half of the participants identified religious places as their concern, and should be taken very seriously. Table 7 shows that 133 people experienced difficulties, but 149 people in Table 11 indicated that they did not experience any difficulties. Since the total number of participants was 345, it means 196 people experienced difficulties. This is because when some interviewees were asked directly whether they had experienced difficulties with religious activities, the participants did not realize that they had difficulties at the moment. However, when presented with the question of difficulty experienced during religious activities in the questionnaire, it stirred some memories of past experiences.

Looking carefully at the results of this research above, it is easy to see that the results of the questionnaire coincide with the findings of the interviews taken earlier and are highly consistent.

d) Analysis of finding 4

The tenth and eleventh questions have a recursive relationship. The prohibition of illegal prayer and religious activities on campus is the most important religious law and regulation in all Chinese universities, so the authors have listed them independently. If it is understood that religious activities are illegal on campus, international students can avoid most of the problems. Question 11 (Do you know the laws and regulations concerning religion in China?) concerns the laws and regulations on religion in China and is certainly important for international students.

132 people still do not know that religious activity is illegal on campus, representing 38.26% of the total. This is a relatively high percentage and affects international students living on campus. 303 people do not know or only know very little about Chinese religious laws and regulations, accounting for 87.83% of the total. This is a very high percentage, which means that very few international students know about religious laws and policies and is consistent with personal interactions with international students.

4) Implications

The choice of the proposal for this study is the first of its kind, and an idea discovered in the course of work experience. Interviews followed by questionnaires were used in order to study the issue as deeply as possible. It can be said that the study had the desired effect. The findings of the questionnaire were generally consistent with the findings from the interviews. Identical studies are not available, so the findings of this paper cannot be compared to the results of previous studies. This study is original and will serve as a seminal study. The findings can be used by future researchers as a reference. The practical implication of this study is that it can be used by administrators at universities with international students as a reference, as well as administrators in the

religious sector. The paper concludes with prospects and recommendations. The aim is to try to reduce or eliminate the cultural confusion of international students coming to China, especially from a faith perspective.

B. Possible Causes of Religious Confusion

Religious confusion may lie in a variety of reasons. In order to discover some of these causes and their solutions, several brainstorming sessions and discussions were held with the relevant international students (i.e., those who faced religious confusion in China) to obtain different views and answers from people with different cultural and religious backgrounds. According to the results of the discussion, the following possible causes are the most relevant to religious confusion amongst international students living in China.

1) Legal barriers for international students

The state has implemented the separation of education and religion in accordance with the Education Law of the People's Republic of China [8]. Education Law of the People's Republic of China Article 8 stipulates: "The State separates education from religion. No organization or individual may make use of religion to conduct activities that interfere with the educational system of the State [8]."

Understanding these documents is essential for new international students in their daily religious practices as lack of this legal knowledge may lead to religious confusion. Legal barriers are hence the first and most recognized causes of religious confusion for international students living in China.

2) Language barriers that influence the religious experiences of international students

In 2017, the Chinese government announced some new rules governing the programs and services that universities in China provide for foreign students. The new rules jointly issued by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs require all foreign students to take compulsory courses in the Chinese language and Chinese culture. This can "help them to become familiar with and adapt to the learning and living environment as soon as possible" [9]. Based on interviews, the language skills acquired from the implementation of this new rule are not enough to enable them to understand the religious practice requirements in China, even though they have studied the language as required by their universities. The language barrier can also impede attempts by international students to interact with locals to gain useful information [10].

VI. STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study's limitations include a simple research method, basic data analysis, and a lack of a robust theoretical framework. Future research should address these limitations by employing more rigorous methods, sophisticated analyses, and a stronger theoretical foundation. Additionally, future studies could expand the scope to include a wider range of students and universities. And more quantitative analysis need to be done in this kind of research. By addressing these limitations, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by international students in China.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study looked at the cultural experiences of international students in China, particularly their ability to practice their faith. While many students didn't have problems, a significant number faced challenges due to laws, language barriers, and other factors. This highlights the need for better support for these students in adjusting to the culture and expressing their faith in China.

Universities and authorities should address these issues to improve how international students adapt and practice their faith. This could involve language programs relevant to cultural beliefs and clearer information about campus rules related to expressing faith.

Cultural experience and confusion in a faith perspective offers a rich and multifaceted area of research with the potential to make significant contributions to our understanding of international student experiences, faith-based identity formation in higher education. Hope to see more research in this area.

Overall, the study helps us understand the cultural complexities and challenges that international students face in Chinese universities. This knowledge can be used for research and creating practical solutions to make universities more inclusive and diverse for international students with various beliefs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Donghong Li conceived the study, designed the research framework, and drafted the initial manuscript; Min Yang contributed to manuscript writing and refinement, focusing on overall structure and clarity; Tongtong Lyu was responsible for questionnaire development, distribution, and data collection; Bo Li provided technical support, including data analysis and interpretation; all authors contributed to data interpretation, reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version.

FUNDING

This project was supported by the International Talent Development Special Project of 2024 Northwestern Polytechnical University Higher Education Research Fund (Project Number: GJGZMS202408).

REFERENCES

- [1] Y. Yu and M. Moskal, "Why do Christian churches, and not universities, facilitate intercultural engagement for Chinese international students?" *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 68, pp. 1–12, 2019.
- [2] Z. Shou. (April 12, 2019). Almost 500,000 international students in China in 2018. *China Daily Global*. [Online]. Available: <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/12/WS5cb05c3ea3104842260b5eed.html>
- [3] Z. Ying, S. Liu, S. Bao, and J. Zhou, "Religious diversity and regional development in China," *China Economic Review*, vol. 46, pp. 1–9, 2017.
- [4] A. Hasnain and J. Hajek, "Understanding international student connectedness," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 86, pp. 26–35, 2022.
- [5] J. W. Berry, "Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation," *Applied Psychology*, vol. 46, no. 1, pp. 5–34, 1997.
- [6] Y. Hu and J. A. Zhong, "Cultural conflicts and adaptations of Chinese international students: A brief review and suggestions," *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 615403, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.615403>
- [7] M. V. Fritz, D. Chin, and V. DeMarinis, "Stressors, anxiety, acculturation and adjustment among international and North American students," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 244–259, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2007.11.001>
- [8] National People's Congress. (March 22, 2018). Constitution of the People's Republic of China. XinhuaNet. [Online]. Available: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/22/c_1122572202.htm
- [9] ICEF Monitor. (2017). China introduces new rules for foreign students. ICEF Monitor. [Online]. Available: <https://monitor.icef.com/2017/07/china-introduces-new-rules-foreign-students/>
- [10] R. A. Smith and N. G. Khawaja, "A review of the acculturation experiences of international students," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 35, no. 6, pp. 699–713, 2011.

Copyright © 2025 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).