



An exploratory study of inter-relationships of acculturative stressors among Chinese students from six European union (EU) countries



Chun Cao^{a,b,*}, Prof., Dr. Chang Zhu^{a,**}, Qian Meng^{a,b}

^a Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussel, Belgium

^b Changchun University of Science and Technology, China

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the inter-relationships of acculturative stressors experienced by Chinese international students. A sample of 463 Chinese students in six EU countries (UK, Germany, France, Netherlands, Spain and Belgium) responded to a web-based survey. The results showed that Chinese students in France suffered from bigger constraints in linguistic issues and dealing with life tasks than Chinese students in UK. Structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis revealed that language constraints and perceived cultural differences play a key role in influencing other stressors. The findings indicated that language constraints and perceived cultural differences accounted for 62% of the total variance of academic integration difficulty; language constraints accounted for 17% of the variance of problems in dealing with daily tasks; perceived cultural differences accounted for 56% of the variance of social integration difficulty; academic integration and problems in dealing with daily tasks explained 14% of the variance of homesickness.

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1. Introduction

According to Mathou and Yan (2012), the total number of Chinese students in the EU in 2010 was between 118,700 and 120,000—about six times more than in 2000. Countries reporting the highest numbers of Chinese students were the UK (40% of total), France (23%) and Germany (20%), followed by the Netherlands (4%), Italy, Ireland, Sweden (3%), respectively. This inflow was higher than inflows received by other large receiving countries such as US, Australia, Canada, Korea and New Zealand.

On the one hand, the EU regards China as a strategic country in terms of cooperation in higher education. An increasing number of exchange programs has been initiated to encourage Chinese students to study in the EU. On the other hand, it is increasingly important for the EU higher education institutes to be aware of international students' adaptation as to differentiate themselves from other institutes in terms of providing academic and social support to the students.

A review of the literature showed that most research related to Chinese student sojourners were conducted in the USA, Australia and New Zealand (see for example, Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Li & Gasser, 2005; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In contrast, Chinese students in Europe seems a largely neglected population. Moreover, recent studies tend to ignore the pos-

* Corresponding author at: Changchun University of Science and Technology, China.

** Corresponding author at: Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussel, Belgium.

E-mail addresses: caogecheng@aliyun.com (C. Cao), chanzhu@vub.ac.be (Prof., Dr. C. Zhu), mengqianlucky@aliyun.com (Q. Meng).

sible inter-relationships between different acculturative stressors (Swami, Arteche, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). This study is an attempt to start redressing the balance. In this study, we will focus on the psychological and sociocultural stressors that Chinese students may encounter in the EU host countries and explore their inter-relationship to better understand their operationalizing mechanism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Acculturative stressors of international students

Acculturation was defined as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005). International students sojourning in a culture different from their own have to go through a process of acculturating to a new socio-cultural and educational environment. Sojourning remains a difficult process involving different factors that could be highly stressful. Based on a review of acculturation models (Berry, 1997; Safdar, Lay, & Struthers, 2003; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), we identified the main acculturative stressors that international students may encounter.

Language constraints and communication related problems are widely recognized as major adjustment issues for international students (Andrade, 2006; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Many international students from Asia and other developing countries suffer from a serious language problem in UK (Li & Kaye, 1998). Again, the supporting evidence in this respect can be found in a study by Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006), in which the authors found that the most frequently encountered problems of Chinese students in Britain were understanding jokes and humors in English. In a more recent study by Wang et al. (2012), Chinese international students were found to experience more difficulties in adaptation and social integration due to their lower English competence compared with their European counterparts. Studies have found that higher level of English competence could lead to better academic performance (Zhang & Brunton, 2007) and better psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In the EU, except a few countries, such as UK and Ireland, most countries are non-English speaking countries. Therefore, Chinese international students in these countries may experience extra language obstacles.

Hofstede (1980) defined cultural distance as the extent to which norms and values in one country differ from the ones in another country. Hofstede (1997) identified four dimensions of cultures: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism and masculinity vs. femininity. The dimensions of individualism-collectivism and power distance have often been researched to investigate the differences between East Asian cultures and western cultures. Countries in Western Europe are rated high in individualism and low in power distance, whereas China is rated high in both collectivism and power distance (Hofstede, 2001). Chinese students brought up in collectivistic cultural traditions often experience intense acculturative difficulties in cultures valuing individualism (Li & Kaye, 1998). Redmond (2000) stated that the greater the cultural distance between the home culture and the host culture, the more cultural difficulties the international students would experience. This view was supported by Yeh and Inose's (1993) study of international students in a northern university in the U.S. and found that European students experienced less acculturative stress than their counterparts from Asia and Africa. In addition, Waxin (2004) investigated a sample of expatriated managers (from France, Germany, Korea, and Scandinavia) in India and found that Koreans experienced greater cross-cultural adjustment than their European counterparts. Culturally, most Chinese students are caught in a deep dilemma of need to change and while at the same time they are unable or unwilling to change (Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Several studies have suggested that many international students adopt a learning style preference that is at odds with their domestic peers (e.g., Barron, 2006). Students from individualist cultures tend to behave more independently, are more oriented toward competition, and tend to engage more actively in debates (Ozer, 2015). In contrast, Chinese students from high collectivist and power distance cultures are usually taught to be compliant, remain quiet in class, obey the teachers and withhold expressing their thoughts or asking questions until invited to do so by their teachers (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Watkins and Biggs (1996) found that Asian students (particularly Chinese) had difficulties adjusting to an educational environment characterized by independent learning and less instructor supervision. In a more recent study, Yan and Berliner (2009) interviewed a group of Chinese international students in the U.S. and revealed that their habitual silence or verbal passiveness in class emphasized in Chinese classroom culture for both authority and social harmony contributed to considerable stress. Although academic stress is not unique to international students but rather experienced by all university students, it is likely to be intensified for international students due to the added stressors of second language anxiety and adapting to a new educational environment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Social integration of international students describes that how well international students initiate interactions and maintain interpersonal relations in the host country (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007). International students tend to have three distinct social networks: friendships with people from the same country seem to be the most common (co-national network), followed by friendships with international students from other foreign countries (multi-national network) and friendships with members of the host country (host-national network, such as students, teachers and counselors) (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Accumulating research has provided evidence that most international students have developed close-knit compatriot social network in the host country. For instance, in a survey of international students in UK, UKCOSA (2004) found social integration to be a key problematic issue because 59% of the respondents indicated most of friendships came from co-nationals and other international students, and only 7% had local UK students as their main friends.

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