



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MODERN EDUCATION
(IJMOE)

www.gaexcellence.com/ijmoe



A REVIEW OF THEORIES AND COPING STRATEGIES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Chen Zhifang^{1*}, Julia Tan Yin Yin², Liyana Ahmad Afip³

¹Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia

 l24e0611f@siswa.umk.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6238-4609>

²Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia

 julia@umk.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0676-8822>

³Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia

 liyana.a@umk.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6920-1036>

*Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 27.01.2026

Revised date: 05.02.2026

Accepted date: 23.02.2026

Published date: 10.03.2026

To cite this document:

Chen, Z., Yin, J. T. Y., & Afip, L. A. (2026). A Review of Theories and Coping Strategies for Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students. *International Journal of Modern Education*, 8(29), 784-791.

Abstract:

With the development of globalization and the internationalization of education, an increasing number of international students are emerging, bringing with challenges in cross-cultural adaptation. This narrative literature review aims to examine the theoretical foundations of cross-cultural adaptation for international students and to identify a classification and indicators of coping strategies for international students' cross-cultural adaptation, with the goal of helping them achieve more effective cross-cultural adaptation. Through the analysis of existing literature, it was found that research focuses primarily on the United States and other developed Western countries, while developing countries like China lack localized cross-cultural adaptation theories. The focus is primarily on high school or undergraduate education, with insufficient attention paid to international students in higher vocational colleges. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between practical approaches, and the systematic and targeted nature of coping strategies remains to be improved. Future research should strengthen the development of localized theories in developing countries like China, as well as the focus on international students in higher vocational colleges. This study contributes by proposing a localized analytical framework and promoting high-quality development of international education in various countries.

DOI: 10.35631/IJMOE.829046 **Keyword:**

Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Coping Strategies, International Students, Review, Theory



© The authors (2026). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY NC) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact ijmoe@gaexcellence.com.

Introduction

Countries around the world are increasingly prioritizing the internationalization of education, resulting in a growing number of international students. China, for example, has become one of the largest studies abroad destinations in Asia. Despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the total number of international students studying in China recovered and exceeded 520,000 in 2023 (China Education News, 2024). This large international student population constitutes a unique cross-cultural population. Helping them achieve better cross-cultural adaptation is not only a necessary requirement for their studies but also a key aspect of the internationalization of education. Current research shows that international students still face multiple challenges during their studies, including language barriers, cultural differences, and academic adaptation (Yanzhou et al., 2021). Therefore, conducting research on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students has extremely significant theoretical and practical value. This article aims to collect and analyze relevant literature to deepen the understanding of the theory of cross-cultural adaptation of international students, especially to provide a comprehensive historical perspective on the coping strategies of cross-cultural adaptation of international students, and to propose future research directions to provide reference for researchers and policymakers in related fields.

Literature Review

Scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds have proposed a variety of cross-cultural adaptation theories or models, providing a theoretical foundation for cross-cultural adaptation research. However, there are different types of intercultural adaptors, including international students, immigrants, refugees, and corporate expatriates (Sousa et al., 2019). Different intercultural adaptors have different cross-cultural adaptation content and priorities, are applicable to different cross-cultural adaptation theories or models, and require different cross-cultural adaptation strategies.

Theories and Models of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

There are approximately six theories or models regarding the cross-cultural adaptation process. Kim's dynamic model of "pressure-adaptation-growth" believes that the cross-cultural adaptation process is a spiral process. In the process of continuous circulation, the process of cross-cultural adaptation presents a spiral process from retreat to adaptation and then to improvement. Berry's (1997) Cross-cultural Adaptation Stress and Coping Strategies Model is

a framework for understanding how individuals adapt to a new cultural environment, focusing on the cross-cultural adaptation strategies of cross-cultural people after entering the host country. The "Five-Stage Model of Cross-cultural Adaptation" divides the process of cross-cultural adaptation into five stages: contact stage, breakdown stage, reintegration stage, autonomous adaptation stage, and independence stage (Adler, 1975). Bourhis et al. (2010) proposed the "Multidimensional Interactive Acculturation Model", which aims to present a non-deterministic and more dynamic explanation and description of immigrants' cross-cultural adaptation in the host country. The "U-curve" Theory believes that cross-cultural adaptation goes through three stages, namely the initial adjustment stage, the crisis stage, and the re-adjustment stage, based on the satisfaction of cross-cultural adaptation. The whole process presents a U-shaped curve. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) proposed the "W-curve" Theory, and this Theory suggests that when sojourners return to their home country and host country many times, the CA process will present a W-shaped curve. The "Culture Shock Theory" divides the CA process into four stages, namely the honeymoon period, the crisis period, the recovery period, and the adaptation period (Oberg, 1960).

There are about four theories about the dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation. The One-dimensional Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory believes that cross-cultural adaptability is a continuous, one-way, and gradual process of integration with the mainstream culture, and is eventually "assimilated" by the mainstream culture (Borsa et al., 2012). Searle and Ward (1990) proposed the Two-dimensional Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, which suggests that cross-cultural adaptation involves changes in both the psychological level and the sociocultural level, and is constrained by both individual and social factors. Black and Mendenhall (1989)'s Three-dimensional Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory divides cross-cultural adaptation into three dimensions: life adaptation, interpersonal communication adaptation, and work adaptation. American sociologist Gordon (1964) proposed the Multi-dimensional Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, using seven dimensions to explain the CA process of American immigrants, namely cultural integration, structural integration, marital assimilation, identity recognition, attitude recognition, behavioral recognition, and civic assimilation.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Coping Strategies

This paper reference Berry's (1997) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Stress and Coping Model which is a framework for understanding how individuals adapt to a new cultural environment. It focuses on the adaptive coping strategies adopted by cross-cultural individuals after entering a host country. Based on existing literature, scholars have proposed the following coping strategies.

At the micro level, we mainly start from the individual level of international students as the main body of cross-cultural adaptation and strive to achieve better cross-cultural adaptation. Such as to improve language skills to better adapt to the academic and social environment (Manyeruke & Tanse, 2024), take the initiative to learn and understand the host country's culture and reduce confusion and conflicts caused by cultural differences (Hofhuis et al., 2023), develop cultural intelligence and cross-cultural communication skills to better cope with cultural differences and enhance cross-cultural communication and exchange capabilities (Chu & Zhu, 2023) and enhance psychological resilience through psychological counseling, self-regulation, etc. (Qian & Yu, 2023).

At the meso-level, schools, colleges, and government departments are working to provide more effective support services for international students. They offer language training and practice platforms and encourage international students to interact with others (Babushko et al., 2022; Ledeneva, 2025). They should hold more cultural exchange activities, seminars, cultural festivals, etc. to promote interaction and understanding between international students and local students (Quiñones et al., 2021) and establish multicultural student organizations and social clubs and provide culturally sensitive educational practices, cross-cultural exchange activities and social opportunities (Liu et al., 2022; Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022). They can also strengthen mental health services and publicity and provide academic support and personalized support services and guidance, such as providing bilingual teaching materials and academic counseling (Alshammari, 2024).

At the macro level, the government and schools should improve policies for international students, formulate normative documents, provide visa guidance, financial support and employment opportunities, and help students smoothly through the adaptation period (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). Build supportive communities and networks to help international students form friendships with local students and help international students build social networks (Yu & Leung, 2024). The community organizes social activities and cultural exchanges to promote mutual understanding among residents of different cultural backgrounds (Li & Zizzi, 2018). Multicultural services and facilities should be provided to meet the different cultural needs of international students (Marino & Mu, 2025).

Methodology

To achieve the research objective, this narrative literature review selected three databases for their relevance to cross-cultural adaptation: the Web of Science, the Scopus Index, and the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). This search was conducted until December 2025, covering data from 2016 to 2025, with no restrictions on publication type. To achieve this goal, the researchers primarily searched for the following topics: "cross-cultural adaptation," "cross-cultural adaptation of international students," "intercultural psychological adaptation," "intercultural academic adaptation," "sociocultural adaptation," and "cross-cultural adaptation coping strategies." They also employed a combination of keywords: international students, intercultural, adaptation, challenges, and strategies. Sequential searches were conducted across the three databases, gathering comprehensive information on the diverse nature of the research topics. Duplicate papers and papers with missing full texts were manually removed, and a review process was conducted to select papers that remained relevant in the current context. Ultimately, a total of 36 papers were analyzed for this review.

Problem Statement

Analysis shows that there is lack of localized theory in China. Theories and research contexts on cross-cultural adaptation are primarily based in the United States and Western developed countries, while localized theories in China are lacking. Most current research on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students studying in China directly applies Western models. Therefore, localized cross-cultural adaptation theory should be developed in the future. Future research also should focus on developing theoretical frameworks that are relevant to Chinese culture and educational contexts.

Neglect of Higher Vocational Colleges. Research primarily focuses on students at the high school or undergraduate level and above, resulting in a relatively large body of research. However, for this emerging group of international students in higher vocational colleges, existing research is significantly insufficient, especially systematic and in-depth research. Hence, future research should focus more on their cross-cultural adaptation. The future research methods for international students in higher vocational colleges should be diversified. For example, visual methods such as photovoice are particularly well-suited for cross-cultural research, helping to overcome language barriers and gain authentic cultural experience, thereby enhancing the ethical standards and practical value of research.

Addressing Practical Disconnect. There is a significant gap between research and practice. Most institutions lack dedicated cross-cultural adaptation support centers, and psychological counseling and academic guidance services are fragmented and lack coordination. Furthermore, policies are disconnected from teaching practice, lacking specificity and impact, leading to a significant lack of faculty cross-cultural teaching capabilities. Future research should focus on developing dedicated "cross-cultural adaptation support centers" that integrate psychological counseling, academic guidance, language support, and other services to provide one-stop assistance. Research could also be conducted to enhance faculty and staff's cross-cultural teaching capabilities. At this point, future research should focus to develop a cross-cultural adaptation strategy system based on scientific implementation at multiple levels.

Conclusion

This research review finds that current research on international students' cross-cultural adaptation has achieved initial results in the areas of psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptation. However, there is still room for improvement in localized theoretical research in developing countries, specialized research on international students in higher vocational colleges, and targeted and practical guidance for cross-cultural adaptation strategies. Based on a detailed literature analysis, the findings of this review will help refine the research framework and provide more targeted cross-cultural adaptation strategies. Future research should strengthen localized theoretical construction, innovate research methods, establish multi-level intervention mechanisms for international student education, conduct more targeted research, and identify practical, multi-level cross-cultural adaptation strategies and support systems tailored to the needs of international students. This will not only enhance the international student experience but also provide strong support for the internationalization of education in various countries.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to University Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to Wan Fariza Azima Che Azman and Nurul Faizah Halim who are doctoral students from UMK.

Funding Statement: No Funding

Conflict of Interest Statement: There is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE).

Ethics Statement: This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Julia Tan Yin Yin Julia was responsible for the conceptualization and overall supervision of the study. Liyana Binti Ahmad Afip handled data collection, analysis and methodology. Chen Zhifang contributed to the literature review, drafting, interpretation of results and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

References

- Adler, P. (1975) 'The Transitional Experience: An Alternative View of Culture Shock', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 15(4), pp.13-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216787501500403>
- Alshammari, A. Z. M. (2024). Cultural adaptation challenges, academic stress, and social support: A study of Saudi students in Malaysia. *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences*, 11(9), 184-191. <https://doi.org/10.21833/ijaas.2024.09.020>
- Babushko, S., Solovei, M., & Solovei, L. (2022). How to smooth international university students' adaptation in Ukraine. *Revista Romaneasca Pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 14(1), 93-114.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied psychology*, 46(1), 5-34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Black, J. S., & Mendenhall, M. (1989). A practical but theory-based framework for selecting cross-cultural training methods. *Human resource management*, 28(4), 511-539. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.3930280406>
- Borsa, J. C., Damásio, B. F., & Bandeira, D. R. (2012). Cross-cultural adaptation and validation of psychological instruments: Some considerations. *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto)*, 22, 423-432. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-863X2012000300014>
- Bourhis, R. Y., Montaruli, E., El-Geledi, S., Harvey, S. P., & Barrette, G. (2010). Acculturation in multiple host community settings. *Journal of Social Issues*, 66(4), 780-802. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2010.01675.x>
- China Education News. (2024). 2023 International School Annual Development Observation Report. China Education News Network. http://www.jyb.cn/rmtzgjyb/202312/t20231228_2111137327.html
- Chu, K., & Zhu, F. (2023). Impact of cultural intelligence on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China: The mediating effect of psychological resilience. *Front Psychol*, 14, 1077424. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1077424>
- Gordon, M. M. (1964) *Assimilation in American Life*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gullahorn, J. T., & Gullahorn, J. E. (1963). An extension of the U-Curve Hypothesis 1. *Journal of social issues*, 19(3), 33-47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1963.tb00447.x>
- Hofhuis, J., van Egmond, M. C., Lutz, F. E., von Reventlow, K., & Rohmann, A. (2023). The effect of social network sites on international students' acculturation, adaptation, and wellbeing. *Frontiers in Communication*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1186527>
- Ledeneva, V. Y. (2025). Adaptation of foreign students in the Eurasian Economic Union countries as a factor of demographic security. *Вестник университета*, 16.
- Li, S., & Zizzi, S. (2018). A case study of international students' social adjustment, friendship development, and physical activity. *Journal of International Students*, 8(1), 389-408.
- Liu, Y., Song, Y., & Yan, Y. (2022). Problems and countermeasures associated with cross-cultural adaptation in international education according to the communication action theory model. *Front Psychol*, 13, 42-46. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.942914>
- Manyeruke, G., & Tanse, E. (2024). Investigating Social and Psychological Adaptation Among International Students: A Study of Factors Influencing Wellbeing. *Cyprus Turkish Journal of Psychiatry & Psychology*, 6(2), 105-115. <https://doi.org/10.35365/ctjpp.24.2.01>
- Marino, F., & Mu, Y. (2025). Visualizing identity: multimodal and multilingual practices in international student organizations' on-campus artifacts. *Multimodal Communication*, 14(1), 85-101.

- Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environment. *Practical Anthropology* 7: 177-182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182966000700405>
- Qian, J., & Yu, J. (2023). Effects of Chinese Language Learning Anxiety on the Mental Health of International Students in China: The Chain Mediating Effect of Campus Adaptation and Academic Resilience. *Psychol Res Behav Manag*, 16, 2201-2211. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S414837>
- Quiñones, A. V. S., Bustos, C. E., Perez, M. V., Peralta, D. L., Zañartu, N., & Vergara del Solar, J. I. (2021). Metasynthesis Regarding the Sociocultural Adaptation of International University. *The Qualitative Report*. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4623>
- Roberts, P., & Dunworth, K. (2012). Staff and student perceptions of support services for international students in higher education: A case study. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 34(5), 517-528.
- Searle, W., & Ward, C. (1990). The prediction of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14, 449-464. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(90\)90030-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(90)90030-Z)
- Sousa, C., Gonçalves, G., Santos, J., & Orgambidez-Ramos, A. (2019). The relationship between multicultural competencies and intercultural contact: Multicultural personality and cultural intelligence. *Psicologia & Sociedade*, 31, e166867.
- Yanzhou, L., Bichthao, D., & Lin, C. (2021). The theoretical model construction of cross-cultural psychological adaptation of Southeast Asian students. *Psychiatria Danubina*, 33(S12), 7-7. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/en/273132>
- Yılmaz, K., & Temizkan, V. (2022). The Effects of Educational Service Quality and Socio-Cultural Adaptation Difficulties on International Students' Higher Education Satisfaction. *SAGE Open*, 12(1), 23-27.
- Yu, B., & Leung, Y. W. (2024). Establishing ties or strengthening friendships? Students' use of online social networks in intercultural friendship development. *Information Technology & People*, 37(2), 815-834.