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THE CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION OF ASEAN STUDENTS IN HIGHER VOCATIONAL COLLEGES IN GUANGXI, CHINA

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Abstract:

The growing educational cooperation between China and ASEAN countries has led to a significant increase in ASEAN student enrolment in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi in recent years, creating new challenges and opportunities for cross-cultural adaption. This study aimed to investigate the cross-cultural psychological adaptation of these ASEAN students and employed a mixed-methods approach. Psychological scales were randomly distributed first to ASEAN students who had been in China for over one year, resulting in 304 valid responses, which were used to assess their level of cross-cultural psychological adaptation. Based on the survey findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ASEAN students and their teachers, counselor and administrators, continuing until information saturation was reached. Ultimately, 12 ASEAN students who had been in China for over one year and 12 teachers, counselors and administrators were interviewed. The data were then analyzed using NVivo software for thematic coding to explore the specific challenges and conditions related to their cross-cultural psychological adaptation. The study found that the overall level of cross-cultural psychological adaptation among ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi is in good condition, but there are still challenges included language pressure, academic pressure, homesickness, pressure related to exams and scholarships, interpersonal sensitivity, and financial pressure. Based on

these findings, several coping strategies are proposed. ASEAN students should cultivate motivation and resilience; teachers and students in higher vocational colleges should provide warm and friendly support for ASEAN students; higher vocational colleges should strengthen psychological work through multi-level management for ASEAN students; and society should seek common cultural elements and create a friendly atmosphere for ASEAN students. This study contributes to international student adaptation by providing practical recommendation for educational institutions, policymakers, and support services seeking to enhance the well-being and academic success of ASEAN students in China.

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Keyword:

Asean Students, Challenges, Coping Strategies, Higher Vocational Colleges, Psychological Adaptation



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Introduction

Guangxi is a province in China, located in the southwest of the country and bordering Vietnam. Due to this geographical location, Guangxi is the frontier window for China to connect with ASEAN countries. In addition, with the recent integration of industries and educational cooperation between China and ASEAN countries, higher vocational colleges in Guangxi have attracted a large number of ASEAN students in recent years (Yi et al., 2025). Although Guangxi is connected to ASEAN countries and has convenient transportation, and has similar cultural customs, ASEAN students who are far from home still face cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges during their studies in Guangxi. Especially, most of the ASEAN students who come over do not have HSK level 3 proficiency. Cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges are by no means trivial. They will not only have a negative impact on the study and life of ASEAN students but also put great pressure on the management of higher vocational colleges. In the long run, they will also affect the effect of talent exchange and industrial integration between China and ASEAN countries. However, at present, more scholars have focused on the cross-cultural psychological adaptation of undergraduate and graduate levels, lacking of attention to international students in the higher vocational colleges. Higher vocational colleges also pay more attention to the improvement of ASEAN students' Chinese proficiency, professional skills and handling of factual matters, lacking of attention to the psychological adaptation of ASEAN students (Duan et al., 2025). Therefore, it is very necessary to conduct an investigation on the cross-cultural psychological adaptation of ASEAN students in Guangxi's higher vocational colleges, find out the psychological adaptation challenges and explore the coping strategies. Theoretically, this research can enrich the theory of cross-cultural adaptation of international students, and practically, it can help ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi achieve more successful cross-cultural psychological adaptation, providing empirical reference for optimizing the management and

services for international students and improving the enrollment and management for international students.

This study is mainly guided by Berry and Sam (1997) model of cross-cultural adaptation stress and coping strategies and Searle and Ward (1990) two-dimensional cross-cultural adaptation theory. The basic viewpoint is that cross-cultural psychological adaptation is one of the basic contents of cross-cultural adaptation. It emphasizes that although cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges are inevitable, they can be addressed through effective measures from all parties. This constitutes the theoretical basis of this paper.

Literature Review

With the internationalization of education, an increasing number of students choose to study at schools that suit them around the world. These international students, upon arriving in a foreign environment, will inevitably go through some psychological adaptation. This psychological adaptation occurs in a cross-cultural context. The cross-cultural psychological adaptation of international students refers to the process in which they adjust themselves and their environment psychologically after entering a different cultural setting, in order to achieve harmony with the new cultural environment and gain psychological comfort (Bethel et al., 2020).

The main theories in the field of cross-cultural psychological adaptation research include Oberg (1960) "culture shock" theory, which posits that culture shock is the psychological problem experienced by individuals when they enter a foreign culture, characterized by symptoms of unease and anxiety due to the loss of familiar social environments, symbols, and interaction rules. According to the "U-shaped Curve Hypothesis" (Lysgaard, 1955), cross-cultural psychological adaptation also goes through three stages: the initial adjustment stage, the crisis stage, and the readjustment stage, with the entire process presenting a U-shaped curve. John T. Gullahorn (1963) proposed the "W-shaped Curve Hypothesis", suggesting that when cross-cultural individuals travel back and forth between their home country and the host country, the process of cross-cultural adaptation will present a W-shaped curve. Searle and Ward (1990) proposed the ABC model, which divides cross-cultural adaptation into three aspects, one of which is emotional psychological adaptation, focusing on the mental health and subjective well-being of cross-cultural individuals. Berry and Sam (1997) also put forward a theory of cross-cultural adaptation, which holds that cross-cultural adaptation has two dimensions, one of which is psychological adaptation, and that cross-cultural individuals have subjective initiative in the process of cross-cultural adaptation, which is the result of the interaction of multiple regulatory variables. The factors influencing the psychological adaptation of international students, based on current research results, can be divided into psychological traits, cultural intelligence, and self-efficacy at the individual level of cross-cultural individuals, psychological support from teachers, classmates, international students, schools, and society at the interpersonal interaction level, and factors such as cultural distance, language ability, and nationality recognition at the situational level.

It can be found that the existing research in the field of cross-cultural psychology is mainly conducted in English-speaking countries, lacking studies on cross-cultural psychological adaptation in other language backgrounds. Secondly, most of the research on the psychological adaptation of international students focuses on undergraduate and graduate international students, with a lack of research on international students in the vocational education system.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed research approach to investigate the cross-cultural psychological adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi. Firstly, after expert discussions, three representative higher vocational colleges in Guangxi were selected as the survey scope, representing the new-starting institutions, medium-level institutions, and high-level institutions in terms of ASEAN student recruitment and management. The survey subjects were ASEAN students who had studied in Guangxi's higher vocational colleges for more than one year. Secondly, a questionnaire survey was conducted randomly, and 304 valid questionnaires were collected, obtaining their demographic information, study motivations, and cross-cultural psychological adaptation situations. Then, based on the questionnaire survey results, following the principle of voluntariness, 12 ASEAN students from different nationalities were recruited from each of the three colleges for semi-structured interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges they faced and the reasons behind them. Thus, the cross-cultural psychological adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi was studied.

Among the 304 respondents in the questionnaire survey, there were more females than males. There were 183 female respondents, accounting for 60.2%; and 121 male respondents, accounting for 39.8%. In terms of nationality, the number of students from Laos was the highest, totaling 123, accounting for 40.46%; followed by those from Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Malaysia. The number of Malaysian students was the lowest, with only 6, accounting for 1.97%. The age range of the respondents was 16-30 years old, with the majority being between 18-22 years old, which is a stage when their psychological and emotional states are not stable. 90.13% of the ASEAN students surveyed had no experience of visiting other countries and no cross-cultural experiences. Since their study abroad time exceeded one year, 95.73% of the ASEAN students had an HSK level of grade 3 or above, enabling basic communication. However, the ASEAN students with an HSK level of grade 3 had relatively more difficulties in professional learning. 4.27% of the ASEAN students with HSK levels of 1-2 or those who did not take the HSK exam were facing very significant language barriers. The information of the interviewees in the semi-structured interview is presented in the following table 1.

Table 1. Information Sheet of Semi-Structured Interviewees

Serial Number	Country	Age	Gender	Date of arrival	Previous HSK level	Current HSK level	Major
1	Laos	18	female	9/2023	HSK1-2	HSK3	International Business
2	Malaysia	22	male	9/2024	HSK2-3	HSK4	Digital Media Art Design
3	Thailand	19	female	9/2024	HSK1-2	HSK3	e-commerce
4	Indonesia	19	female	9/2024	HSK1-2	HSK3	e-commerce
5	Cambodia	21	male	11/2024	HSK2-3	HSK3	International Marketing
6	Laos	19	male	9/2023	HSK1-2	HSK4	Architectural Engineering Technology

7	Indonesia	20	female	10/2023	HSK2	HSK 4	Computer network technology
8	Vietnam	19	female	9/ 2024	HSK2	HSK 3	International Marketing
9	Laos	20	female	10/ 2024	HSK1-2	HSK 3	Logistics Management
10	Thailand	21	male	11/2024	HSK1-2	HSK 3	Intelligent manufacturing
11	Indonesia	21	female	9/2023	HSK1-2	HSK4	International Business
12	Vietnam	21	female	9/2023	HSK1-2	HSK5	International Business

Research Findings

The cross-cultural psychological adaptation scale of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi is mainly based on the depression self-rating scale developed by American psychology professor Zung (1965). According to the psychological adaptation scale in 304 questionnaires, as shown in table 2, the cross-cultural psychological adaptation of ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi is in good condition, but there are many challenges in their psychological adaptation.

Table 2. Cross-cultural Psychological Adaptation Scale for ASEAN students in Higher Vocational Colleges in Guangxi

Items/Options	Very inconsistent	Not quite in line with	generally	Somewhat in line	Very suitable	Scores
1. I feel very comfortable and happy in China.	1 (0.33%)	8 (2.63%)	130 (42.76%)	78 (25.66%)	87 (28.62%)	3.8
2. I feel it is very meaningful and I have confidence .	2 (0.66%)	9 (2.96%)	140 (46.05%)	82 (26.97%)	71 (23.36%)	3.69
3. Our school values the mental health of international students .	8 (2.63%)	14 (4.61%)	151 (49.67%)	71 (23.36%)	60 (19.74%)	3.53
4. When feeling down, seek help from others in your home country.	19 (6.25%)	29 (9.54%)	164 (53.95%)	45 (14.8%)	47 (15.46%)	3.24
5. I ate the same amount as usual.	15 (4.93%)	35 (11.51%)	171 (56.25%)	46 (15.13%)	37 (12.17%)	3.18
6. I know about the school's psychological counseling center .	39 (12.83%)	34 (11.18%)	158 (51.97%)	38 (12.5%)	35 (11.51%)	2.99
7. When feeling down, seek help from a counselor	28 (9.21%)	44 (14.47%)	164 (53.95%)	43 (14.14%)	25 (8.22%)	2.98
8. When feeling down, seek help from the school's psychological center.	58 (19.08%)	43 (14.14%)	142 (46.71%)	34 (11.18%)	27 (8.88%)	2.77

a . I feel tired for no reason.	52 (17.11%)	50 (16.45%)	142 (46.71%)	35 (11.51%)	25 (8.22%)	2.77
b . I don't sleep well at night.	58 (19.08%)	60 (19.74%)	126 (41.45%)	25 (8.22%)	35 (11.51%)	2.73
c . Frequently feeling sullen and depressed	52 (17.11%)	60 (19.74%)	140 (46.05%)	30 (9.87%)	22 (7.24%)	2.7
d . Not interested in ordinary things	56 (18.42%)	64 (21.05%)	135 (44.41%)	28 (9.21%)	21 (6.91%)	2.65
e . Often feel like crying or I burst into tears.	65 (21.38%)	64 (21.05%)	113 (37.17%)	39 (12.83%)	23 (7.57%)	2.64
f . Feeling lonely studying here	67 (22.04%)	49 (16.12%)	136 (44.74%)	29 (9.54%)	23 (7.57%)	2.64
g . Noticing weight loss	66 (21.71%)	56 (18.42%)	131 (43.09%)	27 (8.88%)	24 (7.89%)	2.63
h . Suffering from constipation	77 (25.33%)	59 (19.41%)	118 (38.82%)	27 (8.88%)	23 (7.57%)	2.54
Subtotal	663 (13.63%)	678 (13.94%)	2261 (46.48%)	677 (13.92%)	585 (12.03%)	2.97

The Cross-Cultural Psychological Adaptation of ASEAN Students in Higher Vocational Colleges in Guangxi Is in Good Condition

The scale has 16 items in total: 8 positive items (items 1-8) and 8 negative items (items a-h). The average score is 2.97, almost equal to the average score of 3 points for each item. All the average scores for the negative items are lower than the average score of 3 points for each item. The three items with the highest scores (from highest to lowest score) are: "I am very happy studying in China" (3.8 points, 0.8 points higher than the average score); "I feel very fulfilled and confident now" (3.69 points, 0.69 points higher than the average score); and "Our school values the mental health of international students" (3.53 points, 0.53 points higher than the average score). The fact that the average scores for the negative items are all lower than the average score of 3 points for each item indicates that the cross-cultural psychological adaptation of ASEAN students is generally in good condition in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi and generally approve of the school's psychological support efforts for ASEAN students.

ASEAN Students Face Numerous Challenges in Cross-Cultural Psychological Adaptation

In the 8 negative items, the frequency of selecting "Very suitable" ranged from 21 (6.91%) to 35 (11.51%), while the frequency of selecting "Somewhat in line" ranged from 25 (8.22%) to 39 (12.83%). This indicates that a significant proportion of ASEAN students experience cross-cultural psychological challenges such as poor sleep, low mood, loss of interest in ordinary things, often feel like crying, feelings of loneliness, weight loss, and constipation, ranked from most severe to least severe. The most common manifestations of cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges are poor sleep, decreased interest, and waning enthusiasm; severe physical health abnormalities such as constipation and weight loss are relatively less.

ASEAN Students Face Challenges in Coping with Cross-Cultural Psychological Adaptation

In the 8 positive items, the three items with the lowest scores (from lowest to highest) are: "Seeking help from the school's psychological counseling center when feeling sad" (score 2.77); "When feeling down, seek help from a counselor" (score 2.98); and "Knowing that the school has a psychological counseling center" (score 2.99). This indicates that ASEAN students do not pay enough attention to psychological health during cross-cultural psychological adaptation, lack awareness of seeking help, and that higher vocational colleges in Guangxi do not provide adequate psychological support for ASEAN students. Specifically, the frequency of "Very inconsistent" for the question "knowing that the school has a psychological counseling center" was 39 (12.83%), and the frequency of "Not quite in line with" was 34 (11.18%), indicating that the psychological health promotion work in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi is not well implemented, and ASEAN students are unaware of the existence of psychological counseling centers in their schools. For the question "When feeling down, seek help from the school's psychological center", the frequency of "Very inconsistent" is 58 (19.08%), and the frequency of "Not quite in line with" is 43 (14.14%), indicating that on the one hand, ASEAN students are unaware that their schools have a psychological counseling center where they could seek counseling assistance, and on the other hand, they are unwilling to choose to seek psychological counseling.

The ASEAN Students Experience Challenges Related to Language Proficiency, Academic Demands, Emotional Adjustment, Interpersonal Relationships, And Financial Concerns.

The findings indicate that while students generally demonstrate positive psychological adaptation, they continue to experience cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges related to language proficiency, academic demands, emotional adjustment, interpersonal relationships, and financial concerns. Based on interview records of 12 ASEAN students and 12 faculty members from three representative higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, China, thematic coding was performed using NVivo15.0 software. A total of 131 reference points has been identified and categorized into 6 groups regarding the challenges of cross-cultural psychological adaptation. This revealed that the cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges faced by ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi include language pressure, academic pressure, exam and scholarship pressure, homesickness, economic pressure, and interpersonal relationship pressure.

Language pressure has the most reference points among all cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges, totaling 75, further subdivided into learning language pressure (27 reference points), seeking help language pressure (13 reference points), reading language pressure, and social language pressure. A staff from international center stated, "When language students enroll, it's very clear that their Chinese proficiency is just beginning. According to our school's HSK mock exam, 80% of the language students are at HSK level 1-2. Among degree-seeking students, some of them have relatively good Chinese proficiency, with HSK levels approaching HSK level 3, but they have almost known nothing about professional terminology." ASEAN students face significant academic pressure, especially during their first year in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi, due to a heavy workload, numerous courses and assignments, challenging majors, and demanding tasks. There are 48 references for academic pressure, mainly manifested in difficulty understanding lectures, too many courses, heavy workload, and high difficulty of the major. A Lao student who has been in China for 1 year and 5 months said, "I still find that my major studying is so difficult that I

couldn't help crying. Crying releases the pressure, and then I feel much better, and then I continue studying. "There are 23 references for the pressure associated with examinations and scholarships. The Guangxi government scholarship is mainly selected based on exam scores but is also related to the levels of passing HSK examination and daily performance. Homesickness is very prevalent among ASEAN students in higher vocational colleges in Guangxi. One Indonesian student said, " After just a few months here, I started to miss my family terribly. I missed them a little after the first month, but after more than four months this semester, I really, really want to go home. I feel like I can't hold back anymore; sometimes I even cry because I miss my family. " Other pressures include financial burdens such as tuition, accommodation, and transportation costs, as well as interpersonal relationship stress related to dormitory conflicts and interactions with Chinese classmates.

Conclusion

In response to the common cross-cultural psychological adaptation challenges such as language pressure, academic pressure, examinations and scholarships pressure, homesickness, economic pressure, and interpersonal relationship pressure, this article puts forward suggestions from the perspectives of ASEAN students, teachers and students in vocational college, the management of higher vocational colleges and the construction of social culture.

For ASEAN Students, They Should Cultivate Adaptability and Build Psychological Resilience

ASEAN students should prioritize their psychological health. Studying abroad inevitably encounters challenges such as homesickness and cultural differences, requiring a positive attitude towards these challenges. Students should strive to improve their Chinese language skills, diligently study professional knowledge and skills, actively participate in various exchange and friendship activities, and proactively address any psychological adaptation issues to cultivate positive psychological motivation (Xing & Ge, 2025). When encountering challenges beyond their capacity to cope with alone, students should actively seek help from classmates, teachers, and psychological health centers. Developing and enhancing psychological resilience involves various methods such as confiding in peers, communicating with teachers, seeking counseling, and participating in psychological activities (Dartina et al., 2025).

For Teachers and Students in Higher Vocational Colleges, They Should Provide Warm and Friendly Assistance and Psychological Support for ASEAN Students

The managers of the international center and the psychological center jointly started psychological education for the newly enrolled ASEAN students as soon as possible. They enabled the ASEAN students to understand the common cross-cultural psychological adaptation problems at each stage of their studies they will encounter and helped them prepare psychologically in advance. Professional teachers should improve their cross-cultural literacy, take into account the differences of ASEAN students, slow down their speech as much as possible, communicate more with ASEAN students to see if they understand, explain more, and translate the key points or difficult professional terms in advance to ensure that ASEAN students can understand and master the professional courses. Counselors should care for and help ASEAN students in their actions and daily life, become their confidants, and go deep into the dormitory, canteen and other living areas to talk and communicate with ASEAN students

to establish a trust and close psychological relationship. For the dietary, medical care, accommodation, transportation, and administrative matters of ASEAN students, patience is needed. Multi-language guides should be prepared to effectively address the practical problems that ASEAN students are concerned about (Badham et al., 2025). Promptly identify the psychological state and homesickness of ASEAN students, provide timely psychological support and guidance, and refer them to the mental health center for professional counseling when necessary. Create a sense of belonging through dormitory arrangements, verbal cues, and cultural integration, making ASEAN students feel welcome and valued. Chinese students should treat their ASEAN classmates with friendliness and hospitality, as if they were neighbors, proactively breaking down psychological barriers and offering care and support (Lee, 2026).

Higher Vocational Colleges at The Working Level, Should Coordinate Multi-Level Management and Strengthen Psychological Work

Higher vocational colleges in Guangxi should establish a multi-level and three-dimensional scholarship and grant system, select outstanding ASEAN students and provide them with scholarships through multiple channels and in multiple forms to expand the coverage. Higher vocational colleges in Guangxi can set up "work-study" positions or school-enterprise cooperation scholarships to provide financial assistance and alleviate the economic pressure on ASEAN students, and should attach importance to the cross-cultural psychological adaptation assistance work for ASEAN students, carry out a variety of psychological activities, alleviate homesickness and psychological pressure, build a platform for making friends, and improve language skills (Muhsin et al., 2026). Carry out multi-cultural integration activities, especially integrating the cultural customs of ASEAN countries into school activities, so that ASEAN students feel that they and their cultural customs are respected and welcomed. Continuously supplement and improve the psychological work and management work related to ASEAN students, strengthen the coordination of various departments in the psychological support work for ASEAN students, and realize psychological support for all ASEAN students in all aspects and throughout the whole process (Wu & Teng, 2026).

Social Integration Level, Should Find Cultural Commonalities and Creating a Friendly Atmosphere

ASEAN countries with China, especially with Guangxi, share extensive and profound cultural commonalities. These include shared holidays such as the Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and Mid-Autumn Festival; a shared rice-growing civilization and the resulting common dietary habits; close-knit ethnic groups with similar languages and customs, such as the Jing people of Guangxi and the Viet people of Vietnam; and cultural networks formed by geographical migration and transnational intermarriage, leading to cultural integration. By identifying these cultural commonalities and utilizing various means such as social and physical environment arrangements, cultural promotion, organizing shared festivals, and exchanging shared ethnic customs, a friendly environment can be created for ASEAN students, thereby promoting their psychological adaptation and integration into the local community (Patil et al., 2025).

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