


Chapter 3

Becoming Interculturally Adaptable: Chinese Student Sojourners Attending German Universities

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing picture of intercultural adaptation among international student sojourners features a reified process of overcoming culture shock or culture-related stress and anxiety. In the context of increasing recruitment of Chinese students by German higher education institutions, there has been a growing interest in understanding Chinese students' intercultural adaptation experiences, and in exploring approaches that can be adopted by Chinese and German higher education to support these sojourners' learning experience. Drawing on a six-month mixed-methods study of 84 Chinese students attending German universities, researchers explored their intercultural experience regarding psychological, sociocultural, and educational aspects to university life. The challenges faced by these students are discussed in terms of psychological, sociocultural, and educational adaptations.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, the socioeconomic connections between China, Europe, and other Asian countries have been consolidated by The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which physically, economically, and politically connects China with countries west and south with a vast infrastructure of highways, roadways, and railways. Also known as the New Silk Road, it strengthens links between more than 60 countries with regard to trade, pipelines, and education. The BRI has led to a significant increase in the number of Chinese students pursuing higher education opportunities in these countries, particularly in Germany.

As one of the world's fastest rising overseas study destinations, Germany is in the company of leading English-speaking countries such as the U.S., U.K., Australia, and Canada. In the past decade, it has experienced rapid increases in international students, taking advantage of opportunities to grow further through the growth of degree programs conducted in English (Redden, 2018). Between 2013 and 2018, the number of international students enrolled at German higher education institutions rose from 282,201 to 374,583, an increase over 32.7 percent. In 2018, there were 36,915 Chinese students that enrolled in German universities (up 5.5 percent over 2017), accounting for 13 percent of international students in Germany, more than any other country (ICEF Monitor, 2019). Despite remarkable increase in the number of Chinese students studying in German higher education institutions, the cultural, academic, and educational exchange dimensions between China and Germany remain in a formative stage, with Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst, or German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) establishing its Beijing office in 1994, Guangzhou office in 2002, and Shanghai office in 2003, Düsseldorf China Center founded in Düsseldorf in 2005, and the first Confucius Institute in Germany established in Freie Universität Berlin, or Free University of Berlin (FU Berlin) in 2006. Therefore, German educators and institutions may face enormous sociocultural, technical, and academic challenges in serving Chinese students regarding their intercultural adaptations.

There are previous studies targeting intercultural issues of the broader Asian student body studying in the world's leading study destinations (Bista, 2015; Campbell & Li, 2007; Hung & Hyun, 2010; Li & Gasser, 2005; Machart, 2016) and intercultural experiences of Chinese students from Mainland China studying master, doctoral, or postdoctoral programs in the U.S. and the U.K. settings (Gill, 2007; Gu, 2011; Zhang, 2004; Zhong, 1996; Zhou et al., 2011; Zhou & Todman, 2009). However, the research on intercultural issues that Chinese students encounter in Germany remains scarce (Li, 2017; Yu & Wange, 2011; Zhang et al., 2010), despite the fact that Germany ranks 4th place after the U.S., the U.K., and Australia as the most attractive guest country for international students (China Daily, 2019).

This paper shares recent research on intercultural adaptations of Chinese undergraduate and graduate students from Mainland China studying in German universities. Focus is given to the challenges and opportunities students encountered and experienced in learning and communicating with German professors and peers from the aspects of psychological, sociocultural, and educational adaptations in their overseas study. The synergy of these dimensions of intercultural adaptation were explored from affective, behavioral, and cognitive perspectives. Therefore, the main research questions that drove this study include: (1) What are Chinese students' adaptation experiences in German higher education institutions? and, (2) what is the nature of these experiences from psychological, sociocultural, and educational aspects of intercultural adaptation? This study contributes to filling the gap in the important but lacking literature on international higher education student exchange between Germany and China, with a focus on intercultural adaptation of Chinese students taking degree courses through English medium instruction in a non-English-speaking setting.

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