

## Beyond Language Barriers: Chinese Students' Cross-cultural Adaptation in Catalonia through a Life Story Lens

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### Abstract

With the globalization of higher education, the number of Chinese students undergoing cross-cultural adaptation in multilingual context in Europe is increasing. This inquiry employs a narrative research approach based on life history, conducting semi-structured interviews with four Chinese undergraduate international students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Barcelona in Spain. It examines their current state of cross-cultural adaptation in these environments, as well as the factors that influence this process. The findings show that the cross-cultural adaptation process of Chinese students is influenced by a combination of individual and contextual factors. While they currently demonstrate the capacity to adapt well to their overseas study life, they have not yet fully integrated or actively adopted relevant strategies. Therefore, this inquiry proposes strategies to enhance the future cross-cultural adaptation process for this group, focusing on improving their proficiency in the local languages of the multilingual context, constructing more life-oriented local social networks, and bolstering their psychological resilience to against diverse challenges.

### Keywords

Cross-cultural adaptation; Chinese international students; Life history research method

### 1. Introduction

In the complex dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation for international students, they often need to cope with challenges from psychological, social, and academic aspects (Elliot et al., 2015; Yu & Moskal, 2018). In recent years, the number of studies on cross-cultural adaptation of international students has surged, and the discussions have become increasingly profound (Peng & Wu, 2019; Babushko et al., 2022; Tang & Zhang, 2023). These studies have explored the correlation between international students' cross-cultural adaptation and factors such as prior intercultural learning (Fang

et al., 2020), cultural intelligence (Chu & Zhu, 2023), and social support (Shu et al., 2020). However, most studies have focused on the adaptation experiences of international students in English-speaking countries or the adaptation of English-speaking students overseas (Gong et al., 2020; Yu & Wright, 2024), with less exploration of adaptation in other language environments.

With the increasingly frequent global academic mobility, Chinese international students, as one of the major mobility groups (British Council & Oxford Economics, 2020), have attracted growing academic attention. Currently, most studies on this group have focused on English-speaking countries such as the UK, US, Australia, and Canada (Dai, 2018; Achirri, 2021; Zhang & Noels, 2022; Zhuang & Bell, 2024), with an emphasis on examining their adaptation in a monolingual (English) cultural environment. In contrast, existing studies on their cross-cultural adaptation in multilingual context remains scarce (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020; Jurásek & Wawrosz, 2022).

In the process of cross-cultural adaptation, linguistic barriers are the first challenge to be faced and a key factor influencing the adaptation of international students (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Linguistic barriers not only lead to communication difficulties, cultural misunderstandings, and social isolation (Gong et al., 2020), but also directly impact academic performance (Chaiyasat, 2020) and even affect the psychological adaptation of international students (Bai et al., 2023). Therefore, in multilingual context, linguistic barriers pose a more significant and daunting challenge for cross-cultural adapters.

In recent years, the destinations for Chinese international students have diversified, with many choosing to study in multilingual European countries such as Spain, France, and Germany. Data shows that in 2021-2022, the number of Chinese students ranked among the top international students in Spain (Tableau, n.d.). Among them, the Catalonia has attracted a large number of students. This region applies a unique policy of dual official languages, Castilian (Spanish) and Catalan (Boix Fuster & Sanz, 2009). Plan for strengthening the Catalan language enacted in 2022 (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2022) requires a further increase in the proportion of courses taught in Catalan, posing a new challenge for Chinese international students. Taking the University of Barcelona (UB) as an example, over 50%, and even up to 90%, of undergraduate courses in many programs are conducted in Catalan (Buscador de grados, n.d.). Since most Chinese students mainly learn and prepare for Castilian proficiency tests (such as DELE) before going abroad, they have little exposure to Catalan, resulting in significant linguistic barriers that further affect their adaptation and integration into the local social environment. Based on this background, this study aims to explore the current status of

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cross-cultural adaptation among Chinese undergraduate international students at the Faculty of Education of the UB.

## 2. Cross-cultural adaptation of international students

When international students find themselves in a new environment vastly different from their own culture, they inevitably go through the process of cross-cultural adaptation. According to Kim (2001), cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic process in which individuals gradually transform their identities in the new setting. They need to continuously adjust their behaviors, beliefs, and values to better integrate into the host country's environment. Facing numerous challenges and shocks from cultural differences, international students often need to adapt in three key dimensions: academic, socio-cultural, and psychological (Lai et al., 2023; Zhao & Schartner, 2023; Qu & Song, 2024).

In the dimension of academic adaptation, notable differences between Eastern and Western cultures are evident in academic aspects such as learning and teaching methods (Chang et al., 2011). These disparities, observed in students' learning behaviors in their home countries, persist in cross-cultural classroom settings. For instance, Chinese students tend to prefer a listening-oriented rather than an actively participating classroom interaction mode, whereas North American students demonstrate the opposite attitude (Lu & Han, 2010). These differences pose challenges for international students in their academic adaptation process. Current studies have explored the status, issues, and influencing factors of academic adaptation from various perspectives. On one hand, research has focused on specific problems and sources of stress in academic adaptation. Cao et al. (2021) found that academic pressure for Chinese students mainly originates from academic ability, cultural shock, resource acquisition, cross-cultural communication, and stress management. On the other hand, studies have also examined internal and external factors affecting academic adaptation, such as academic resilience (Singh, 2021), employment orientation (Thies, 2023), and cross-cultural sensitivity (Mensah et al., 2024). However, the process of academic adaptation is not isolated. Some studies have explored the relationship between socio-cultural interactions and the adaptation of international students. These include social support (Martirosyan et al., 2019), as well as the interplay between academic, psychological, and socio-cultural adaptation (Sheng et al., 2022; Yu, 2021). From this standpoint, a comprehensive analysis of the adaptation of international students requires an understanding of the other two dimensions.

In the dimensions of psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, Ward et al. (2001) identified that these two dimensions are crucial indicators of cross-cultural adaptation and are also closely interconnected (Brisset, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2020; O'Reilly et al., 2010). Specifically, the socio-cultural adaptation stress faced by international students can further affect their psychological adaptation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Additionally, studies have focused on the role of socio-cultural factors in psychological adaptation (Gibbs et al., 2020; Salerno, 2024). Dovchin (2020) found that socially prevalent biases such as "ethnic accent bullying" and "linguistic stereotyping" have negative impacts on the mental health of international students. To facilitate better psychological and socio-cultural adaptation for international students, scholars have focused on exploring how to effectively utilize the key factor of social support (Sovic, 2009; Nga et al., 2017; Bender et al., 2019), particularly the extensive discussion in recent years on social network sites (SNS) as sources of social support (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022; Hofhuis et al., 2023; Wong & Liu, 2024). It can be seen that although current research has paid attention to the social and academic challenges faced by international students, the exploration of psychological adaptation still needs to be strengthened (Oduwaye, 2023).

In addition to the aforementioned study findings, linguistic barriers are always considered one of the primary factors among the many challenges of cross-cultural adaptation, affecting the interaction between international students and the host society (Chaiyasat, 2020). Studies have shown that a lack of second language communication skills can affect international students' performance in academic, social and cultural adaptation (Yang et al., 2005; Yu et al., 2019; Zhang & Noels, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). Having good second language skills and language confidence can help alleviate the stress of adaptation for international students (Yu, 2016). For those studying in English-speaking countries, language has become a major challenge in adapting to local life (Tian & Lowe, 2012; Hsu & Chen, 2020; Xie et al., 2020). Therefore, for students studying in multilingual European countries where English is not their mother tongue, the adaptation problems they face are undoubtedly more difficult and pronounced. Recent studies have begun to focus on the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students in non-English European settings. In particular, Li & Pitkänen (2018) conducted a study through semi-structured interviews on the integration and adaptation process of Chinese students in Finland, and found that English and Finnish served as mediators for integrating into the local host community. Maeder-Qian (2017) explored the formation of cultural identity among Chinese students studying in Germany within a multilingual and multicultural context, revealing that the proficient use of both German

and English contributed to their cultural identity construction and integration into the local environment. These studies have used qualitative research methods to explore the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students, but they have not yet examined the impact of individuals' dynamic growth experiences on the cross-cultural adaptation process from life history perspective.

The life history research method is a qualitative approach that emphasises the exploration of the dynamic experiences of individuals along the timeline of their lives to investigate the interaction between individuals and social environment (Hagemaster, 1992). This method is complex and diverse and is widely used in disciplines such as sociology, education and psychology (Suárez-Ortega, 2013). Researchers need to focus on the narrative content, linking past and current events to gain a more comprehensive understanding and reflection of individuals' emotions and attitudes, thereby enhancing the depth of the study (Germeten, 2013). This method is useful for researchers to delve into the cross-cultural adaptation process of Chinese international students in a multilingual context. At present, studies using the life history method in the field of cross-cultural research mainly focus on immigrant and refugee populations (Ghorashi, 2008; Lee, 2010; Ramsgaard & Bohn, 2019; Koehn et al., 2022), and little attention has been paid to the short-term cross-cultural adaptation process of international students.

In conclusion, the cross-cultural adaptation of international students is a complex and multi-dimensional process influenced by various factors. By analyzing the process and influencing factors of cross-cultural adaptation, we can better help international students in facing the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation and provide them with more comprehensive and systematic support and guidance. Specifically, this study adopts the life history method, using undergraduate Chinese students from the Faculty of Education at the UB in Spain as a case study. It aims to explore two questions regarding the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students in a European multilingual context:

RQ1: What is the current status of cross-cultural adaptation for undergraduate Chinese students in the Catalonia region of Spain?

RQ2: What factors influence the cross-cultural adaptation process of undergraduate Chinese students in the Catalonia region of Spain?

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research participants***

This study centers on Chinese undergraduate students who are either currently studying or have successfully finished their undergraduate studies at the UB's Faculty

of Education. With them as a case study, data collection and analysis will be carried out. These students are mainly beginners in Spanish and have similar experiences of applying to the UB. After completing the Gaokao, the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges, they selected a Chinese overseas study agency and enrolled in a one-year Spanish language program, which was divided into six months of study in China and six months in Spain. After obtaining the necessary Spanish language certification, they proceeded to take the Test and Access to the University (PAU) in Spain. Based on the conversion of their Gaokao and PAU results, they applied to and were subsequently admitted to the Faculty of Education at the UB.

In this study, the target group was invited to participate via email, and four students voluntarily agreed to take part. Before conducting the formal interviews, explicit consent and authorization were obtained from these participants to ensure ethical research practices. Table 1 provides detailed information about the participants. As detailed in Table 1, the participants' personal backgrounds are diverse, including factors such as age, gender, time of arrival in Spain, and current academic state. To safeguard their privacy, participants are identified by letters (A, B, C, D).

**Table 1.** Participants' profiles.

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Major	Time	State
1	A	25	Female	Pedagogy	2018 (6 years)	Not yet graduated
2	B	25	Female	Pedagogy	2018 (6 years)	Graduated
3	C	23	Female	Pedagogy	2020 (4 years)	Not yet graduated
4	D	22	Male	Pedagogy	2021 (3 years)	Not yet graduated

### 3.2 Data collection

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which personal growth experiences shape cross-cultural adaptation, this study employs a life history method within narrative research. Through semi-structured interviews, this method

collects longitudinal and dynamic storylines from interviewees, capturing key narrative moments to present authentic and vivid portrayals of individuals' cross-cultural growth experiences. The life history is not merely a description of past events but a tool for assessment and intentional communication, encompassing deeper emotional content and values (Elliott, 2005). Narrators place their personal experiences within the dynamic interplay of time and social contexts, expressing active reflection on thematic issues through thoughtful and emotionally charged language, thereby evoking resonance and deeper contemplation among readers. The perspectives and experiences of individual narrators constitute invaluable data for researchers (Brannen, 2013; Asplund & Pérez Prieto, 2020; Brotman et al., 2020). These characteristics of the life history method align well with the research direction and questions addressed in this study.

As a Chinese international student belonging to this particular group, the researcher conducted a self-narrative review of own life history and experiences regarding adaptation and integration within the Faculty of Education at UB. According to Kyrtatzis and Green (1997), "narrative research entails a double narrative process, one that includes the narratives generated by those participating in the research, and one that represents the voice of the researcher as narrator of those narratives" (p. 17). Therefore, in the process of narrative research, the analysis and expression of the researcher are equally important. The researcher can also include their own story as part of the study, using subjective methods to review and reflect on their history. From the researcher's own perspective, in order to gain a profound understanding of the study and find an appropriate balance between subjectivity and objectivity, there is no need to deliberately avoid the inherent subjectivity in the research.

Referencing the acculturative stress scale for international students by Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994), the researcher's own reflective life history narrative guided the design and creation of a semi-structured interview framework, which covered three dimensions: socio-cultural, psychological and academic adaptation. The interview structure is divided into five parts to guide the participants' recall and reflection: (1) Personal Information (a brief introduction of basic personal details); (2) Discovering Who I Am (exploring the participants' growth stories and campus experiences before studying abroad in China); (3) Preparing for the Cross-Cultural Journey (transitional experiences before entering the UB); (4) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Journey (experiences of cross-cultural adaptation during study and life at the UB); (5) Achievements and Development (outlook for future life, as well as reflections on the gains from this period of life). The interview activities commenced on March 20th,

2024, and concluded on April 1st. During this period, each interview lasted approximately one and a half to two hours, with in-depth conversations and exchanges conducted in Chinese. The interview process was recorded using the mobile phone's audio recording function, and subsequently transcribed using the "Recording Expert" application. After transcription, all content was uploaded to the Google Docs platform for organization and carefully proofread to ensure the accuracy of the transcription results.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

In this study, NVivo14 was utilized to code the collected life history interview data and conduct thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a research method commonly used in qualitative studies to handle large amounts of descriptive data, assisting researchers in minimizing subjective biases as much as possible (Naeem et al., 2023). In narrative research, this method enables researchers to avoid fragmented interpretations by deeply analyzing individuals' unique experiences and backgrounds, offering new perspectives to comprehensively understand the reasons and motivations behind their behaviors (Meraz, 2019). Therefore, thematic analysis is suitable for processing life history data in study exploring the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students.

In examining the factors affecting the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students, the researcher first returned the transcribed interview transcripts to the participants for content verification (Xu & Zammit, 2020). And repeatedly read through the transcripts to become as familiar as possible with the data. Subsequently, to enhance the reliability of data processing, this study leveraged NVivo14 for efficient inductive coding. The researcher labeled all statements closely related to the research topic, generating a total of 158 initial codes. During the initial coding process, the researcher maintained a record of all coding ideas and comments in order to facilitate the subsequent organization (Nowell et al., 2017). Based on this, the researcher used a visual mind-mapping approach for induction (Braun & Clarke, 2006), repeatedly comparing and logically organizing the codes, eliminating 9 isolated coding items. From the remaining 149 valid codes, 12 sub-themes with clear directions were extracted. Ultimately, these sub-themes were further summarized and organized, successfully distilling into 6 core themes, namely, the influencing factors of cross-cultural adaptation. And based on all the analyzed data, the current status of cross-cultural adaptation for Chinese international students has been summarized.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Cross-cultural adaptation status

A comprehensive examination of interview data has revealed that the cross-cultural adaptation process of Chinese international students at the University of Barcelona exhibits a W-curve dynamic pattern, as initially proposed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963). The behavior patterns, thinking modes, and attitudes of this group evolve continuously over time and with changing environments, transitioning gradually from an initial state of maladaptation to a current state of good adaptation. However, it is noteworthy that when these students return to China after adapting to their new life in Barcelona, they may still experience the impact of reverse culture shock, particularly in terms of certain beliefs and lifestyle habits.

In terms of sociocultural adaptation, Chinese international students generally demonstrate good adaptability. They are able to accept and understand the differences between Spain and China in sociocultural aspects and daily life, and these differences do not significantly hinder their adaptation. And the use of Catalan does not pose a significant impact in this dimension, as they can use Castilian in daily life. However, Catalan becomes a major challenge for them in the university study environment. Additionally, social situations vary among individuals. Most international students tend to communicate about daily life topics with people from the same cultural background. This tendency may help them quickly adapt into the new environment in the initial stage of adaptation, but in the long run, it could also become an obstacle to their deeper integration into local cultural life.

With regard to psychological adaptation, some international students have experienced severe mental health issues, which is deeply concerning. However, it is encouraging to see that these students have adopted a proactive stance in the face of mental health challenges. They are not only seeking external interventions, such as consulting with mental health professionals, but also employing internal coping strategies like self-reflection and understanding to deal with their difficulties.

In respect of academic adaptation, Chinese international students face numerous challenges. At the Faculty of Education of UB, the study pressure is generally perceived to be high, requiring significant time and effort, as well as strong independence and self-discipline. Among these challenges, Catalan language proficiency stands out as the biggest obstacle. Many students were not sufficiently informed about this situation before enrollment, leading to communication and language usage difficulties during their studies. Although teachers and fellow students provide considerable assistance with their studies, students demonstrate a restricted awareness of the support resources

accessible at the university. Beyond language courses, their participation in other campus activities remains relatively low.

In conclusion, the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students at the UB is a process that occurs in stages and at a gradual pace. They arrive with high expectations for their overseas study experience, yet subsequently encounter numerous cross-cultural adaptation challenges, leading to a decline in satisfaction and enthusiasm. However, through continuous adjustment and adaptation, they gradually accept differences and find their own way to fit in. Nevertheless, achieving full integration into local life remains challenging, and these students tend to maintain their original cultural identity in their cultural adaptation strategies rather than actively adopting strategies to integrate into the new culture (Berry et al., 2001; Sam & Berry, 2010). This suggests that, in future intercultural education, more emphasis should be placed on guiding students to actively integrate into the new culture while maintaining respect and inheritance of their original culture.

#### ***4.2 Factors influencing cross-cultural adaptation***

Data analysis reveals that the adaptation status of Chinese students in Barcelona during their cross-cultural adaptation process is influenced by a multitude of complex factors. As shown in Table 2, these factors can be broadly categorized into two main groups: individual factors and contextual factors. Individual factors primarily encompass the students' own experiences, psychological states, and motivations for cross-cultural adaptation. Among these, psychological adaptation factors (23/149) have a significant impact on the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students, followed by individual planning factors (20/149) and cross-cultural background factors (11/149). In contrast, contextual factors focus more on the external conditions and challenges encountered by students during cross-cultural interactions with their new environment. The data indicates that adaptation barriers (45/149) pose the greatest challenge to the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students, followed by external regulation factors (35/149) and social interaction factors (15/149). These two categories of factors are not isolated but are mutually influential, jointly shaping the dynamic process of cross-cultural adaptation for Chinese students in Barcelona and fundamentally determining their adaptation status.

**Table 2.** Factors influencing cross-cultural adaptation.

Category		Frequency	Influencing Factors	Frequency
Individual Factors	Psychological Adaptation	(23/149)	Mental Resilience	(16/23)
			Mental Health Status	(7/23)
	Individual Planning	(20/149)	Future Planning	(11/20)
			Initial Expectations and Planning	(9/20)
	Cross-cultural Background	(11/149)	Cross-cultural Motivation	(7/11)
			Prior Cross-cultural Experience	(4/11)
Contextual Factors	Adaptation Barriers	(45/149)	Linguistic difficulties	(28/45)
			Academic Shock	(17/45)
	External regulation	(35/149)	Unexpected Events	(23/35)
			Social Support	(12/35)
	Social Interaction	(15/149)	Social Situation	(8/15)
			Social Preferences	(7/15)

#### 4.2.1 Individual factors as the internal driving force

Individual factors serve as the internal driving force for cross-cultural adaptation, exerting a direct influence on the mindset adjustment, attitude formation, and behavioral patterns of Chinese students in multicultural contexts. These factors can be classified into three categories: psychological adaptation, individual planning, and cross-cultural background. These factors not only shape their adaptation strategies in the new environment but also further determine the overall effectiveness of their

adaptation, thereby profoundly affecting their cross-cultural living experiences and integration levels.

#### **4.2.1.1 Psychological adaptation**

In the intricate process of adaptation for international students, psychological adaptation, particularly in regard to mental health status and resilience, occupies a pivotal and indispensable position. This adaptation profoundly influences various aspects of their lives in a foreign country. This study identifies resilience as a critical factor in maintaining the mental health of international students, with the potential to influence their academic performance and social integration.

The case studies of participants studying in Barcelona have revealed that a significant majority of students encounter substantial mental health challenges, manifesting as loneliness, excessive stress, anxiety, and depressive. These psychological conditions not only directly affect students' self-perception and emotional wellbeing (Fayzullina et al., 2020), but also indirectly disrupt their interactions and communications with the surrounding environment. For example, Student A's severe anxiety and depressive symptoms, including overeating, insomnia, somatization disorder, and breathing difficulties, resulted in significant distractions from learning and impediments to social activities. It fully illustrates the dual negative impact of mental health issues on both academic performance and daily life.

When I was taking online classes... I just couldn't concentrate on learning, and I had a really hard time sleeping at night. And I started eating and drinking way too much... to the point where I felt like I might throw up... (IC/A/12)

The importance of resilience as a crucial resource for navigating intercultural stress is well documented (Gao et al., 2023; Pakzad et al., 2024). The participants consistently stated that resilience traits, such as optimism, inclusivity, robust stress resistance, and the courage to confront challenges, are indispensable for overcoming obstacles in cross-cultural adaptation. One of them, Student C, pointed out that "good mental capacity" is the key to a successful university life in Barcelona.

Moreover, self-regulation within psychological resilience has been identified as an effective means of mitigating negative cross-cultural emotions (Yoo et al., 2006). Following the experience of mental health crises, students A and B demonstrated notable improvements in their psychological well-being through the proactive pursuit of professional assistance and self-regulation. Student B, in particular, when talking about her experience of studying abroad, expressed that while external support is important, the role of self-digestion and adaptation is even more significant. This

further highlights the important role that psychological dimensions play in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students.

In conclusion, psychological adaptation, particularly in relation to mental health and psychological resilience, exerts a profound and comprehensive influence on the cross-cultural adaptation process of international students. Such factors are not only directly related to students' mental health status, but also have a significant impact on their academic performance and quality of life. Therefore, for international students, enhancing psychological resilience and improving self-regulation is an important way to strengthen cross-cultural adaptability and adapt smoothly to unfamiliar environments.

#### **4.2.1.2 Individual planning**

Individual planning refers to the preparation before studying abroad and future development, and such planning has a significant positive guiding effect on the intercultural adaptation process of Chinese international students. This Study have revealed that a lack or inadequacy of pre-departure planning often leads students to face more challenges in cross-cultural environments. Specifically, some participants had limited understanding of the culture, educational environment, and language use in Barcelona before arriving, relying only on superficial cultural impressions or tourist experiences. For instance, most students were unprepared for the widespread use of Catalan in Barcelona, as Student B mentioned, and were surprised by the language difference upon arrival. This information asymmetry increased the difficulty of their cross-cultural adaptation.

When I got off the plane... I realized how big the issue was... When I first arrived, I didn't know any of the metro station names, and they didn't sound like Spanish (Castilian) to me, so I thought it was really weird... It took me some time to figure out it was Catalan. (IC/B/52)

Further analysis demonstrated that future planning during the period of study abroad had a significant impact on attitudes and strategies related to cross-cultural adaptation. In the study, the students who planned to stay and continue living in Barcelona showed a more positive attitude towards adaptation, tending to take proactive actions to bridge the gap with the local culture, such as learning Catalan and actively participating in local social circles. Students A and B due to their strong desire to stay, actively integrated into the local language and culture. They effectively promoted cross-cultural adaptation by attending language courses and expanding their social circles. Conversely, students like C and D, who intended to return to their home country for development, had less motivation to learn Catalan, and their adaptation strategies were relatively passive.

By the second semester of my first year, all my teachers started talking to me in Catalan... because I wanted to stay here in the future. Slowly, I got used to it... So I started learning Catalan too. (IC/A/20)

In conclusion, individual planning stands as a crucial yet frequently overlooked factor in the process of cross-cultural adaptation. While current studies seldom examine individual planning as a factor influencing cross-cultural adaptation, it is undeniable that clear personal plans not only provide international students with a clear direction and objectives but also substantially facilitate their transition into a new cultural environment.

#### **4.2.1.3 Cross-cultural background**

This study integrates the prior cross-cultural experiences and cross-cultural motivations of international students into the core element of cross-cultural background, which indirectly influences the adaptation of Chinese students in Barcelona. Prior intercultural experience serves as an important component of an individual's cultural capital. It provides international students with valuable opportunities for cultural adaptation and helps them to deal more confidently with cultural differences and challenges in their new environment (Fang et al., 2020). Participants have broadened their horizons and improved intercultural competences through diverse experiences, including overseas travel, international exchange programs, and musical exchanges. As Student B mentioned, these experiences significantly reduced the sense of strangeness she felt in Barcelona.

Before I came here, I'd been to Korea, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy. Plus, I'm really into English and learning about other countries' cultures and ways of life. So, I don't feel too much strangeness in Barcelona. (IC/B/44)

In addition, intercultural motivation as an internal driving force for international students' intercultural choices should not be ignored. Compared to those whose study abroad choices are driven by external factors, international students with self-determined motivation and a passion for cross-cultural learning often demonstrate stronger adaptability and resilience in adjusting to new socio-cultural environments (Chirkov et al., 2007). However, this study also found that the cross-cultural motivation of international students is not singular, but rather influenced by a complex interplay of various internal and external factors. Unsatisfactory results in the Gaokao have become a significant factor driving many students to choose to study abroad.

It is worth noting that some students show randomness and uncertainty in their major selection, influenced by factors such as family and admission conditions, among others. For example, students C and D chose to major in Education because the UB did

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not require a B2 linguistic certificate. They lacked in-depth knowledge about the major and the university, thus encountered challenges in their academic adaptation. This phenomenon reveals the complexity and diversity of cross-cultural motivations. And suggests that while encouraging students to engage in cross-cultural learning, we should guide them to make more informed choices based on their own interests and long-term plans.

I think this university has a pretty high ranking, and I have the required score. Plus, they don't require a B2 linguistic certificate... But why did I choose Education? Because I wasn't sure what to study... Honestly, it doesn't really matter to me which major I get into. (IC/D/115)

In conclusion, the cross-cultural background of international students, including their prior cross-cultural experiences and cross-cultural motivations, jointly shape their cross-cultural adaptation process in Barcelona. Prior experiences provide a foundation for cultural pre-adaptation, while clear and firm cross-cultural motivations are essential for their successful integration into the new environment.

#### **4.2.2 Contextual factors as environmental driver**

Contextual factors constitute the external environment that international students must confront during their cross-cultural adaptation process. These factors encompass both challenges and opportunities, exerting a complex and profound influence on the adaptation process. International students need to actively address these factors to grasp opportunities and overcome challenges.

##### **4.2.2.1 Adaptation barriers**

Cross-cultural adaptation barriers, particularly linguistic difficulties and academic shock, represent the most widespread and significant impacts of contextual factors on the adaptation process of Chinese international students in Barcelona. Linguistic difficulties stand as the primary challenge, posing severe tests to students' academic adaptation and mental health. Mastery of the host country languages, including Castilian and Catalan, becomes a crucial factor determining whether students can smoothly integrate into the local academic and social environments (Elrayah & Alzahrani, 2024).

The experience of Student A serves as a typical example, where she felt "overwhelmed and at a loss" during the initial academic adaptation due to linguistic barriers in Catalan. Student B also experienced increased academic workload, reduced social activities, and even developed an aversion to Catalan due to linguistic issues. Although Student C was able to partially overcome linguistic barriers during the

pandemic by utilizing translation software in online courses, Catalan, as a new language, still presented an obstacle to comprehension. Furthermore, Student D noted that despite English being an international lingua franca, its utility was constrained during his studies, as many local students lacked sufficient English proficiency for effective communication. The linguistic barrier hindered daily harmonious interactions with both teachers and peers, thereby exacerbating his feelings of isolation and marginalization.

I found that many people's English is not very good, and then I realized that we can't just use English to communicate. So, Castilian is used more often. (IC/D/127)

It is notable that the impact of language difficulties on international students extends beyond the academic domain (Park et al., 2017), influencing various aspects of mental health and integration into the school environment. However, interview analyses reveal that the Catalan linguistic barrier has a relatively minor impact on the daily social life of international students, with some interviewees indicating that Castilian is sufficient for their basic living needs.

Closely linked to academic challenges are those posed by differences in educational systems and learning approaches (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). These differences are evident not only in linguistic usage but also in teaching philosophies, methodologies, and assessment practices. Student A mentioned essay writing as a classic example. She had never received such training in China, whereas these are common assignment forms at the UB.

At least in my hometown, writing essays isn't really common... It's a completely different way of learning. At first, I wasn't used to it. (IC/A/26)

Other participants also reflected on the significant disparity between the rote memorization-based exam system in the Chinese education system and the dynamic assessment model at the UB. Cooperative learning methods such as group work also made them feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, managing study and leisure time independently and efficiently in a foreign country emerged as another significant challenge for international students.

Chinese international students face the dual challenges of linguistic distress and learning shock during their adaptation in Barcelona. These challenges not only affect their academic performance and mental health but also prompt them to continuously adjust their original beliefs and habits to better integrate into the new educational environment and lifestyle.

#### 4.2.2.2 *External regulation*

External regulation plays a key role in the cross-cultural adaptation process of international students, including two major aspects: unexpected events and social

support. These factors exhibit diverse impacts on individuals. On one hand, unexpected events such as family issues and the pandemic have significantly affected the mental health of international students. Family changes experienced by students A and B, including the loss of a loved one and parental divorce, have emerged as contributing factors to their mental health issues. These sudden changes are difficult for them to accept and adjust to in a short period, and when intertwined with other cross-cultural adaptation factors. They ultimately lead to the onset of mental health problems. In contrast, the impact of the pandemic varies widely among individuals. While most international students have faced additional challenges in cross-cultural adaptation and experienced deteriorated mental health due to the pandemic (Li et al., 2023), student C has unexpectedly benefited from it. Particularly, online courses provided her with a buffer period to adapt to university life, and through the use of recording and translation tools, she was able to keep up with her studies more easily.

I'm really adapting well, and I feel like the online classes gave me a bit of a break to adapt to university life. You know, with online classes, I can just record the audio and use translation tools, which is really helpful. (IC/C/94)

On the other hand, social support, as a crucial component of external regulation, positively contributes to the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Family members, friends (both from the host and home countries), teachers, and internet provide tangible or intangible support through multiple channels. This support sometimes enhances their emotional experiences through direct emotional encouragement and sometimes mitigates the impact of negative emotions through buffering mechanisms (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The assistance from local classmates and teachers mentioned by student B, as well as the support from friends in the home country emphasized by student C, are concrete manifestations of social support in cross-cultural adaptation. Furthermore, online social interaction has become an important way for international students to seek psychological comfort, alleviating loneliness and fulfilling psychological needs through online activities. However, the study also found that participants under-utilised the social support provided by the university, which to some extent hindered their sense of inclusion in the university.

At first, I had no idea what services the university offered... I didn't even know about the welcome program... And later on, I hardly participated in any campus activities, basically none at all. (IC/B/70)

External regulation factors exert a complex and important role in the process of cross-cultural psychological adjustment of international students. There are significant individual differences in the impact of unexpected events on an individual's

psychological well-being, while social support becomes crucial in alleviating the stress of adaptation.

#### 4.2.2.3 Social interaction

Social interaction is an important aspect of the cross-cultural adaptation process for international students, and establishing good friendships with the host country's community is vital for their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Bethel et al., 2020; Sheng et al., 2022). This study found that international students' social preferences are closely related to their social situation, with different social preferences influencing their social circles and level of activity participation. Some students are keen to make friends actively and participate in local social events with unique characteristics, such as dance parties (Fiesta), while others prefer quieter social interactions and are not interested in noisy local social activities. These differences in social preferences impact their social situation and the progress of their adaptation to some extent. For example, Student A expressed:

Actually, I'm not much for socializing right now. I don't like those noisy things, I don't enjoy going to dance parties, and I'm not a big drinker. (IC/B/61)

These personal preferences in socializing can impact the individual social situation of Chinese students. Moreover, these social activities and habits are subject to adjustment and change as they adapt. For instance, Student D initially struggled to understand how to interact with locals, leading to some misunderstandings. However, through gradual interaction, he slowly adapted to the social norms and customs of the locals, which helped him broaden his circle of friends and better integrate into local life.

Further analyses revealed that international students showed a separation between academic life and daily life in terms of socialising. They are more likely to discuss academic issues with their host country peers, while they are more often to communicate with their home country peers in terms of daily life and recreation. For example, Student C indicated that although her two local classmates provided her with much care and support in academic pursuits, she more prefers to seek the opinions of Chinese classmates when it comes to discussions about various life trivia and daily experiences. This segregated mode of socialisation may help to alleviate psychological anxiety and loneliness in the early stages of cross-cultural adaptation, as interactions with compatriots are more easily provided with emotional support and a sense of belonging. However, as cross-cultural adaptation progresses, this over-reliance on the home country social circle and a social pattern confined to the comfort zone can become barriers to integrating into the local society and culture, limiting opportunities to further broaden their social circles and gain deeper insights into the local culture.

When you're studying abroad, it's really comforting to have a Chinese classmate. It helps you adapt and you don't feel so lonely or strange. Well, you know, if there's something that you just can't talk about with the local friends, then you can always have a chat with your Chinese friends whenever you want... (IC/C/85)

Therefore, social interactions play a dual bridging-barrier role in international students' cross-cultural adaptation. It is of the greatest importance to encourage international students to engage deeply with the local community, to step out of their comfort zones and actively participate in diverse social activities. This is the most effective way of enhancing their cross-cultural adaptability and sense of belonging.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examines the various influences on Chinese international students' cross-cultural adaptation in the multilingual context of Barcelona and assesses their overall adaptation status. The findings reveal that these students face a range of challenges in sociocultural, mental health, and academic life adaptation. After an initial period of adaptation to the local environment, this group generally adapts well to cross-cultural life in Barcelona. Although Chinese international students can adapt to local life through self-adjustment and external support over time, there remains a significant gap in achieving true integration. Overall, they do not seem to adopt proactive strategies to integrate into local life. Based on the issues and needs identified in the study, the following recommendations are proposed.

### *(1) Enhancing the use of multilingualism in the local context*

Acquiring language skills is essential for successful cross-cultural adaptation. In multilingual settings, English often functions as a crucial means of communication between international students and local communities. For instance, Nepali students living in Hong Kong often view English as a key tool for integrating into the local society and constructing their personal identities (Gong et al., 2022). However, the practical use of English still needs to be flexibly adjusted according to specific contexts. It is advisable for international students not to overly depend on English as their exclusive tool of interaction. Besides learning English, it is particularly important to focus on learning and mastering the local languages widely spoken in multilingual countries or regions (such as Castilian and Catalan), which are essential foundations for deep integration into the local society.

Taking the group in this study as an example, Chinese international students studying in Barcelona should seriously approach the one-year language course before entering university. They should start by learning Castilian to build a solid language

foundation. Subsequently, they can gradually introduce Catalan learning into their study plan. To more effectively integrate into the local society and culture, and quickly adapt to the Catalan linguistic environment, it is recommended that Chinese students prioritize studying at language schools in Barcelona. After entering university, students should continuously enhance their Spanish and Catalan skills to improve their language proficiency. For instance, Chinese students can take advantage of the language service centers offered by their universities to learn Catalan.

### *(2) Creating a more life-oriented local social network*

Current studies indicate that the establishment of a good social networks contributes to shaping international students' multilingual abilities and facilitating their academic discourse socialization (Li & Gong, 2023). It is recommended that international students try to find a fixed local group to form a small study circle in their first year. Using this as a starting point, they should gradually expand their personal social circle. They should maintain regular contact with local students, engaging in deep conversations not only about academics but also on diverse topics such as culture, entertainment, and sports. Additionally, they should actively invite local students to participate in various off-campus activities to deepen emotional interactions and build lasting friendships. This not only helps them develop language skills and intercultural competence but also enables them to expand their circle of local friends and better integrate into the life in Catalonia. Furthermore, Chinese students should pay special attention to the information and resources provided by student services, which are often easily accessible on the university's official website. By closely following and attending the events posted on the university's official website, international students can enhance their sense of belonging to the university environment. This not only enriches their personal campus life but also serves as an important channel for expanding their local social circle and meeting more friends.

### *(3) Strengthening psychological resilience to diverse challenges*

Studies have shown that many international students' mental health issues stem from unmet fundamental psychological needs (Law & Liu, 2023). Before studying abroad, international students should be well prepared psychologically and make a clear personal plan. This group often encounters numerous unexpected difficulties and challenges when adapting to cross-cultural environments and managing their own learning activities. Therefore, it is necessary to lower their psychological expectations, as the solo cross-cultural journey may not be as rosy as they imagine. It is important for them to gather as much information as possible about the university and the courses before entering university and to take the initiative to familiarise themselves with the

unknown environment in advance in order to minimise conflicts arising from sociocultural differences.

Moreover, in daily life, international students need to learn to plan and enrich their university experience. While the internet can alleviate feelings of loneliness and negativity, engaging in social activities and outdoor sports is also important. If mental health issues are identified, it is essential to face them and seek external help, such as utilizing student mental health support services provided by higher education institutions.

In conclusion, the findings of this study not only enhance our comprehension of the cross-cultural adaptation processes and present circumstances of international students, especially Chinese international students residing in multilingual nations, but also prompt introspection regarding their cross-cultural situations. These thoughts help local higher education institutions and organisations to understand the current situation of Chinese students, and can provide experiences to improve the adaptation process of this group in the future. It is worth noting that the study's participants were Chinese international students at the Faculty of Education of UB in Spain. Although there are widespread similarities in the adaptation of Chinese students in multilingual context, there may also be unique regional traits. Consequently, when utilizing the study's conclusions, it is imperative to carefully consider local contexts to more effectively aid international students in surmounting cross-cultural obstacles and elevating their learning and living experiences. To promote mutual adaptation in cross-cultural environments, as emphasized by the British Council (2014), future research could build upon the findings and directions of this study to explore efficacious strategies for higher education institutions to facilitate the integration of international students into multilingual and diverse local life.

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