

Intercultural Adaptation among African Master Students in Beijing

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Abstract: China is becoming more popular as a destination of overseas study. This empirical research, based on self-rated questionnaires and semi-open interviews, explores adaptation of African master students in Beijing. It finds that participants' life, academic and psychological adaptation are generally satisfactory though difficulties do exist. Personality and host society are main contributory factors.

Keywords: Intercultural adaptation; African master students; Beijing

1. Introduction

China has witnessed a major hike in the number of African students to get academic study. The average increase of African students in China reached 19.74% in 2015, topping all continents by large margin.¹

Ward and Kennedy^[4] indicated on the processes of socio-cultural and psychological adaptation, and holds that socio-cultural adaptation mainly refers to the ability to fit into local cultural environment and establish effective contacts with local people while psychological adaptation focuses on the psychological well-being and life satisfaction during intercultural interactions. Adaptation involves necessary adjustments in order to go about day-to-day business of living in a host society, which often means adopting certain host customs, and may reflect the psychological states of the person as well as the host socio-cultural aspect^[1]. A given environment facilitates the adaptation of the newly-settled when the native population welcomes and supports the newcomers while at the same time expecting the new ones to conform to local norms^[3].

Intercultural adaptation research has drawn increasing attention since 1980s, particularly in developed countries. Scholars adopted individual-level approach to explain and understand the re-socialization and coping process of the newcomer. Researches concerning intercultural adaptation in China started much later. In recent years, the publication of researches on international students is on a rise. However, there is few research on African master students' adaptation in Beijing.

2. Research Method

This quantitative research, consisted of questionnaires and interviews, was carried out in 2019 and 2020. The questionnaire was designed in measurement scale. After each statement, number 1-5 is given as rating choices. 1 means strong disagreement, 2 indicates disagreement, 3 shows partial agreement while 4 means fairly agreement while 5 suggests strong agreement with the statement. 66 valid anonymous questionnaires were collected from students originated in 27 African countries. 27 were males and 39 were females, aged 23 to 43, with the average age of 32.5 years old. The mean length of residence was 1.8 years. 56% participants had working experience. The mean length of residence in Beijing was 1.8 years. 8 students from 7 countries were interviewed separately on their impression of China, their academic performance and psychological adaptation.

3. Findings

3.1 Expectation and attitude

Five questionnaire questions and two interview questions reveal whether students have a favorable attitude towards China before arrival. The mean score of "I was interested in China before I came here" was 2.89. Over 62% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "I made preparations before coming to China". The average score for statements "I could live and enjoy my life in China" and "I enjoy relating to Chinese people" were 3.76 and 3.35 respectively. 80% respondents agreed that "life in China is better than I expected". There were also answers showing that the participants knew very little about China or their impression of Chinese people changed a lot since they came to Beijing.

A correlation is observed between interviewees' prior knowledge of China and their level of satisfaction. Most interviewees didn't interact with Chinese in their home country, but they had observation and perception of Chinese people. There were also impressions that proved to be partially incorrect upon arrival in Beijing.

3.2 Life Adaptation

Each participant answered six questionnaire questions and two interview questions. The satisfaction and adaptation towards

1 Statistics from official website of the Ministry of Education, PRC. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201604/t20160414_238263.html

Beijing's infrastructure ranks highest, with 4.76 as the mean score. Accommodation is also appreciated. However, when asked about food, life style, language and the way of making friends, respondents tended to give lower scores. The rating of "food in Beijing" got the lowest score 2.15.

Technology advancement is global while lifestyle remains largely local. Both the questionnaires and the interviews suggested that African students adjust very quickly to the basic and technological infrastructure in Beijing, but changing their long-established personal habits to fit the host one is much more challenging, despite the fact that they try very hard.

3.3 Academic Study Adaptation

The questionnaire included five measurement questions to discover students' impression on learning experience in China, and two interview questions to reveal their relationship with Chinese teachers. Over 80% of the respondents thought the programs are beneficial, and more than half expressed their willingness to apply for PhD programs in China. The mean score of negative statements "learning in China is too hard and tired for me" and "I feel upset about my study or performance" were 1.63 and 2.37. The most frequently discussed topics with tutors were research methods and thesis writing (42%), lecture contents (26%), assignment requirement (19%) and career experience or planning (13%).

Half respondents thought that academic study pressure in China was slightly lower than their home country. While the majority think Chinese lecturers have more interaction with them after class than tutors in their home country. As one interviewee puts it "The relationship with the lecturers is very informal (in China) compared with back home, where lecturers seldom communicate with students after class and it's very common."

3.4 Psychological Adaptation

The recuperation model posits that the recovery from cultural shock is the mechanism for a sojourner to successfully adapt to the new life in the host country^[2]. 'homesickness' is experienced by some respondents but it does not carry a significant psychological weight as it carries an average score of 2.23. Cultural shocks exhibit themselves in different ways, while the foreign identity remains a distinct psychological factor among the students (mean score 3.38 as to the statement "I enjoy being treated like a foreigner in China").

The initial cultural shocks hit the participants upon their arrivals in China, including food differences, language barrier, way of driving, and Chinese policies and culture. Language barrier or difficulty in communication was considered as one of the major obstacles to psychological adaptation, as mentioned by several interviewees.

4. Contributory factors

Despite the fact that the participants are of different gender, age, major, or length of stay, no significant differences in adaptation level is observed. Direct link between adaptation level and gender, age or major is not found. The participants who describe themselves as adaptive and open adapt better sociologically, academically and psychologically.

A host environment may be receptive to adaptation and may exert pressure for conformity by varying extent. The overall good adaptation of African students in Beijing has a lot to do with how the students perceive local people in Beijing. Adjectives used by research participants to describe people in Beijing are mostly positive, with the most used ones being hardworking, smart, honest, punctual and disciplined.

5. Conclusion

While humanity shares some universal values and practices, every culture has its own distinct features. This research concludes that the intercultural adaptation of African master students in Beijing is good. Most African students adopt active strategy to cope with the new environment so as to adapt to the new life in Beijing. It is worth noticing that both the sojourners and host society play a role in the adaptation process.

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