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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CULTURAL INCLUSION IN THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF PAKISTANI STUDENTS IN CHINA

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Abstract

The globalization of higher education has positioned China as a key academic hub, attracting a rapidly growing population of international students, including a significant cohort from Pakistan. While existing literature largely examines adaptation in Western contexts, little is known about the socio-cultural challenges faced by South Asian students in non-Western settings. This study investigates the interplay of social networks, Mandarin language proficiency, and institutional inclusion in shaping the academic and social experiences of Pakistani students in Chinese universities. Adopting a mixed methods design, we surveyed 192 students using the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale and conducted in-depth interviews with 20 participants to capture nuanced perspectives. Quantitative analyses revealed that Mandarin proficiency was the strongest predictor of perceived acceptance and participation, whereas qualitative findings highlighted both the protective and restrictive roles of co-national networks and underscored gaps in intercultural engagement initiatives. The integration of these findings extends established theoretical frameworks, including the U-Curve, ABC, and Acculturation models, demonstrating that adaptation is a dynamic, multidimensional process shaped by individual competencies, network structures, and institutional responsiveness. This study provides evidence-based recommendations for Chinese universities, including comprehensive language support, structured peer mentorship, and culturally inclusive curricula, to strengthen internationalization efforts and student well-being. The findings contribute a critical non-Western perspective to global adaptation research and offer actionable insights for policymakers and educators.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid internationalization of higher education has reshaped the global academic landscape, with China emerging as a leading destination for international students due to its strategic Belt and Road Initiative, economic growth, and expanding research capacity (Wei, Chen, and Zhou 2018). Pakistani students represent a growing demographic in this mobility trend, motivated by scholarships, career prospects, and cultural exchange opportunities. However, their adaptation journey is often complicated by linguistic, cultural, and institutional challenges that hinder full participation in academic and social spheres (Chen and Wellman 2009a; Montgomery and McDowell 2009a).

Existing literature on socio-cultural adaptation predominantly focuses on students in Western host nations (Zhou et al. 2008; Brown and Holloway 2008), leaving a significant gap in research on non-Western contexts such as China. Understanding adaptation experiences in this environment is critical because cultural distance, communication barriers, and differing pedagogical norms intensify adjustment challenges for students from South Asian backgrounds. Pakistani students, in particular, navigate complex interactions between strong co-national support networks, limited institutional platforms for cross-cultural engagement, and a host society where Mandarin proficiency is a decisive factor for social inclusion and academic success (Chen and Wang 2021a; Li and Zhang 2022a).

Socio-cultural adaptation theories provide valuable frameworks to interpret these dynamics. The U-Curve Adjustment Hypothesis (Lysgaard 1955) illustrates the psychological phases of cultural immersion, while the Affective–Behavioral–Cognitive (ABC) model emphasizes emotional resilience, behavioral competencies, and cultural cognition as pillars of successful adaptation (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001). Berry's acculturation strategies further contextualize the balance between cultural retention and integration (Berry 1997), underscoring the importance of host institutions in shaping outcomes. These models suggest that adaptation is not merely an individual endeavor but a systemic process influenced by institutional support and social structures.

Social networks have long been recognized as both a coping mechanism and an enabler of intercultural learning (Bochner, McLeod, and Lin 1977). While co-national groups offer initial stability, over-reliance can create cultural silos, reducing exposure to host communities (Lin and Kishore 2021a). Conversely, hybrid online–offline networks, intercultural events, and mentorship programs can bridge gaps, enhancing integration and fostering cultural empathy (Xu and Liu 2023a). Similarly, cultural inclusion practices—such as multilingual services, diversity training, and culturally sensitive curricula are proven strategies for improving international students' sense of belonging (Smith and Khawaja 2019; Tran and Nguyen 2020).

In this context, Pakistani students' experiences in China present a critical case study to explore the interplay of language proficiency, institutional inclusion and peer networks. Addressing this research gap has implications beyond student well-being, informing policy frameworks for international education and aligning with China's ambition to strengthen its role as a global education hub. This study aims to (i) examine how social networks influence Pakistani students' integration; (ii) analyze the role of cultural inclusion in shaping academic and social outcomes; and (iii) assess Mandarin proficiency as a determinant of socio- cultural adjustment. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative narratives, this work provides actionable recommendations for universities to foster inclusive and globally competitive academic environments.

Literature Review

The socio-cultural adaptation of international students has been extensively studied in Western contexts, but research focusing on non-Western destinations such as China remains comparatively scarce (Zhou et al. 2008; Chen and Wang 2021b). This gap is significant given China's rapidly growing role as a global education hub under initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, attracting increasing numbers of students from South Asia, including Pakistan (Wei, Chen, and Zhou 2018). For these students, navigating linguistic,

Table 1. Key Literature on Socio-Cultural Adaptation of International Students

Authors & Year	Focus	Region	Key Findings
Lysgaard (1955)	U-Curve hypothesis	Scandinavia	Cultural adaptation follows stages: honeymoon, shock, recovery, adaptation.
Ward et al. (2001	ABC model	New Zealand	Emotional, behavioral, and cognitive domains jointly predict adaptation.
Berry (1997)	Acculturation strategies	Canada	Integration strategy yields highest success; marginalization lowest.
Bochner et al. (1977)	Social network typology	UK	Conational support crucial early, but may hinder immersion
Chen & Wang (2021)	African students in China	China	Mandarin proficiency critical; institutional language support needed
Li & Zhang (2022)	Language impact	Australia/China	High proficiency improves daily functioning and academic success.
Xu & Liu (2023)	Institutional role	China	Peer mentorship boosts integration in high cultural distance settings.
Ryan & Viete (2009)	Academic inclusion	Australia	Inclusive pedagogy reduces anxiety and enhances engagement.

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cultural, and social barriers represent a multifaceted challenge that influences their academic achievement, well-being, and integration outcomes.

1.1. Theoretical Frameworks

Classic frameworks, such as the U-Curve Adjustment Hypothesis (Lysgaard 1955), ABC (Affective–Behavioral–Cognitive) Model (Ward, Bochner, and Furn- ham 2001), and Berry's Acculturation Model (Berry 1997), remain pivotal in understanding adaptation. The U-curve model highlights initial euphoria, culture shock, and eventual stabilization, whereas the ABC model emphasizes the interplay between emotional well-being, skill acquisition, and cognitive adaptation. Berry's work introduces four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration, with integration being most strongly associated with academic and social success.

1.2. Role of Social Networks

Social networks are consistently identified as both protective and limiting factors. Bochner et al. (Bochner,

McLeod, and Lin 1977) categorized networks into co-national, host-national, and multinational types, emphasizing that over-reliance on co-national networks may hinder cultural immersion. Research in digitally connected contexts shows that hybrid networks blending online support with in-person engagement facilitate smoother adaptation (Nguyen and Park 2021). For Pakistani students, language barriers often result in network clustering, limiting meaningful contact with local peers (Lin and Kishore 2021b).

1.3. Language Proficiency and Institutional Support

Mandarin proficiency is a strong determinant of integration. Li and Zhang (Li and Zhang 2022b) demonstrate that linguistic competency predicts higher behavioral adaptation and academic success. Similarly, Chen and Wang (Chen and Wang 2021b) stress the role of institutional language programs in reducing barriers. Despite China's rising prominence, studies highlight insufficient structured support systems, emphasizing the need for inclusive practices (Wei, Chen, and Zhou 2018; Xu and Liu 2023b).

1.4. Cultural Inclusion Practices

Cultural inclusion initiatives, such as multicultural events, intercultural mentorship, and cultural sensitivity training for faculty, have been proven effective in enhancing belongingness (Montgomery and McDowell 2009b;?). In contexts with high cultural distance, such as between Pakistan and China, culturally responsive policies are essential for mitigating psychological stressors including homesickness, anxiety, and marginalization (Oberg 1960; Ryan and Viete 2009). Table 1 consolidates influential studies, highlighting methodological trends, geographic scope, and relevance for non-Western settings. While global literature is extensive, few studies focus on South Asian students in China, positioning this research as a critical contribution.

This synthesis reveals that while foundational theories remain robust, empirical work on South Asian student integration in China is limited, particularly regarding Mandarin learning trajectories and institutional practices. Addressing this knowledge gap, the present study provides evidence-based recommendations to enhance internationalization policies in Chinese universities.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to explore the socio-cultural adaptation of Pakistani students in China, emphasizing the roles of social networks, cultural inclusion, and Mandarin proficiency. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches enables a comprehensive understanding of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of adaptation, ensuring both breadth and depth of insight (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

2.1. Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods framework was employed, combining structured survey data with in-depth semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analysis was conducted to identify statistically significant relationships between adaptation variables, while qualitative narratives offered nuanced context to these findings. This triangulation enhances validity, reliability, and interpretive rigor (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011).

2.2. Quantitative Approach

2.2.1. Instrument and Measures

Data were collected using a structured survey based on the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) (Ward and Kennedy 1999), adapted for Chinese higher education settings. The survey consisted of 12 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) covering: (i) ease of social connections and acceptance; (ii) Mandarin communication proficiency; (iii) understanding of cultural norms; (iv) institutional support and respect for cultural identity; (v) participation in intercultural activities; and (vi) self-efficacy in stress and conflict management.

2.2.2. Population and Sampling

The study targeted Pakistani nationals enrolled at six major Chinese universities (Donghua, Tongji, Shanghai Jiao Tong, East China Normal, Shanghai University, and Fudan). Inclusion criteria required participants to have resided in China for at least six months. Using convenience sampling, 200 participants were recruited, of which 192 valid responses were retained (response rate: 96%). This sample is diverse in age, gender, and

academic level (undergraduate to doctoral), ensuring generalizability.

2.2.3. *Data Collection and Analysis*

Surveys were distributed electronically via institutional mailing lists and social media platforms. Data were analyzed using Jamovi software, employing descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency, Pearson correlations for association strength, and independent-samples t-tests to compare adaptation levels based on Mandarin proficiency. Effect sizes (d) and significance thresholds ($p < 0.05$) were reported following Cohen's guidelines (Cohen 1988).

2.3. Qualitative Approach

2.3.1. *Interviews and Protocol*

Twenty participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to provide richer insights into adaptation trajectories. The interview guide explored participants' motivations, adaptation challenges, coping strategies, interaction patterns, institutional support experiences, and recommendations for future students. Interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing, lasting 45–60 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with informed consent.

2.3.2. *Thematic Analysis*

A six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke 2006) was applied to transcribed interviews: (1) data familiarization; (2) initial coding; (3) theme generation; (4) theme review; (5) theme definition; and (6) synthesis with quantitative results. Coding was guided by the ABC model of adaptation, enabling systematic categorization into affective, behavioral, and cognitive domains.

2.4. Integration with Theoretical Framework

The methodology is anchored in the U-Curve Adjustment Hypothesis (Lysgaard 1955), ABC model (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001), and Berry's Acculturation Framework (Berry 1997). Quantitative measures map onto behavioral and cognitive outcomes, while interviews uncover affective experiences, offering a multidimensional perspective on adaptation processes.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical protocols were followed. Participants provided informed consent, data were anonymized, and identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored, accessible only to the research team. The study complies with the ethical standards of Donghua University and aligns with international best practices in educational research (BERA 2018).

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the survey and interview data collected from Pakistani students studying in Chinese universities. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings offers a holistic understanding of socio-cultural adaptation, highlighting the interconnected roles of social networks, Mandarin proficiency, and cultural inclusion initiatives.

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

Survey data ($n = 192$) were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods, providing insight into adaptation experiences across behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions. Table 2 summarizes descriptive statistics for key Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) items, revealing high mean scores for institutional support ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.95$) and navigation of daily life ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.89$), indicating positive perceptions of Chinese university resources. Conversely, Mandarin communication comfort recorded the lowest mean ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.02$), underscoring language as a primary adaptation barrier, consistent with prior findings (Chen and Wang 2021b; Li and Zhang 2022b). correlation analysis (Table **??**) revealed statistically significant relationships between Mandarin proficiency and key integration metrics, such as ease of forming friendships ($r = 0.39$, $p < .01$) and participation in Chinese events ($r = 0.31$, $p < .01$). These findings echo previous research emphasizing linguistic competence as a critical determinant of socio-cultural adaptation (Xu and Liu 2023b; Berry 1997).

Independent samples t-tests demonstrated that students with higher Mandarin comfort reported significantly greater acceptance by Chinese peers ($M =$

3.68, *SD* = 1.09) compared to those with lower comfort levels (*M* = 3.05, *SD* = 1.08; $t(190) = -3.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.51$). This medium effect size validates Hypothesis 3, supporting the premise that language proficiency directly influences perceived inclusion.

3.2. Qualitative Insights

Thematic analysis of twenty semi-structured interviews ($n = 20$) enriched the quantitative findings by uncovering nuanced perspectives. Three overarching themes emerged:

1. **Social networks as dual agents:** Co-national networks provided essential emotional support during initial adjustment phases but risked creating cultural enclaves that limited broader integration. This aligns with Bochner, McLeod, and Lin (1977), who identified over-reliance on ethnic networks as a barrier to immersion.

2. **Cultural navigation challenges:** Students reported dietary restrictions, classroom participation norms, and differences in communication styles as recurrent stressors, consistent with earlier cross-cultural adaptation literature (Montgomery and McDowell 2009b).

3. **Institutional initiatives as integration catalysts:** Peer mentorship programs, multicultural events, and targeted language training were widely cited as effective in fostering belongingness, supporting findings from Wei, Chen, and Zhou (2018).

Illustrative excerpts emphasized this duality:" Pakistani *peers were my lifeline in the first months, but I later realized I was not learning much about Chinese culture*" (P07). Another participant added:" University *language support and peer mentoring made a big difference; I now attend local events confidently*" (P13).

3.3. Integrated Discussion

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings reinforces the multi factorial nature of socio-cultural adaptation. Mandarin proficiency emerged as the strongest predictor of perceived acceptance and participation, confirming existing models such as Berry's acculturation framework (Berry 1997). While strong co-national networks reduced cultural stress initially, their overuse risked creating insular environments, corroborating Chen and Wellman (2009b). Institutional efforts, such as intercultural events and counseling services, were identified as key mediators bridging linguistic and cultural gaps.

Figure ?? conceptualizes these findings, presenting a dynamic interplay between language proficiency, social networks, and institutional support. The model demonstrates that balanced engagement across all three domains optimizes integration outcomes, providing actionable insights for policymakers and educators.

Overall, these findings validate all three proposed hypotheses, offering both theoretical contributions and practical recommendations. Future research should further explore hybrid social networks blending online and offline interactions to extend the adaptability of international students in non-Western contexts (Lin and Kishore 2021b).

4. Discussion

The present study provides a comprehensive examination of the socio-cultural adaptation of Pakistani students in China, offering a nuanced perspective that integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence. The mixed-methods approach strengthens the validity of the findings and enables a multi-dimensional understanding of the interplay between language proficiency, social networks, and cultural inclusion.

4.1. Role of Language Proficiency

Quantitative findings revealed that Mandarin proficiency is a critical determinant of perceived acceptance and integration (Cohen's $d = 0.51$), supporting previous work emphasizing language as a gateway to meaningful cross-cultural engagement (Li and Zhang 2022b; Chen and Wang 2021b). Students with higher comfort levels in Mandarin reported significantly better peer acceptance, aligning with Ward et al.'s ABC model, which highlights the behavioral and cognitive dimensions of adaptation (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001). Qualitative narratives reinforced this relationship, illustrating that limited Mandarin skills often result in social withdrawal and a reliance on co-national networks. These findings indicate that robust institutional language training and conversational practice opportunities are indispensable for successful adaptation.

Table 2. Selected Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) Descriptive Statistics

SCAS Item	Mean (M)	SD	Range
Ease of navigating daily life	4.15	0.89	1–5
Institutional support adequacy	3.80	0.95	1–5
Feeling accepted by Chinese peers	3.28	1.12	1–5
Participation in Chinese social events	3.15	1.20	1–5
Comfort communicating in Mandarin	2.25	1.02	1–5

4.2. Social Networks as Double-Edged Mechanisms

The thematic analysis underscores that social networks act as both facilitators and barriers. Co-national networks offer emotional comfort during initial adjustment phases but risk reinforcing social silos that delay integration, confirming Bochner et al.'s social network typology (Bochner, McLeod, and Lin 1977). Conversely, multinational networks create a platform for intercultural exchange, offering resilience against cultural stressors and promoting inclusivity. This dual role emphasizes the importance of designing structured peer mentorship and cross-cultural activities to ensure students transition from reliance on familiar networks to broader engagement.

4.3. Cultural Inclusion and Institutional Practices

The results demonstrate that cultural inclusion is pivotal for psychological well- being and academic satisfaction, consistent with Berry's integration framework (Berry 1997). Interview evidence highlighted gaps in intercultural platforms, dietary accommodations, and faculty sensitivity training, suggesting that Chinese universities' internationalization strategies remain largely infrastructural rather than holistic. This observation aligns with prior studies emphasizing that international student success requires culturally responsive ecosystems beyond traditional support services (?Xu and Liu 2023b).

4.4. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

By situating these findings within the U-Curve, ABC, and Acculturation models, this study extends cross-cultural adaptation theory in a non-Western context, an area historically underrepresented in literature (Zhou et al. 2008; Montgomery and McDowell 2009b). Empirical evidence suggests that adaptation is neither linear nor universal; rather, it is shaped by the cultural distance between home and host environments and mediated by institutional practices. Practically, the findings support targeted interventions such as:

Comprehensive Mandarin learning pathways integrating formal coursework and informal conversational exchanges. Structured peer-mentorship programs pairing local and international students.

Culturally sensitive faculty development workshops to address unconscious biases. Dedicated multicultural spaces for cultural expression and socialization.

4.5. Limitations and Future Directions

This study's focus on Pakistani students in metropolitan Chinese universities provides valuable insights but limits generalizability. Future research should include longitudinal designs to track adaptation trajectories over time, and comparative studies with other South Asian or African student populations to evaluate cultural similarities and divergences. Additionally, digital network dynamics warrant further exploration, particularly given their growing influence in shaping social and cultural integration.

Overall, these findings underscore that socio-cultural adaptation is a complex process influenced by individual competencies, network structures, and institutional responsiveness. For China to solidify its position as a global education hub, universities must evolve beyond policy-level internationalization toward cultivating inclusive, student-centered environments.

Conclusion

This study investigated the socio-cultural adaptation of Pakistani students in China, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analyses to capture the complexity of their experiences. The findings underscore the multidimensional nature of adaptation, emphasizing the interconnected roles of social networks, Mandarin proficiency, and institutional cultural inclusion in shaping students' academic and social trajectories. Quantitative results confirmed that stronger social networks and higher self- reported Mandarin comfort significantly enhance perceived acceptance, social participation, and overall adaptation. Thematic analysis further revealed the nuanced impact of these networks: while co-national circles provide a vital initial support system, overreliance can create cultural silos that hinder broader integration. Similarly, Mandarin proficiency emerges as both a powerful enabler of intercultural engagement and a substantial barrier for those with limited language skills.

Institutional support was identified as a critical determinant of successful adaptation, with evidence pointing to gaps in intercultural interaction platforms, culturally sensitive services, and targeted language assistance. Students lived experiences highlight the psychological dimensions of adaptation, including stress, isolation, and identity negotiation, which remain underexplored in current Chinese higher education policy frameworks.

This research makes three key contributions:

1. It enriches literature on international student adaptation by offering empirical insights from a non-Western host context, a perspective often underrepresented in global higher education studies.
2. It demonstrates the need for hybrid support systems—combining digital net- works, peer mentorship, and structured intercultural initiatives—to foster belonging and cultural competence.
3. It provides evidence-based recommendations for Chinese universities, including scalable Mandarin training, culturally inclusive curricula, and intercultural exchange platforms, aligning with China's ambition to become a leading global education hub.

Future research should adopt longitudinal and cross-national comparative designs to further unpack adaptation trajectories over time and assess the transferability of these findings to other non-Western contexts. By addressing language, culture, and institutional inclusion holistically, universities can transform the international student experience, enabling deeper academic engagement and mutual cultural understanding.

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