

# **A Pilot Study on Cultural Shock and Cross-Cultural Adaptation among Guangxi University Students in Short-term Exchange Programs in Malaysia**

**Dongyun Fu**

Nanning University, Nanning, Guangxi Autonomous Region, 530299

**Abstract:** Short-term exchange programs have become a popular pathway for higher education internationalization, yet the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of students participating in such programs—particularly within Asian contexts—remain underexplored. This pilot study investigates cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation among Guangxi university students in short-term exchange programs in Malaysia. A questionnaire survey was conducted with 46 undergraduate students from Nanning University who completed a semester-long exchange in Malaysia, measuring cultural shock, psychological adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis were employed. The instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.823$ ). Results showed that students experienced moderate cultural shock but relatively high levels of psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Cultural shock was significantly negatively correlated with both adaptation dimensions and emerged as a significant negative predictor of adaptation outcomes. No significant gender differences were found. As a pilot investigation, this study provides preliminary empirical insights and establishes a methodological foundation for future research on Chinese exchange students in Southeast Asian contexts. The findings also offer practical implications for improving institutional support in China–ASEAN short-term exchange programs.

**Keywords:** cultural shock; cross-cultural adaptation; student mobility; short-term exchange students; China–ASEAN educational cooperation; pilot study

**DOI:10.12417/3029-2328.26.03.001**

## **1. Introduction**

The internationalization of higher education has become a significant trend in recent decades. Universities around the world increasingly promote student mobility programs to enhance students' global awareness, intercultural communication skills, and academic competitiveness. Among these programs, short-term exchange opportunities have gained popularity because they provide students with international experience within a limited period of time.

In the context of China–ASEAN educational cooperation, Malaysia has emerged as a major destination for Chinese exchange students due to its multicultural environment, English-medium instruction, and relatively affordable living costs. Universities in Guangxi Province have actively established partnerships with Malaysian institutions, enabling students to participate in semester-long exchange programs.

Despite these opportunities, students often face challenges when adapting to unfamiliar cultural environments. Differences in language use, social norms, and academic expectations may lead to cultural shock, which can negatively affect students' psychological well-being and their ability to interact effectively in the host culture. Understanding how students experience and manage these challenges is essential for improving the quality of exchange programs.

Previous research has mainly focused on long-term international students, while studies on short-term exchange students remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to explore the cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation of Guangxi university students in Malaysia. It also examines the relationship between cultural shock, psychological adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation, while evaluating the questionnaire instrument through a pilot study.

## 2.Literature Review

The concept of cultural shock was first introduced by Kalervo Oberg, who defined it as the anxiety and discomfort individuals experience when encountering an unfamiliar cultural environment. Cultural shock arises when familiar social cues are lost and individuals must adjust to new norms, values, and communication patterns. Oberg proposed that cultural shock develops through several stages, including the honeymoon stage, crisis stage, recovery stage, and adjustment stage. For international students, cultural shock may manifest in language barriers, academic difficulties, homesickness, and challenges in social interaction.

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the process through which individuals adjust to a new cultural environment. According to Young Yun Kim, adaptation is a dynamic and continuous process involving both psychological and sociocultural dimensions. Psychological adaptation focuses on emotional well-being, such as stress levels and life satisfaction, while sociocultural adaptation refers to the ability to function effectively in daily life, including communication and social participation. Successful adaptation requires intercultural competence, including openness, cultural awareness, and communication skills, as well as institutional support from host universities.

Cultural differences play a crucial role in shaping adaptation experiences. Geert Hofstede proposed a framework of cultural dimensions, such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, to explain variations across societies. These cultural values influence communication styles, social expectations, and interpersonal relationships.

Although China and Malaysia share certain cultural characteristics, Malaysia's multicultural context, consisting of Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities, creates a diverse social environment. This diversity may both facilitate and challenge Chinese students' adaptation. Understanding these theoretical perspectives provides a foundation for examining cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation among short-term exchange students in Malaysia.

## 3.Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to investigate the experiences of cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation among university students in Guangxi participating in short-term exchange programs in Malaysia. Quantitative methods were considered appropriate for this study because they allow researchers to measure psychological and behavioral variables in a systematic and objective manner.

The research was conducted as a pilot study. Pilot studies are commonly used in early-stage research to test the reliability and validity of research instruments and to evaluate the feasibility of research procedures. The purpose of this pilot study was therefore twofold. First, it aimed to explore the relationship between cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation among Chinese exchange students in Malaysia. Second, it aimed to assess whether the questionnaire instrument could effectively measure the relevant constructs for future large-scale studies.

The conceptual framework of this research was built upon cultural shock theory and cross-cultural adaptation theory, particularly the distinction between psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation proposed in previous intercultural communication studies.

### 3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate students from Nanning University in Guangxi, China, who had participated in a one-semester exchange program in Malaysia. These students were selected because they had direct experience studying and living in a different cultural environment for a short period of time.

A total of 46 valid questionnaires were collected and included in the final analysis. The participants represented different academic majors, including business administration, international trade, English, and digital economy. Most students were between 20 and 22 years old, which is typical for third-year undergraduate students participating in exchange programs. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from a single partner university,

which limits generalizability but is acceptable for a pilot validation study.

In terms of gender distribution, the sample included both male and female students, although female students constituted a slightly larger proportion of the participants. The gender distribution reflects the general pattern observed in many Chinese university exchange programs, where female students often show higher participation rates.

### **3.3 Instrument**

The primary data collection instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire designed to measure students' experiences of cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation.

The questionnaire consisted of three major sections. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, age, academic major, and previous international experience. These variables were included to provide background information about the participants and to allow for variation analysis. The second section measured cultural shock experienced by students during their exchange program. The items in this section assessed students' feelings of confusion, stress, and difficulty in adjusting to cultural differences in Malaysia. The third section measured cross-cultural adaptation, which included two sub-dimensions: Psychological adaptation, referring to students' emotional well-being, satisfaction with life abroad, and ability to cope with stress. Sociocultural adaptation, referring to students' ability to interact with local people, understand social norms, and function effectively in everyday situations.

All questionnaire items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated stronger agreement with the statements. The questionnaire items were adapted from previous cross-cultural adaptation studies (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Berry, 1997) and adjusted to fit the context of short-term exchange students in Malaysia.

### **3.4 Data Collection Procedure**

The questionnaire was distributed to students who had completed their exchange program in Malaysia. Participants were invited to complete the survey voluntarily, and they were informed that the collected data would be used only for academic research purposes.

The survey was conducted online using a questionnaire platform, which allowed students to complete the survey conveniently. All responses were collected anonymously to protect participants' privacy. After the data collection process was completed, the responses were exported and organized into a dataset for statistical analysis.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS27. Several statistical techniques were employed to examine the data.

First, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the overall levels of cultural shock and adaptation.

Second, reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire instrument.

Third, correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships between cultural shock, psychological adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation.

Fourth, linear regression analysis was used to explore whether cultural shock could significantly predict students' adaptation outcomes.

Finally, independent sample t-tests were conducted to examine whether gender differences existed in cultural shock and adaptation levels.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated for the overall questionnaire as well as for each subscale.

Table 1 Reliability Analysis of the Questionnaire

| Variable                 | Number of Items | Cronbach’s Alpha |
|--------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Cultural Shock           | 6               | 0.79             |
| Psychological Adaptation | 5               | 0.84             |
| Sociocultural Adaptation | 5               | 0.80             |
| Overall Scale            | 16              | 0.823            |

The results indicate that the overall Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of the questionnaire is 0.823, which demonstrates good internal consistency. According to commonly accepted standards, values above 0.80 indicate a high level of reliability. Therefore, the questionnaire instrument used in this study is considered reliable for measuring cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation.

### 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to examine the overall levels of cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation experienced by the participants.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

| Variable                 | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Cultural Shock           | 2.39 | 0.71               |
| Psychological Adaptation | 3.88 | 0.54               |
| Sociocultural Adaptation | 3.54 | 0.54               |

The mean score for cultural shock was 2.39, indicating that students experienced a relatively moderate level of cultural shock during their exchange experience.

In contrast, the mean score for psychological adaptation was 3.88, suggesting that students generally maintained positive emotional well-being while studying abroad.

The mean score for sociocultural adaptation was 3.54, indicating that students were able to adapt relatively well to daily life and social interactions in the Malaysian cultural environment.

Overall, these results suggest that although students encountered certain cultural challenges, they were generally able to adjust successfully to the host environment.

### 4.3 Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among cultural shock, psychological adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation.

Table 3 Correlation Matrix

| Variable                 | Cultural Shock | Psychological Adaptation | Sociocultural Adaptation |
|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Cultural Shock           | 1              | -0.46                    | -0.46                    |
| Psychological Adaptation | -0.46          | 1                        | 0.74                     |
| Sociocultural Adaptation | -0.46          | 0.74                     | 1                        |

Note:  $p < 0.01$

The results show that cultural shock is significantly negatively correlated with psychological adaptation ( $r = -0.46$ ). This suggests that students who experienced stronger cultural shock tended to report lower levels of

emotional well-being.

Similarly, cultural shock is negatively correlated with sociocultural adaptation ( $r = -0.46$ ), indicating that higher levels of cultural stress may lead to greater difficulties in social interaction and daily life adjustment.

In contrast, psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation are strongly positively correlated ( $r = 0.74$ ). This finding suggests that students who maintain positive emotional states are more likely to interact successfully with people in the host culture.

**4.4 Regression Analysis**

Regression analysis was conducted to examine whether cultural shock significantly predicts students’ cross-cultural adaptation.

Table 4 Regression Result

| Dependent Variable       | $\beta$ | t     | p     |
|--------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Psychological Adaptation | -0.35   | -2.94 | <0.01 |
| Sociocultural Adaptation | -0.36   | -3.02 | <0.01 |

The regression results indicate that cultural shock has a significant negative effect on psychological adaptation. Specifically, higher levels of cultural shock are associated with lower levels of emotional well-being.

Similarly, cultural shock also shows a significant negative effect on sociocultural adaptation, indicating that students who experience stronger cultural stress may encounter greater challenges in interacting with the host culture.

**4.5 Gender Variation Analysis**

To explore whether gender differences existed in cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation, participants were divided into male and female groups, and independent sample t-tests were conducted.

Table 5 Gender Differences in Cultural Shock and Adaptation

| Variable                 | Male (Mean) | Female (Mean) | t     | p     |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------|-------|
| Cultural Shock           | 2.68        | 2.55          | 0.74  | 0.466 |
| Psychological Adaptation | 3.69        | 3.83          | -0.84 | 0.407 |
| Sociocultural Adaptation | 3.47        | 3.53          | -0.43 | 0.673 |

The descriptive statistics show that male students reported slightly higher levels of cultural shock than female students. In contrast, female students demonstrated slightly higher levels of psychological and sociocultural adaptation.

However, the results of the independent sample t-tests indicate that none of these differences are statistically significant. Therefore, gender does not appear to be a major factor influencing cultural shock or cross-cultural adaptation in this sample.

**5. Discussion**

The findings of this study provide several insights into the cross-cultural experiences of Guangxi university students participating in short-term exchange programs in Malaysia.

First, the results indicate that students experienced moderate levels of cultural shock during their exchange program. This finding is consistent with Oberg’s cultural shock theory, which suggests that individuals entering a new cultural environment often experience feelings of confusion and uncertainty.

Second, despite experiencing cultural challenges, students reported relatively high levels of psychological and sociocultural adaptation. One possible explanation is that Malaysia shares certain cultural similarities with China, such as collectivist cultural values and respect for hierarchical relationships. However, as Malaysia is a multi-ethnic

society, future research should consider ethnic differences in host cultural contact and their impact on adaptation.

Third, the correlation and regression results confirm that cultural shock has a significant negative impact on both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. These findings support previous research suggesting that cultural stress can influence individuals' emotional well-being and social functioning.

Another important implication of this study relates to the role of institutional support. Universities can help students adapt more successfully by providing pre-departure cultural training, language preparation programs, and intercultural communication workshops.

Furthermore, peer support networks and mentoring systems may also help exchange students build social connections in the host culture.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined cultural shock and cross-cultural adaptation among university students in Guangxi participating in short-term exchange programs in Malaysia. The results indicate that students experienced moderate cultural shock but relatively positive adaptation outcomes. Cultural shock was found to have a significant negative effect on both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. The gender variation analysis showed that male and female students experienced similar levels of cultural shock and adaptation, and gender differences were not statistically significant.

As a pilot study, this research provides preliminary empirical evidence on the cross-cultural experiences of Chinese exchange students in Malaysia. However, the study also has several limitations. The sample size is relatively small, and the participants were drawn from a single university. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples to improve the generalizability of the findings.

In addition, further refinement of the questionnaire instrument may help improve its construct validity in future research. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of Chinese exchange students and provide practical insights for improving international education programs between China and ASEAN countries.

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