

Chinese Adaptation

-- Challenges and Opportunities for Chinese Students Studying in US

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Abstract: The U.S. Department of State and the non-profit organization Association for International Education released the Open Doors report on Monday (13), showing that the number of international students in the U.S. higher education system reached 1.057 million in the 2022-23 academic year, an increase of nearly 12 percent over the previous year.[1] This is the most significant annual increase in more than 40 years, with Chinese students reaching as high as 289,500. Amid the wave of globalization, more and more Chinese students are choosing to study in the United States to pursue higher educational standards and broader development opportunities. Nowadays, many recruiting companies judge international students' ability and various indicators based on QS or US NEWS, so entering a highly-ranked American university has become a basic need for many international students. This article will explore the pros and cons of the Chinese communication style for Chinese students in the United States, emphasizing the urgent need for international students to adapt to the American social and academic environment to navigate and integrate successfully.

Keywords: Chinese Communication, International Student, Culture Coexistence, Cultural Confidence, Cultural Integration.

1. Introduction

Amid the wave of globalization, more and more Chinese students are choosing to study in the United States to pursue higher educational standards and broader development opportunities. Chinese students, as the largest single source of the international student body, deserve more academic attention because their psychosocial and educational experiences in the host country deserve attention. [2] The trend of Chinese students studying in the United States is driven by several factors, including the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, which allows more and more families to afford the high cost of overseas education, as well as the high-quality reputation of U.S. higher education and the wide range of career choices it offers. Many Chinese families are willing to put everything they have into supporting their children to study abroad to generate a class leap. The American college education system encourages critical thinking and innovation. It provides a different learning environment from the traditional Chinese education system, attracting many Chinese students seeking quality education and personal development while offering more possibilities. In addition, studying in the U.S. is an opportunity to gain knowledge and improve social status and job competitiveness, especially in Chinese society, where academic background is highly valued.

Despite the allure of the American education system, Chinese students face significant challenges when studying abroad. Cultural adjustment, language barriers, and financial pressures are just a few of the hurdles they must overcome. Many students and families prepare for study abroad by participating in preparatory programs and cultural exchanges, such as joining an international high school to take advanced placement AP courses and participating in language exams such as the TOEFL. However, the transition is not always smooth. Many Chinese students find it challenging to communicate in English when they first arrive in the United States. English is taught as a foreign language in China, and many Chinese students feel uncomfortable speaking English in various situations. The variables of acculturation are often intertwined. Social contact with native English speakers may help improve students' English proficiency and simplify the acculturation process. However, limited English proficiency may lead to anxiety and even self-isolation among Chinese students when interacting with native English speakers. Yang and Clum noted that the greater the differences between the two countries, the greater the adaptation stress for international students.[3] Chinese students may have more difficult coping experiences than students from European countries or other Asian countries because China and the United States are considered the countries with the most significant cultural distance . [4]

Language proficiency and academic knowledge are undoubtedly crucial for international students, but they are only part of the equation. Equally crucial are communication skills, especially in a cross-cultural environment. This paper will delve into the pros and cons of Chinese-style communication for Chinese students in the United States, highlighting the urgent need for international students to adapt to the American social and academic environment. The urgency of this need cannot be overstated, as it directly impacts the student ability to navigate their academic and social lives in a foreign country.

2. Characteristics of Chinese-style Communication for International Students in the United States

Chinese communication generally refers to a style that emphasizes networking, etiquette, and indirect expression. This style, while different from direct and assertive Western communication, has its unique benefits. For U.S. students studying in China, this communication style may affect their experience studying abroad in many ways, from social interactions in daily life to academic and career development. The impact of this communication style on Chinese students is twofold, with obvious benefits and potential downsides. While emphasizing networking and indirect expression can foster solid relationships and harmony, it may also lead to over-reliance on interpersonal networks and communication barriers. Understanding this communication style is essential to support better and guide international students' study abroad journey, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach.

2.1. Focus on Interpersonal Relationships

In Chinese culture, relationships are the foundation of social interaction. Chinese students in the U.S. emphasize building a network of long-term relationships, including professors, classmates, friends, and community members. They actively participate in social activities and student organizations to expand their networks. Students connect with compatriots and those interested in Chinese culture off-campus by participating in community activities. By helping each other and sharing resources, students maintain friendships and stay in close contact with family and friends back home. This demonstrates the importance of kinship and friendship. The Chinese concept of "friendship" is closely related to "relationship" or "network" . [5] In contrast to the Chinese concept of friendship, Americans have very different expectations of what friends should do when help is needed. For Americans, friendship is not usually based on the exchange of favors. [6]

2.2. Indirect Expression

Chinese people are accustomed to expressing ideas and feelings indirectly to avoid direct conflict. They use euphemisms and innuendo to maintain humility and politeness. Students avoid offending others in academic communication by listening and understanding their positions. Indirect expression helps to find harmonious solutions when faced with different opinions or cultural conflicts. Students strengthen relationships daily by giving small gifts or expressing gratitude. In China, more attention is paid to the beauty of language. Here, teachers do not care if they use big words. However, in China, teachers care about terminology, proverbs, or pretty phrases. The Western way of thinking is based on rationality. [7]

2.3. Face Culture

Face is crucial in Chinese culture and involves one's dignity and reputation in social situations. International students maintain face by giving respect to others and avoiding public criticism. In social situations, face culture influences behavioral styles and interactions. For example, in the classroom, avoiding public criticism preserves one's dignity and that of others. There are two main aspects of the face: one is "giving face," i.e., giving respect to others in public through words and actions to ensure that the other person maintains his or her dignity and self-respect; the other is "saving face," i.e., individuals avoid embarrassing situations in public, including avoiding public criticism, to maintain their dignity and the dignity of others. The second is "preserving face," i.e., avoiding embarrassing situations in public, including avoiding public criticism and maintaining one's and others' dignity. In Chinese society, the concept of face affects not only individual behavior but also family and social relationships. Losing face can lead to social tension and alienation while preserving face can enhance interpersonal relationships and social harmony. For international students, face is an essential factor that must be addressed in the workplace, family, circle of friends, and more comprehensive social interactions.

For example, in international students' study and life interactions, it is important to save face and maintain one's dignity and the dignity of others, even if it means not expressing one's valid opinions. Angie Egan and Rebecca Weiner, in their book *Culture Shock! China* writes that in Chinese society, friendship means more than just getting to know each other; it means that their lives and personal well-being have become intertwined. If they can afford to help a friend, they will. [8] Moreover, on appropriate occasions, international students are also more protective of the face and dignity of international students from China.

2.4. Politeness and Respect

Politeness and respect are at the core of Chinese communication culture. Chinese students express their respect for others through politeness, earning goodwill and trust, and fostering interpersonal relationships. In the U.S., politeness and respect are widely accepted, which helps students receive positive responses in social interactions.

2.5. Collectivism

Chinese culture emphasizes collective interests and teamwork. Chinese students in the U.S. demonstrate coordination and cooperation in team projects and social activities, forming close-knit social circles to gain a sense of belonging and support. By staying connected to Chinese culture, they gradually adapt and integrate into American culture and search for a sense of identity. For example, participating in traditional Chinese festivals helps to maintain cultural identity. Adapting to a new culture requires a dynamic shift in personal identity. [9] This process is a dual process that includes

both cultural and psychological changes. Many international students report that acculturation is a positive experience, although the process can be challenging.

Acculturation is a critical process that enhances international students' intercultural communication competence. [10] By interacting with American students and other international students, Chinese students gradually understand and adapt to American social norms and cultural practices.

Chinese international students excel in teamwork, a significant advantage in U.S. academic and professional environments. American society values teamwork, and the ability to work harmoniously and together to achieve goals is critical. Chinese students tend to be collectivist and focus on team effectiveness and coordination, which allows them to perform well in collaborative projects.

Influenced by Western individualism, American students emphasize personal freedom, equality, and direct communication. They tend to be independent, outspoken, and focused on individual achievement. American students use analytical thinking, value personal opinions and logical reasoning, and make decisions with a greater focus on personal interests and goal achievement. Behaviorally, they are willing to express their personal views openly, and communication is direct and open. American students value extensive social networks, prefer short-term and functional relationships, and emphasize personal interests and common goals. When faced with conflict, they prefer to discuss and resolve issues directly and are less concerned with face-saving culture. They see conflict as the standard way to solve problems and progress in relationships.

In teamwork, American students pay more attention to individual contribution and independent thinking and emphasize the role and achievement of the individual in the team. They are used to presenting and promoting their ideas and solutions. This direct communication style contrasts with the indirect expression of Chinese students. For example, in a team project, Chinese students may express opinions through humility and euphemisms to ensure they do not offend others. American students, on the other hand, are more likely to present their ideas directly and actively contribute to the discussion. Such differences require mutual understanding and adaptation in cross-cultural teams for optimal collaboration.

By adapting and assimilating into both cultures, international students can better cope with the challenges of cross-cultural communication and enhance their academic and social experiences.

3. Disadvantage Analysis

3.1. Over-reliance on Interpersonal Networks

3.1.1. Impact on Independence

Chinese students rely too much on their interpersonal networks, hindering their ability to solve problems independently. In American culture, personal independence and self-solving skills are highly valued. For example, in an academic setting, Chinese students may seek help from classmates or teachers before attempting to solve problems independently, which may jeopardize their learning outcomes. For example, they may rely on classmates for study materials rather than utilizing library resources or online databases. In everyday life, such as when renting an apartment or going through administrative procedures, students may rely too heavily on the advice of others rather than conducting research and making independent decisions. This reliance can lead to a lack of confidence and problem-solving skills in the face of new challenges, thus affecting their ability to adapt.

3.1.2. Limited Information and Perspective Bias

Students who rely primarily on their interpersonal networks for information may encounter biased or outdated information. This is particularly problematic for keeping abreast of policy changes and

academic resources. For example, information about visa regulations or job opportunities may be more accurate through official sources than through hearsay in networks. More than relying on these networks may prevent students from gaining a complete and objective understanding of their environment. For example, they may turn to their classmates for help when they encounter learning difficulties rather than solving the problem independently by consulting information and attempting to solve it. In daily life, students may rely too much on the advice and help of others when renting an apartment and going through procedures rather than solving problems by looking for information and making decisions independently. This reliance may lead to a lack of confidence and ability to solve problems independently when faced with new challenges or problems, affecting their growth and adaptability.

3.1.3. Decision-making Challenges

Reliance on relationship advice in major decisions such as choosing courses or career planning may hinder students' ability to think independently. They may follow the advice of others instead of considering their interests and circumstances. Some international students from working-class families especially have the burden of their families, so they will face much pressure in making decisions. Chinese students need help adapting and adjusting to American culture and campus life due to their cultural background, traditions, and family influences. [11] Chinese students often face pressure from family and social expectations in their career choices, prioritizing "decent" careers over personal interests. This contrasts with the emphasis on self-actualization in the United States. For example, students may choose majors based on the advice of friends or family rather than their passions or abilities. For example, doctors, lawyers, and business-related fields are popular majors for international students. From their parent's point of view, these majors are much more employable and will enable their children to find stable jobs as soon as possible. Nevertheless, they care little about their children's emotional needs and fundamental interests. Under Chinese education, respecting the elderly is not a priority, and this group of international students will not take the initiative to express their needs, affecting their academic performance and future career satisfaction.

3.2. Indirect Expression and Communication Barriers

3.2.1. Academic Impact

Chinese students often use indirect communication to avoid conflict, which may lead to misunderstanding because the U.S. values directness. In classroom discussions, they may hesitate to express their opinions bluntly, fearing offending others. For example, in group projects, Chinese students may refrain from expressing opposing views to maintain harmony, resulting in their contributions being ignored, and the project may suffer.

3.2.2. Social and Psychological Effects

The cultural emphasis on saving face can cause stress and discourage students from seeking help or admitting mistakes. A study by Sue and Kirk found that Chinese students were more reserved in obeying and deferring to authority, were more introverted and submissive, were less socially extroverted, were less willing to express their impulses, and were less socially concerned about others, leading to difficulties in adjustment. [12] This reluctance to openly express needs or failures can negatively affect their mental health and academic performance. For example, a student struggling with a course may avoid seeking help to avoid appearing incompetent, thus exacerbating their difficulties.

3.2.3. Misunderstandings and Missed Opportunities

Indirect expressions may be misinterpreted by American students and professors as uncertainty or lack of opinion. For example, when students imply that they need help but do not explicitly ask for it, they may be perceived as not needing help and thus miss out on support opportunities. This can hinder their academic and social adjustment and limit their growth. This misunderstanding may lead to missed opportunities for Chinese students to receive help and support in academic and life situations, affecting their adjustment and growth. In social situations, Chinese students may be less willing to express their interest or opinions on specific topics, which may be misinterpreted as indifference or disinterest, thus affecting the establishment and maintenance of social relationships. When making friends with American students, indirect expression may prevent the other party from gaining a deeper understanding of their true thoughts and feelings, thus jeopardizing the depth and quality of the relationship. This situation may cause Chinese students to appear passive in social situations and make it difficult for them to build deep friendships, which in turn affects their social support network and mental health.

3.3. Conflict between Collectivism and Individualism

3.3.1. Classroom Dynamics

China's collectivist culture emphasizes collective interests and cooperation, in contrast to the individualistic culture of the United States. In American classrooms, students are encouraged to express individual opinions and think independently. Chinese students may be reluctant to stand out and prefer to follow group consensus, resulting in their views being ignored. For example, they may need to be more active during class discussions, compromising their participation and learning experience.

3.3.2. Social Integration

In the U.S., social circles are more diverse and decentralized, emphasizing individual freedom. Chinese students may struggle with this and feel isolated or culturally lost. Life in the United States is challenging for Chinese students; they must endure multiple aspects of life and cultural pressures. [13] They may prefer group activities, such as communal meals, while their American peers may prefer individual activities, leading to feelings of isolation. For example, Chinese students may find it challenging to participate in activities that require individual involvement, affecting their social integration and mental health.

The contrast between collectivism and individualism is particularly evident in the cultural differences between the United States and China. In Chinese culture, collectivism is crucial, emphasizing group interests, cooperative spirit, and adherence to group norms. On the other hand, American culture places a high value on individual independence, self-actualization, and personalization. This cultural difference may present Chinese students in the United States with unique challenges adapting to American society and culture. American students are often encouraged to express their personal views in the classroom, and professors tend to encourage students to think independently and express individualized views.

Chinese students may be more accustomed to following group decisions or instructions from professors. They may worry that overemphasizing themselves will disrupt group harmony and lead to passive or silent classroom discussions. In team projects, Chinese students seek collective consensus and avoid highlighting their views to ensure the overall interest and harmony of the team. This may result in their unique perspectives and innovative thinking being overlooked. This tendency

may limit Chinese students' performance and growth in academics and teamwork, preventing them from fully demonstrating their abilities and individuality.

In Chinese culture, social activities are usually communal, with close relationships between friends and family. In the United States, on the other hand, personal social circles are more diverse and decentralized, and personal independence and freedom of choice are highly respected. This difference may cause Chinese students to feel isolated or need help integrating as they adjust to the American social environment. In daily life, Chinese students may be more accustomed to group activities, such as group meals and group outings, while American students prefer individual activities and freedom of choice. This may cause Chinese students to feel culturally isolated or socially confused. This culture clash may make Chinese students feel isolated and uncomfortable in their lives in the United States, affecting their mental health and social integration. While most respondents agreed that most Americans are friendly, many indicated that this friendliness is somewhat superficial. Developing "close friendships" with Americans is difficult because they always keep their friends close. One computer science major said, "I do not think my friends here are as 'iron' as my friends in China. In China, in the circle of 'iron friends,' we always care for each other and give each other 'special' help. Moreover, as friends, we know what happens in each other's lives. There are no secrets between Chinese friends. In America, the situation is different. Americans emphasize privacy and keep their distance even from their best friends. [6]

Chinese communication styles are rooted in cultural values, which help build strong interpersonal relationships and promote teamwork. However, they can also lead to communication barriers, cultural conflicts, and psychological stress. Therefore, Chinese international students must maintain cultural advantages while learning and adapting to American communication styles to better integrate into the American social and academic environment.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Learn Direct Communication Skills

4.1.1. Observation and Practice

Observe how American students communicate in classroom and team settings, practice direct communication, and start with simple daily conversations. Gradually adapt to direct and transparent ways of expression and improve communication skills and efficiency. Learn how to express yourself directly in different situations. This includes listening carefully and observing how American students present their opinions in discussions, assign tasks, and solve problems in teamwork. By imitating their communication style and actively participating in conversations, you will gradually increase your confidence and ability to express yourself. You can clearly convey your ideas and opinions in English in various situations, improving communication effectiveness.

4.1.2. Attend Seminars

Participate in communication skills training courses or seminars the university offers to systematically learn clear and direct communication skills. Imitate the expression style of American classmates and gradually develop the habit of direct expression. They can start with simple daily conversations and gradually practice expression skills in complex topics and academic discussions.

4.1.3. Class Participation

Students should actively participate in class discussions, ask questions, express opinions directly, and improve their communication skills. They should also clearly state their ideas and suggestions in class team projects to ensure effective cooperation and recognition of their contributions.

4.2. Facing Failure and Seeking for Help

Understand that failure is part of learning and growth. [14] Treat it as an opportunity to learn and improve. [15] Maintain a positive attitude, do not be discouraged by failure, and believe you can overcome difficulties and succeed. After experiencing failure, analyze what went wrong and find ways to improve. Stay optimistic and have the confidence to overcome challenges. When encountering difficulties, take the initiative to seek advice and help from classmates, professors, or mentors, and use university resources such as tutoring centers, counseling services, and career guidance.

4.3. Integrate into a Multicultural Environment

Chinese students face challenges such as relearning new language skills and communication methods, thinking like "Westerners," understanding new classroom expectations and social and cultural backgrounds, and balancing work and play.

4.3.1. Participate in Cultural Activities

Chinese students should actively participate in various cultural exchange activities, understand and respect people from different cultural backgrounds, better integrate into a multicultural environment, and improve cross-cultural communication skills. Actively participate in cultural exchange activities organized by schools and communities, such as cultural festivals, international student clubs, and social gatherings. Interact with students from different cultural backgrounds, learn about their habits and values, and broaden their horizons. Through these activities, they can understand and experience different cultures and improve their cross-cultural understanding and communication skills.

4.3.2. Learning and Adaptation

Students can improve their English and understanding of American culture by taking language courses, reading English literature, and watching American media.

4.3.3. Respect and Tolerance

Respecting and embracing people from different cultural backgrounds and understanding their views and habits will build deeper friendships and a more comprehensive social network. Keep an open mind and be willing to accept and learn different cultures and customs. Avoid prejudice and stereotypes when interacting with others and face cultural differences positively. In a multicultural environment, people should take the initiative to participate and contribute and, through their efforts, promote understanding and cooperation between people from different cultural backgrounds.

5. Conclusion

From a cultural perspective, the challenges of American social culture are natural and inevitable. Many Chinese students need to change but need help to do so. They often cope by adopting external cultural traits, such as American-style clothing, Western dining etiquette, English language proficiency, and a more individualistic lifestyle, while preserving their internal cultural characteristics,

including religious beliefs, national values, and cultural heritage. This approach allows them to present an Americanized appearance while maintaining a Chinese heart. [16]

By following these strategies, Chinese students can better navigate the academic and social environment in the United States, enhancing their adaptability and success while retaining their cultural identity. It is undeniable that international students, including Chinese students, have significantly enriched the richness and diversity of American student culture. We value and appreciate the unique perspectives and experiences that every international student brings, and we hope all international students can complete their studies in a comfortable, warm, and inclusive environment.

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