

**In Search of Sojourners' Cross-cultural Adaptation:  
East Asian International Students in the United States**

Adrian Huang

Northern Illinois University

### **Abstract**

The United States (U.S.) welcomes a myriad of international students each year. East Asian students make up the fastest growing segment of this international student body. East Asian international students, as sojourners surrounded by a new and different culture and society in America, are faced with the necessity of cross-cultural adaptation. They have to deal with cross-cultural conflicts on multitudinous fronts in order to achieve a balance between participating in a new cultural environment and maintaining their own cultural identity. In this study, the researcher explored issues of cross-cultural adaptation with four East Asian international students, respectively coming from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, during their third academic year at universities in the state of Illinois, expecting to gain insights about this uniquely situated group of East Asian international students. In-depth interviews were conducted. Findings in the themes of East Asian international students' cross-cultural adaptation experiences in the U.S. were presented and discussed.

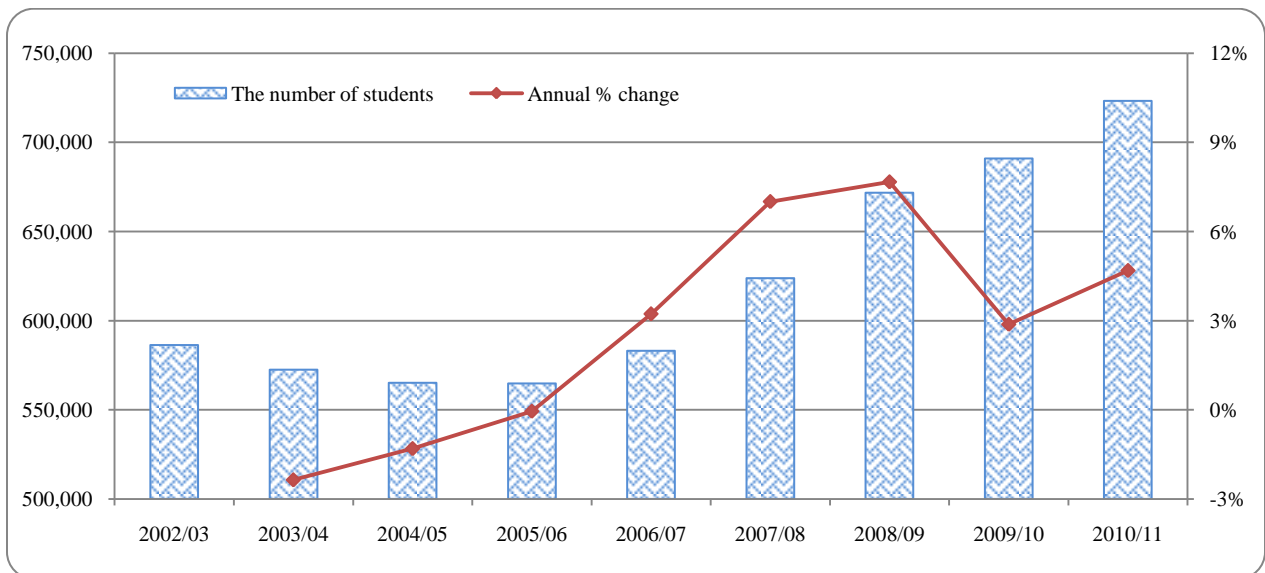
*Keywords:* cross-cultural adaptation, East Asian international students

## Introduction

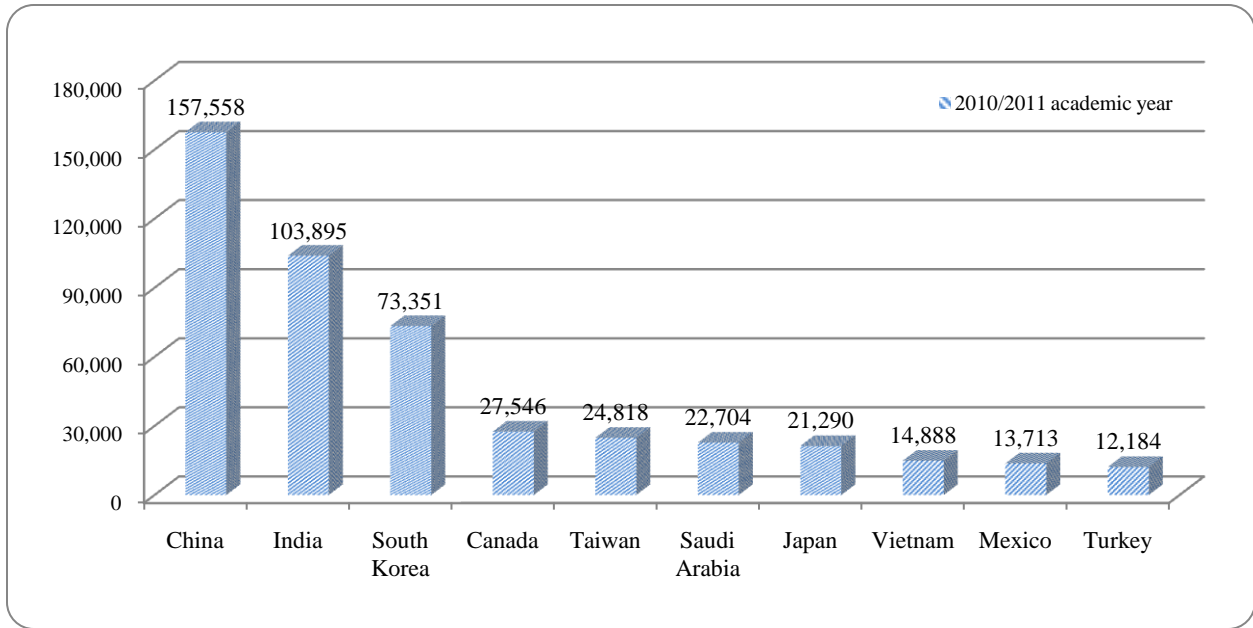
The proportion of international students throughout the world in higher education has increased over the years; however, the literature on them as sojourners is limited (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008). There is a general agreement in the literature which indicates that international students encounter much more predicament adjusting in a foreign country compared with domestic students. International students have to adjust to different cultures, learn a new lifestyle as well as language, and develop social networks in the new environment. They also have to face restrictions on account of their immigration status. Since international students need to learn new sets of culturally defined roles in their new host environment, it is necessary to understand how they learn and manage to adapt to the new social context.

In terms of the number of international students studying in other countries, the United States (U.S.) has hosted more international students than any other country in the world (Tseng & Newton, 2002). Colleges and universities in the U.S. are now more culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse than at any time (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2011), the total international student enrollment in the U.S. increased 5% in the 2010/2011 academic year to a record high of 723,277 international students (see Figure 1). This number is anticipated to continue growing up in the future. The top five leading countries of origin of international students in U.S. higher education institutions were China, India, South Korea, Canada, and Taiwan during the 2010/2011 academic year (IIE, 2011) (see Figure 2). Students from these five countries comprise 54% of all international students. Except for India and Canada, every country among the top five was located in East Asia. East Asian international students, an umbrella term for those from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, comprise 39.3% of the total international enrollments. They are “the largest international student group in U.S. higher education” (Kim, 2006, p. 480).

Not merely can sojourning in a new culture be a rewarding experience, but a quite challenging one. Sojourners are voluntary travelers whose objectives are specific and goal-oriented (Furnham, 1988). East Asian international students, as sojourners surrounded by a new and different culture and society in America, are faced with the necessity of cross-cultural adaptation. The process of adapting to a new cultural environment is often deemed to be quite stressful. International students of East Asian backgrounds always experience even greater adaptation challenges (e.g., language barriers) which may lead to elevated stress levels. In this study, the researcher explored issues of cross-cultural adaptation with four East Asian international students, individually coming from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, during their third academic year at universities in the state of Illinois, expecting to gain insights about this uniquely situated group of East Asian international students. Utilizing in-depth interviews conducted in English was attempted to document their experiences and perspectives about cross-cultural adaptation in America.



*Figure 1.* International student enrollment in U.S. universities and colleges



*Figure 2.* Top 10 countries of origin of international students in U.S. universities and colleges

### **Literature Review**

While studying in the U.S., international students are faced with myriad cross-cultural problems, needs, and issues. As Pedersen (1994, p. 157) uttered:

International students are expected to learn a new language, new rules for interpersonal behavior, and a new set of rules that all the other students on campus have spent their whole life learning ... they are expected to adapt themselves to a relatively narrowly defined set of behaviors in order for them to succeed.

Obviously, during the cross-cultural adaptation process, international students have problems, needs, and issues. Cross-cultural adaptation has been studied seriously since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Arthur, 2004). According to Begley (1999), adaptation is an umbrella term encompassing “culture shock, assimilation, adjustment, acculturation, integration, and coping” (p. 401). Grounded on this definition, cross-cultural adaptation occurs when people from one culture move to a different culture, learning the rules, societal norms, customs and language of the new culture. By bringing their existing thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and beliefs with them,

individuals will integrate these features into their new society while adjusting and accepting to the new standards, thereby creating multicultural persons. Cross-cultural adaptation thus refers to how a sojourner chooses to cope with cultural changes.

Recent models have likened cross-cultural adaptation to two broader processes: learning experiences as well as the management of stress-provoking life changes. First, learning experiences assist with “the acquisition of appropriate social skills needed to negotiate life in the new setting (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001, p. 45). Anderson (1994) conceptualized cross-cultural adaptation as essentially a learning process. She delineated that “cross-cultural adaptation is a commonplace process of learning to live with change and difference, in this instance, a changed environment and different people, different norms, different standards, and different customs” (p. 299). Sojourners are initially ignorant of the behavioral and cultural norms of the new culture. In order to adapt, they must learn the features of it and acquire the sociocultural skills for participating in it. Adaptation here is plotted as “a classic arithmetical learning curve” (Leong & Chou, 2002, p. 187). The jolts provided by experiencing the new culture can be “a precondition to learning” (Taylor, 1994, p. 397).

Second, the management of stress-provoking life changes requires “multiple coping strategies to facilitate psychological well-being” (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001, p. 45). Gudykunst and Hammer (1987), from a perspective of homeostatic mechanism, portrayed cross-cultural adaptation as a dynamic and cyclical process of tension reduction until an equilibrium is reached. In these homeostatic terms, an international student is in a situation where upheavals and disruptions are pushing them out of equilibrium. The process of adapting aims to reduce the internal imbalance felt as tension and uncertainty (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004).

Moreover, studies focusing on factors influencing the cross-cultural adaptation process have done on different groups of sojourners. Manifold predictor variables are brought up to affect the duration and intensity of the cross-cultural adaptation process: communication skills, demographic factors, personality traits, social support network, and so on (Anderson, 1994; Arthur, 2004; Furnham, 1988; Kim, 2001; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Among all of these variables, the host language proficiency plays a very crucial role in maintaining successful cross-cultural adaptation. Empirical studies, such as Poyrazli and Grahame (2007), Swagler and Ellis (2003), and Wan (2001), indicated that the greater an international student's mastery of the host country's language is, the easier, more stable, and more comfortable one feels about the cross-cultural adaptation process is. Cross-cultural adaptation is thus a double-edged process. One that is concurrently troublesome as well as enriching. Despite, or rather because of, the difficulties crossing cultures entails, "people do and must change some of their old ways so as to carry out their daily activities and achieve improved quality of life in the new environment" (Kim, 2001, p.21).

Chaney and Martin (2005, pp. 103-104) concluded the cross-cultural adaptation phenomenon:

When people live in another culture for an extended period of time, they have choices to make concerning how much of the new culture they are going to accept and to what extent the new culture will override, complement, or be rejected based on values and behaviors of the home culture.

Given the intricate challenges encountered by sojourners were traced to cross-cultural adaptation, it is not surprising to find that East Asian international students experience great difficulties in

America on the basis of the entirely different features between Occidental culture and Oriental culture.

### **Research Question**

How do East Asian international students interpret their cross-cultural adaptation experiences in the U.S.?

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), purposive sampling can maximize the applicability of data for study and promise the possibility of manifold realities. I purposely selected persons I assumed could provide rich information for this study. Because of the extensive and multiple in-depth interviews, I also attempted to select individuals who were easily accessible. A total of five East Asian international students were selected, and four agreed to participate. One female East Asian international student, from Mongolia, declined to participate in the study owing to her personal concern. The following table provides more detailed information about the participants.

Participant	Nationality	Age	Gender	Major	Institution
Sean	Taiwan	23	Male	Language & Literature	Benedictine University
MeiFang	China	23	Female	Information Technology	DePaul University
Reiko	Japan	22	Female	Mathematics & Statistics	Loyola University Chicago
Ethan	South Korea	22	Male	History	Northern Illinois University

*Table 1.* Information about the participants

#### **Data Collection**

The data collection methods contained informal communications, references to the researcher's field journals and interview notes, as well as examinations of the autobiographies provided by the participants.



## **Data Analysis**

According to Bruner (1986), there are two types of cognition in narrative inquiry: paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry, as know as analysis of narratives, and narrative-type narrative inquiry, as known as narrative analysis. First, in the stage of paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry, I established the categories and discovered themes of the data and from stories to common elements. After inductively finding the themes from the data, I compiled a flow chart to diagram the whole into all the categories and themes and their relationships to each other.

Second, in the stage of narrative-type narrative inquiry, I presented a meaningful structure for organizing incoherent data components. Not merely did I collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize them by means of a plot into a story, but I also presented the findings as narrative and descriptive wordings. Thus, analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements, and narrative analysis moves from elements to stories.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was established through two strategies: member checking as well as peer debriefing. First, member checking was applied for verification purposes. I e-mailed the transcribed interviews and researchers' interpretations back to participants and asked them if the results were precise enough and representative of their perspectives and experiences. Each of the four participants confirmed the accuracy of their respective transcript. They expressed that what they mentioned during the interviews is exactly what they had intended to convey. They all agreed with the researchers' interpretations of their remarks.

Second, regarding peer debriefing, three peer debriefers examined the data based on Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria for establishing trustworthiness. They collaboratively discussed the transparency, accuracy, completeness, and comprehensiveness of the data

interpretations. Trustworthiness of the transcribed data and interpretations was ensured accordingly.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Sojourning in a new culture can be a challenging and rewarding experience. Based on the research question, participants dissected their experiences from diverse angles to interpret cross-cultural adaptation. Several interrelated and complex themes emerged from the data analyses. According to the results of in-depth interviews with these participants, I found that the cross-cultural adaptation experience for East Asian international students surrounded five main themes, including (1) psychological adjustment, (2) socio-cultural adjustment, (3) academic adjustment, (4) linguistic self-confidence, and (5) contact with host-nationals.

### **Psychological Adjustment**

Psychological adjustment, originating from the stress and coping points of view, is primarily affective in nature (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). This theme accentuates the emotional well-being of East Asian international students and their satisfaction of sojourning experiences. Participants spoke of that personality, personality traits, life changes, coping styles, relationships with co-nationals, and social support from co/host nationals thoroughly impinge upon psychological adjustment.

### **Socio-cultural Adjustment**

Socio-cultural adjustment, deriving from the concept of social learning, denotes the behavioral domain (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). This theme underscores an East Asian international student's ability to effectively negotiate interactions with members of the host culture in order to blend into society. Communication and social interaction skills are considered necessary. Participants illustrated that the length of residence in the new culture, culture

knowledge, cultural distance, and relationships with host nationals respectively play an important role in the process of socio-cultural adjustment. They further pointed out that making friends and engaging in social activities are able to help improve the socio-cultural adjustment of sojourning students. Albeit psychological adjustment and socio-cultural adjustment are conceptually distinct, participants deemed that these two are correlated. For instance, there is a cause-effect relationship between psychological distress and socio-cultural isolation.

### **Academic Adjustment**

According to Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001), the dominant characteristic that distinguishes international students from other sorts of sojourners lies in their academic objectives. Academic difficulties are reckoned as the most pressing problems for international students (Arthur, 2004). As far as East Asian international students are concerned, successful cross-cultural adaptation is partly contingent upon their ability to master studies in the host institution.

The common academic adjustment concerns which participants specified contain prior academic preparation, adjustment to foreign teaching methodology, pressures from performance expectations, and workload issues. Participants described that they may not be aware of or not be accustomed to the underlying principles, values, and practices common in American higher education. For example, participants listed that expectations for student behavior, time-management skill, writing competence, organizational skill, and public speaking ability are very divergent from what is customary in their home cultures. They faced difficulties communicating in class, as well as in online classes, while dealing with the stress of their aspirations for the future, and their perceptions of their various professors' attitudes and responses to them, as

foreign students. They were reluctant to classroom discussions due to their lack of understanding of topics discussed and insufficient moxie to active participation.

### **Linguistic Self-confidence**

According to Ward and Kennedy (1999), language skills and communication competence are related to cross-cultural adaptation. Language skills “are important because they affect the quality and quantity of intercultural interactions” (Ward, 2004, p. 190). Effective communication is key to successful adaptation in a new culture. Videlicet, the better the understanding of the host country language is, the easier the cross-cultural adaptation process is. Linguistic self-confidence, in particular, is regarded as one of the influential factors in international students’ cross-cultural adaptation experiences. Self-confidence connotes a high level of perceived competence and low level of anxiety in applying a second language. The marriage of language competence and confidence are crucial for adjustment outcomes because this combination provides the capacity for East Asian international students to interact with the host society to achieve everyday practical and emotional needs.

Participants argued that the language ability is related to their overall cross-cultural adaptation. As ability with the host language increases, so does the cross-cultural adaptation of East Asian international students. Lack of proficiency in the English language was recognized to be one of the prominent challenges for participants. They elucidated that their lack of language fluency hinders academic performance, restrains them from initiating communication with others, reduces their ability to develop social ties with people from the host nation, and limits their overall social experiences and adaptation in the host country. Participants also annotated that their English self-confidence can mediate the relations among psychological adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment, and host cultural contact.

### **Contact with Host-nationals**

According to Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, and Al-Timimi (2004), international students who spend more time making contact with host-nationals are significantly more well-adapted compared with students who mostly interacted with other international students. Host-nationals typically include students, university personnel, faculty members and individuals in the local community. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) asserted that international students' contact with host-nationals is mainly instrumental and pragmatic in nature. It helps facilitate international students' academic and professional aspirations. Ying (2003), focusing on international students from Taiwan in particular, also found that individuals who have a greater amount of social interaction with Americans experience greater adjustment and lesser strain. As Ward and Kennedy (1992) depicted, there is a positive correlation between adaptation of international students and the amount of social interaction they have with people from the host country.

Participants who have frequent interactions with host-nationals and felt satisfied with those contacts reported lower stress, better psychological adjustment, fewer socio-cultural difficulties, greater emotional satisfaction, and better academic adjustment. In addition, through interacting and developing ties with host-nationals, participants claimed that they are better able to understand local culture, build local support networks, improve language proficiency, improve communication skills, and acquire social skills necessary to adapt in the new context.

### **Limitation**

This study has some limitations. First as an author as well as an insider, Adrian Huang, an Asian international doctoral student at a U.S. public research university at the time of this study, was able to glean a deeper understanding of the issues unraveled in the analysis.

Nevertheless, this position acts like a double-edged sword. As an old proverb says, the same knife cuts bread and finger. My insider status potentially was a source of subjective bias. In order to echo this concern, I applied strategies of member checking and peer debriefing to establish trustworthiness.

Second, this study was limited to the voices of East Asian international students only. They cannot be taken to represent the general population of international students studying in the U.S. It is possible, however, in studies like this one, that the knowledge gained may be transferable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Including the voices of more participants such as those of African, European, and Latino international students would have added to the perspectives and overall comprehensiveness and amplitude of the findings. In the future, researchers should address these issues.

### **Conclusion**

This study provided how sojourners interpret their cross-cultural adaptation experiences through the voices of East Asian international students, respectively from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in the U.S. Therefore, the overarching research focus was on the analysis of their interpretation of cross-cultural adaptation experiences. Through in-depth interviews, five main themes were emerged: psychological adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment, academic adjustment, linguistic self-confidence, and contact with host-nationals. East Asian international students' cross-cultural adaptation could take on these five themes. These themes also made a great impact on their cross-cultural adaptation in America.

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