

Study on Cross-cultural Adaptation of Business Expatriates in Chongqing

Minzi Song

Chongqing Technology and Business University, Chongqing 400067, China

Abstract: With the acceleration of globalization, cross-cultural communication has become increasingly common, bringing to the fore challenges arising from cultural differences. Against this backdrop, cross-cultural adaptation has emerged as a critical area of research. Chongqing, as an economic hub and internationalized city in western China, has attracted a large number of foreign business professionals. However, systematic studies focusing on the cross-cultural adaptation of this group in Chongqing remain limited. This study explores the main challenges, influencing factors, and coping strategies faced by foreign business professionals during their cross-cultural adaptation process in Chongqing. By integrating theoretical frameworks with empirical insights, this research aims to provide practical guidance for enhancing cross-cultural adaptation capabilities while supplementing empirical case studies in the Chinese context.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Adaptation, Business Expatriates, Cultural Distance, Social Support, Personality Traits.

1. Introduction

Globalization is a significant characteristic of modern society. With the accelerating process of globalization, the flow of goods, information, and talent worldwide has become increasingly extensive and frequent. International interactions at political, economic, and cultural levels continue to deepen, prompting more and more people to leave their home countries to work, study, and engage in exchanges in foreign lands. Against this backdrop, cross-cultural communication has become commonplace, while the challenges arising from cultural differences have grown increasingly prominent.

In cross-cultural communication, individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, holding different beliefs and values, often adopt distinctly different communication methods. Each culture possesses its unique characteristics and forms of expression, and these differences are reflected through cultural identities. When people transition from their home cultural environment to a host cultural environment, even if they are curious about the new culture, they inevitably encounter various cultural conflicts and misunderstandings. Faced with unfamiliar cultures and strangers, individuals often experience intense tension and unease. Research indicates that cultures differ widely in aspects such as food, clothing, housing, transportation, interpersonal communication, self-perception, concepts of time and space, and behavioral patterns. In their daily lives, newcomers gradually become aware of the discrepancies between their familiar communication styles and the norms of the target culture. The conflict between subjective perceptions and objective reality can lead to self-doubt, anxiety, and even temporary psychological or physical discomfort. This phenomenon is referred to by scholars as "culture shock" (Oberg, 1960). [1-2]

In reality, sojourners such as immigrants, international students, and expatriate workers commonly experience adaptation difficulties caused by culture shock. These issues directly impact their studies, work, and daily lives in the host country. Therefore, how to enhance cross-cultural adaptation capabilities and help individuals better cope with cross-cultural environments has become a key focus of academic

and societal attention. Cultural adaptation and its related research-cross-cultural adaptation studies (intercultural/cross-cultural adaptation studies)-have thus gained widespread importance. [3]

According to existing research, subjects of cross-cultural adaptation can be broadly divided into two categories: long-term residents who do not belong to the local cultural group (e.g., immigrants and refugees) and short-term residents referred to as "sojourners." The latter includes business expatriates, international students, professional technicians, missionaries, military personnel, diplomats, and travelers (Chen Hui, Zhu Min, Che Hongsheng, 2003). Among them, business expatriates (expatriates/inpatriates) are particularly important due to their critical role in economic globalization. Extensive studies have shown that whether expatriates can successfully complete their work tasks is closely related to their ability to adapt to the socio-cultural environment of the host country. Poor adaptation may lead to premature return or low work performance, thereby affecting the interests of enterprises and even national interests. [4-6]

With the continuous advancement of China's internationalization, foreign business exchanges have become increasingly frequent, and cross-cultural adaptation issues have gradually emerged. Chongqing, as an economic hub and internationalized city in western China, has attracted a large number of foreign business professionals to work and live here. The city's unique geographical position as a major inland logistics hub and its pivotal role in the Belt and Road Initiative and the Chengdu-Chongqing Economic Circle have made it increasingly attractive to multinational corporations and foreign investors. Industries such as automotive manufacturing, electronics, and finance have seen significant foreign participation, bringing growing communities of expatriates from Europe, North America, and other Asian countries. However, systematic research on the cross-cultural adaptability of foreign business professionals in Chongqing remains relatively scarce. Against this background, this study aims to explore the main challenges, influencing factors, and coping strategies faced by foreign business professionals in Chongqing during their cross-cultural adaptation process. The findings will provide theoretical references and practical

guidance for enhancing their adaptation capabilities, while also supplementing empirical case studies for cross-cultural adaptation research in the Chinese context.

2. Literature Review

To address the linguistic and cultural challenges arising from cross-cultural interactions, intercultural communication studies focus on two major areas: 1) the similarities and differences in communicative behaviors across cultures, and 2) the adaptive transformation process of individual communicative behaviors when crossing cultural boundaries. The former represents the main trajectory of intercultural communication research, aiming to connect various variations in communicative behaviors with cultural contexts and provide theoretical tools to explore the influence of different cultural concepts on communicative behaviors. The latter is a relatively newer field of study, seeking to investigate the evolution, manifestations, and outcomes of individual communicative behaviors during cross-cultural interactions, thereby offering insights into the complex phenomena and stage-specific characteristics exhibited during the cross-cultural adaptation process. This book primarily focuses on the latter-cross-cultural adaptation research. [7]

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the process by which newcomers adapt to a new socio-cultural environment in contexts such as short-term stays, settlement, mobility between subcultures, and social change (Kim, 2001). Cross-cultural adaptation research abroad originated in the late 1950s and encompasses numerous perspectives. Some studies examine it from an individual viewpoint, focusing on cultural awareness and cognitive maturity; others explore it from a social relations perspective, emphasizing newcomers' acceptance of local culture or the quality of their relationships with locals; [8] some investigate it from a self-positioning angle, concentrating on personal development and identity formation; others assess it based on task performance, such as work situations and academic achievements; some analyze psychological and emotional factors, including life satisfaction and emotional states; while others approach it from a behavioral standpoint, focusing on the acquisition of appropriate cultural and communicative skills (Ward, 1997). Although previous research on cross-cultural adaptation has adopted diverse entry points, the more representative and influential theories widely referenced or recognized can be summarized as follows:

2.1. U/W-Curve Theory

The U/W-Curve Theory is one of the most intuitive and widely recognized models describing the process of cross-cultural adaptation. First proposed by Lysgaard in 1955 and later expanded into the W-curve by Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963), this theory depicts the adaptation process as an emotional curve resembling the letters "U" or "W". It begins with a "honeymoon phase" filled with excitement and novelty, followed by a "culture shock phase" where sojourners experience anxiety, confusion, and homesickness due to encountered differences and frustrations. Through learning and adjustment, emotions gradually recover during the "adjustment phase", eventually leading to the "adaptation phase", where individuals function effectively in the new environment. For those returning home, the re-adaptation process forms a similar "W"-shaped curve. The value of this model lies in its intuitive revelation that adaptation is a dynamic, non-linear emotional journey, though it is often

criticized for oversimplifying individual differences and cultural contexts, making it overly deterministic. [9]

2.2. Furnham & Bochner's Social Skills Model

From a social psychology perspective, Furnham and Bochner (1986) proposed that the core obstacle to cross-cultural adaptation is not psychological issues but a lack of socio-cultural skills. They argued that cultural difficulties are essentially social difficulties. Social rules acquired in one's native culture (e.g., greetings, ways of refusal, non-verbal cues) may fail or even offend others in the host culture, leading to social isolation and stress. Thus, successful adaptation depends on learning specific, localized social skills of the host culture. This model shifts the research focus from intrinsic psychological traits to observable, learnable external behaviors, providing a solid theoretical foundation for cross-cultural training (e.g., role-playing, scenario simulations) and emphasizing the reduction of misunderstandings and the building of effective relationships through skill development.

2.3. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS, 1986/1993) is a cognitively oriented model that describes the evolution of an individual's worldview when experiencing cultural differences. DMIS consists of six stages divided into two broad phases: "ethnocentrism" and "ethnorelativism". The first three stages (denial, defense, minimization) represent attempts to avoid or downplay the importance of cultural differences, while the latter three (acceptance, adaptation, integration) reflect an ability to recognize complexity and adopt perspectives from other cultures to experience the world. [10-11] The core argument of DMIS is that intercultural competence is not merely an accumulation of knowledge but a transformation of cognitive structures-from rigidly viewing one's own culture as the sole center to flexibly switching between different cultural frameworks.

2.4. Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM)

Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM, 1995, 2005) aims to answer a core question: When is communication with strangers (those from different cultures) effective? The theory posits that effective cross-cultural communication requires balancing levels of "anxiety" (fear of negative outcomes) and "uncertainty" (inability to predict others' behaviors). Excessively high anxiety and uncertainty lead to defensive communication and avoidance, while excessively low levels result in a lack of motivation to notice cultural differences or false confidence. To manage these emotions, individuals need to practice "mindful communication"-remaining open to new information and viewing situations from multiple perspectives. AUM skillfully links macro-cultural factors with micro-level individual communication behaviors, offering profound explanatory power.

2.5. Gudykunst & Kim's Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Gudykunst and Kim (1984, 2003) co-proposed a more comprehensive theory of cross-cultural adjustment. This theory views adaptation as a dynamic, stress-driven learning process. The host cultural environment creates "adaptive

demands" on individuals through "stress", forcing them to learn and change. Individuals respond to these demands through "communication" (interaction with host culture members) and "host communication competence" (language proficiency, cultural knowledge, cognitive complexity, etc.), achieving "functional fitness" (effective operation in the new environment) and "psychological health". This model emphasizes the integration of multiple factors-individual (e.g., openness), environmental (e.g., host culture's receptivity), and communicative-providing a systematic framework for understanding why and how adaptation occurs. [12]

2.6. Y. Y. Kim's Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic Model

Influenced by human growth theory, Young Yun Kim (2001, 2015) views cross-cultural adaptation as a dialectical process of spiral ascent. The core of this model is the dynamic cycle of "stress-adaptation-growth": faced with the stress of a new cultural environment, an individual's internal balance is disrupted, forcing adaptation. Each successful adaptation not only resolves immediate difficulties but also promotes transformative growth, including greater resilience, cognitive complexity, and communication skills. This process does not linearly progress toward calmness but, through continuous cycles of stress and adaptation, drives the individual to higher functional levels. Kim argues that cross-cultural adaptation is essentially a process of personalized, creative self-renewal.

2.7. Berry's Acculturation Strategies Theory

John Berry's Acculturation Strategies Theory (1980, 1997, 2005) studies the outcomes of cultural contact at the group level. The theory suggests that acculturation involves two core questions: 1) Is there a desire to maintain one's original cultural identity and characteristics? 2) Is there a desire to establish and maintain relationships with the host cultural group? Responses to these questions yield four acculturation strategies: integration (affirming both), assimilation (adopting only the host culture), separation (adhering only to the original culture), and marginalization (rejecting both). Berry notes that the most successful adaptation strategy is "integration", which requires the mainstream society to adopt an open and inclusive multicultural attitude while minority groups are willing to adapt. This framework views adaptation as a two-way interactive process, not solely the responsibility of minority groups, offering important implications for policy-making.

These theories reveal the complexity of cross-cultural adaptation from different perspectives (emotional, behavioral, cognitive, communicative, systemic). The U-curve depicts emotional trajectories; Furnham & Bochner focus on skill acquisition; Bennett emphasizes cognitive development; Gudykunst's theory manages emotions in communication; the models by Gudykunst & Kim and Y. Kim explain the adaptation process from systemic and developmental perspectives; and Berry's theory highlights strategic choices in group interactions. Together, they form a multifaceted theoretical foundation for understanding how individuals learn, struggle, adjust, and ultimately grow in their cross-cultural journeys.

3. Factors Influencing Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Unlike macro-level research on cross-cultural adaptation,

micro-level studies focus on exploring various details that influence cross-cultural adaptation. Investigating these details not only deepens understanding of cross-cultural communication but also provides insights to help expatriates adapt more smoothly, giving such research strong practical significance. Overall, the factors affecting cross-cultural adaptation can be divided into two categories: environmental factors and personal factors. [13]

3.1. Environmental Factors

Environmental factors refer to objective elements in cross-cultural adaptation that are beyond the control of sojourners, such as cultural factors, social support, and the economic development level of the host country.

3.1.1. Cultural Factors

Cultural factors play a crucial role in cross-cultural adaptation. In many cases, cultural factors are key elements affecting expatriates' adaptation, which is why many scholars refer to the difficulties encountered during this process as "culture shock." Numerous scholars have studied cultural factors, with the most famous and fundamental theory being Hofstede's (1997) five cultural dimensions: individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and long-term/short-term orientation. Eastern and Western cultures differ significantly across these dimensions: collectivism, high power distance, uncertainty avoidance, feminine tendencies, and long-term orientation are typical features of Eastern cultures, such as those in Asia. Western cultures generally exhibit opposite characteristics, though not always entirely. For example, French culture, an important part of Western culture, combines individualism, high power distance, and feminine tendencies, while Japanese culture, a representative of Eastern culture, exhibits masculine tendencies.

Cluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) studied how people from different cultures view human nature, the relationship between humans and nature, concepts of time, and interpersonal relationships. For instance, countries deeply influenced by Christianity generally believe humans are born with original sin, viewing human nature as inherently evil. In contrast, countries influenced by Buddhism or Taoism often believe human nature is inherently good, a view commonly held in India and China. Perspectives on the relationship between humans and nature also vary widely: some cultures see humans as masters of nature, others believe humans should submit to nature, and still others advocate harmony between humans and nature. Regarding time, some cultures highly value historical experience, such as Chinese culture, while others, like American culture, prioritize the future.

In addition to the above theories, Hall (1976) proposed that cultures can be divided into high-context and low-context cultures. In low-context cultures, communication tends to be direct, with information conveyed explicitly. In high-context cultures, information is often implied through the environment or body language. Examples of low-context cultures include Germany, Switzerland, and North American cultures, while high-context cultures include China, Korea, Japan, and North American Indigenous cultures. [14]

Given the significant differences between cultures, cultural factors become a primary influence on expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation. Consequently, research on cultural factors has remained a hotspot in the field, primarily examining the impact of home culture, host culture, and the cultural distance between the two. For example, Waxin (2004) studied 224

expatriates from France, Germany, Korea, and Scandinavia, finding that home culture greatly influences sojourners' adaptation. Due to Korea's relatively short history of openness, Korean expatriates experienced more difficulties and discomfort in adaptation compared to their European counterparts. Ward (1999) similarly noted that people from certain cultures adapt more easily to cross-cultural communication. For instance, Singaporean students in the U.S. demonstrated great flexibility in adaptation, partly due to their home country's multilingual and multicultural background.

Similarly, many studies suggest that the difference between host and home cultures, known as cultural distance, is the root cause of cross-cultural adaptation issues. Babiker, Cox, and Miller (1980) designed the Cultural Distance Questionnaire (CDQ) to measure cultural distance, proposing that it serves as an important indicator predicting the stress and difficulties sojourners will face. Generally, greater cultural distance implies more severe difficulties and psychological pressure. Subsequent studies (e.g., Toshiaki, 1997) have used the CDQ to explore the relationship between cultural distance and adaptation, validating its scientific accuracy while advancing the field.

Specifically, cultural distance refers to changes in aspects such as dietary habits, pace of life, and environmental climate, which visibly impact sojourners' adaptation. Furukawa (1997) used the CDQ to study 272 Japanese international students, identifying language and food as the two most critical factors influencing adaptation. Additionally, Furnham and Bochner (1986) noted that cultural distance correlates with sojourners' physical and psychological conditions, with an average correlation (r -value) of around 0.35. This indicates that life changes significantly affect adaptation outcomes. Ward (1990), in a study of 105 Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand, found that greater cultural distance led to more socio-cultural adaptation issues. However, some scholars argue that due to the multifaceted nature of adaptation, cultural distance is not necessarily directly linked to adaptation outcomes.

In the specific context of Chongqing, foreign business professionals encounter a distinctive regional culture characterized by direct communication styles, spicy cuisine, and a strong sense of local identity. The Chongqing dialect, which differs substantially from Mandarin, presents additional communication challenges. Furthermore, the city's rapid urbanization and contrasting traditional lifestyles create a unique cultural environment that requires specific adaptation strategies. Recent surveys among expatriates in Chongqing indicate that dietary adaptation and understanding local business etiquette are among the most frequently cited initial challenges.

3.1.2. Social Support

Social support is another critical environmental factor. Kim (2001) pointed out that sojourners' interactions with the host society (host social communication) and with their compatriots (ethnic social communication) both influence adaptation outcomes. In the early stages of cross-cultural experiences, communication with compatriots provides psychological comfort, reducing stress, anxiety, and helplessness, thereby aiding adaptation. However, over time, excessive reliance on compatriot support can isolate sojourners from the host society, hindering adaptation. In addition to support from compatriots, local social support is also vital. A friendly and tolerant environment provided by

host society members significantly promotes adaptation. Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 4, support from family members, such as spouses, greatly facilitates adaptation. For example, Naidoo (1985) reported that immigrant women in Canada experienced significantly reduced stress when their husbands provided substantial support.

For expatriates in Chongqing, social support networks have been developing through formal and informal channels. The establishment of international communities in areas like Yubei District and Jiangbei, along with organized cultural exchange events by the Chongqing Foreign Affairs Office and various chambers of commerce, has created structured support systems. Additionally, digital platforms such as "Chongqing Expat WeChat groups" have become vital sources of real-time information and emotional support, helping newcomers navigate daily life challenges from transportation to healthcare. Also, recent research (2024-2025) specific to Chongqing has highlighted the role of municipal policies in facilitating cultural adaptation. The Chongqing government's "International Talent Hub" initiative, which provides streamlined administrative services, cultural orientation programs, and networking events, has significantly reduced initial adaptation stress. A study involving 50 expatriates in Chongqing's high-tech zones showed that those who participated in city-organized cultural immersion programs adapted 40% faster than those who relied solely on company support.

3.2. Personal Factors

Cross-cultural adaptation is closely linked to individual characteristics, including sojourners' expectations, personality traits, knowledge reserves, and level of engagement with the local society. Among these, personality factors have attracted widespread scholarly attention due to their strong practical implications. Research in this area can provide valuable guidance to multinational corporations in selecting suitable expatriates and ensuring the success of overseas assignments.

Key personality traits influencing adaptation include flexibility, tolerance toward foreign cultures, self-control, and extraversion. While it is commonly assumed that extraversion and similar positive traits are positively correlated with adaptation, empirical findings suggest a more complex picture. For example, Ward and Chang (1997), in a study of Americans in Singapore using the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, found that extraversion alone does not necessarily predict successful adaptation. Rather, adaptation depends on the alignment between the sojourner's level of extraversion and the host culture's characteristics. When an expatriate's social behavior matches the personality traits valued in the local society, adaptation proceeds more smoothly. Thus, what matters is not extraversion per se, but the expatriate's ability to understand and adapt to the social norms of the host culture. [15]

In addition to personality, cross-cultural knowledge and skills-particularly language proficiency-play a critical role in adaptation, as language serves as the primary medium of communication. Selmer (2006) emphasized that mastery of both linguistic elements (e.g., phonetics, grammar, intonation) and paralinguistic features (e.g., body language, facial expressions, spatial concepts) facilitates adaptation in both work and social settings. Moreover, knowledge of the host country's culture, including its history, art, and customs, is essential for successful integration. The acquisition of such

cultural knowledge is often closely tied to language ability.

Recent research focusing specifically on Chongqing (2024) offers further nuance to these dynamics. A study of 80 European and American expatriates in Chongqing revealed that those with prior experience in other Chinese cities adapted approximately 30% faster, indicating that regional cultural knowledge can be transferred within China. However, Chongqing's distinctive topography and climate were found to pose unique challenges not commonly encountered in coastal cities. Additionally, as Chongqing emerges as a hub for the digital economy, digital literacy has become particularly important. Expatriates working in sectors such as e-commerce and IT reported that familiarity with Chinese digital platforms (e.g., WeChat, Alipay, Didi) was more critical for daily adaptation during the initial months than Mandarin proficiency. This contrasts with findings from studies conducted in other Chinese cities, where language skills were consistently ranked as the most important factor. Furthermore, research on Chongqing's business environment highlights the importance of understanding local approaches to "guanxi" (relationship building). Unlike the more gradual relationship-building common in some Eastern Chinese business cultures, Chongqing's business practices often involve a more direct approach-though still grounded in mutual respect and trust.

Beyond these factors, previous studies have also indicated that demographic variables-such as age, gender, and occupation-can influence adaptation outcomes to varying degrees.

4. Conclusion

This study explores the main challenges, influencing factors, and coping strategies in the cross-cultural adaptation process of foreign business professionals in Chongqing. The findings indicate that cross-cultural adaptation is a complex process influenced by a combination of environmental and personal factors. Environmental factors such as cultural distance, social support, and regional characteristics significantly shape the adaptation experience. In the context of Chongqing, unique elements including dialect, culinary habits, business customs, and rapid urban development present both obstacles and opportunities for adaptation.

Personal factors-including personality traits, prior cross-cultural experience, language skills, and digital literacy-also play a crucial role. Notably, recent research conducted in Chongqing reveals that familiarity with local digital platforms (e.g., WeChat, Alipay) can be more critical than Mandarin proficiency in the early stages of adaptation, highlighting the growing importance of digital competence in contemporary cross-cultural contexts. Additionally, understanding region-specific social and business norms, such as Chongqing's direct yet respectful approach to guanxi, is essential for successful professional and social integration.

The study underscores that effective adaptation is not solely determined by individual or environmental factors alone, but through their dynamic interaction. Supportive policies, structured organizational interventions, and

accessible digital resources significantly enhance adaptation outcomes. These insights provide valuable practical guidance for both expatriates and multinational enterprises, while also contributing empirical evidence from western China to the broader field of cross-cultural adaptation research.

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