

Cultural Adaptation of Graduate School Chinese Students in a Philippine University: A Phenomenological Study

Article History:

Received: 27 January 2025

Accepted: 29 January 2025

Published: 21 February 2025

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the cultural adaptation experiences of Chinese graduate students in one selected university in the Philippines. Through thematic analysis of interviews from four (4) participants, key motivations why they study in the Philippines include geographic and cultural proximity, a positive educational environment, expectations for improvement, cleanliness and safety, and economic considerations. Participants noted that there were differences in educational approaches, lifestyle changes, social traditions, and comparative comfort levels revealing the complexities of adapting to a new academic setting. In terms of adjustments encountered, cultural adaptability, physical adjustments, positive social interactions, and mental resilience emerged while their coping mechanisms include immersion and acceptance, social connections, gradual adjustment and maintaining a positive outlook. Recommendations include developing targeted support services for visa assistance and cultural orientation, promoting interaction between local and international students, and prioritizing mental health resources. Future research should focus on long-term adaptation experiences and comparative studies across institutions.

Keywords: Social Traditions, Educational Approaches, Lifestyle Changes, Cultural Adaptability, Mental Resilience



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INTRODUCTION

Culture is the shared connection between an individual and the other members of their group. According to Hosagrahar (2023), culture is vital for identity and should be integral to development policies aimed at fostering inclusive and equitable progress. The inclusion of culture in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) signifies a shift from focusing solely on economic growth to emphasizing social equity, peace, and environmental sustainability. Culture not only contributes to various SDGs—such as safe cities, decent work, and gender equality—but also enhances the effectiveness of development initiatives. Cultural diversity fosters understanding and peace, aiding in conflict prevention and protecting marginalized groups. Additionally, traditional knowledge contributes to climate action and sustainable

livelihoods. However, while culture's significance is recognized, the 2030 Agenda calls for a more structured approach to measure and implement culture's contributions to sustainable development.

Culture is the identity of a group in a society and has a vital role in informing people about certain beliefs or tradition of the cluster they belong. Every nation has a unique culture. It tells one how to behave appropriately and it helps to determine between the right and wrong. An encounter with a different culture or cultural difference may result in misunderstanding and conflicts. Cultural differences are inevitable. Since each culture is unique, distinctions will always exist.

Cultural adaptation refers to the ability of individuals and societies to adjust their cultural

practices in response to changes in their natural and social environments. The extent of these adaptations can range from minor changes in daily life to significant transformations of entire cultural systems, affecting aspects such as social structures, ideologies, and livelihoods (Cultural Adaptation, n.d.).

The concept of cultural adaptation originated in the late 19th century, influenced by the American school of possibilism, particularly through thinkers like Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski, who viewed culture as a response to environmental challenges. Julian Steward (1955) later expanded this idea, arguing that the natural environment is just one of many factors driving cultural change.

In the mid-20th century, European anthropologists explored the ecological functions of culture, leading to two main approaches: the phenomenological, which emphasizes active engagement with the environment, and the cognitive, which focuses on mental representations of that environment. In the Soviet context, scholars like Markaryan (1975) analyzed culture through an actional lens, viewing it as a system of mechanisms that facilitate human activities. Arutyunov (1993) further developed the ecological function of culture, framing it as a means of shaping both the environment and human characteristics.

The concept of cultural adaptation includes various factors influencing culture, leading to approaches that emphasize both active engagement with the environment and cognitive understanding. In this study, the author aims to understand how these students actively engage with and interpret their new environment, highlighting the complexities and dynamics of their cultural integration.

A student studying abroad needs to learn about their new country's culture. This includes the language, beliefs, traditions, and values of the people. Living in a new place means starting a new life. Everything will be different, like the language spoken, the food eaten, and the people met. Being abroad can be an adventure or a

challenge. For some, it is full of surprises, while for others, it feels threatening. Regardless of the difficulties, interacting with others is important for building good relationships. As international students play a vital role in higher education, it is essential to understand the cultural factors that impact their adjustment. Foreign students often experience many emotions while adapting to different cultures (Amberstudent, 2024).

In the Philippines, international students are enrolling in increasing numbers. On May 24, 2024, Bureau of Immigration (BI) Commissioner Norman Tansingco reported that the increase in foreign students in the Philippines is a result of successful government campaigns to position the country as an educational hub in Asia. During a hearing at the House of Representatives, Tansingco emphasized that all student visas are issued after endorsements from legitimate Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) accredited by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), denying any allegations of anomalies in the visa issuance process. He noted that the Philippine government has actively promoted the country as a regional educational center, leading to heightened interest among international students. The Interagency Committee on Foreign Students (IACFS), mandated by Executive Order No. 285, plays a key role in this initiative, involving various agencies such as National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA), Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), and Department of Education (DepEd). Tansingco acknowledged that while foreign students may be monitored for security purposes, the rise in their numbers reflects growing trust in the Philippine educational system. In 2023, the Bureau of Immigration (BI) issued a total of 24,191 visas to foreign nationals, underscoring the success of the government's efforts in attracting international students (Bureau of Immigration, 2024).

The study of Lou (2024) explored the adjustment challenges faced by U.S. students studying at universities in Taiwan, focusing on their cultural adaptation and coping mechanisms. The

research employs qualitative methods, including interviews with students and faculty, as well as participating observations. The findings reveal that U.S. students developed various strategies to adapt to their new academic and social environments, addressing cross-cultural issues and language barriers. They made personal adjustments to effectively navigate their experiences in Taiwan. The study offers recommendations for international students, the Taiwanese government, and educational institutions to enhance support for current and future international students.

Moreover, the study of Zimu (2024) examines the cultural barriers and intercultural competence of international students at a private university in Bangladesh, a predominantly monocultural country. It aims to understand how foreign students adapt to the local culture and the challenges they encounter. Using a qualitative multiple case study approach, data were collected through interviews with seven participants. The findings revealed that these students face intercultural challenges related to language, communication, food habits, and teaching methods. Moreover, the participants reported that forming friendships and communicating with locals helped them navigate these challenges, highlighting the importance of intercultural competence in this context.

The study of Yue et al. (2024) investigates the experiences of Chinese overseas students in Malaysia, focusing on their acculturation and psychological resources. Using a quantitative approach, it highlights the importance of language proficiency and acculturation in their adjustment to a new academic and social environment. Key findings indicate that psychological factors such as self-efficacy, resilience, and social support are crucial for successful cultural adaptation. The research underscores the relevance of these insights in light of the growing trend of international student mobility and suggests implications for university support programs aimed at enhancing the well-being of Chinese students. Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of cross-cultural education and

offers a foundation for developing interventions to address acculturation stressors faced by international students.

The need to study the cultural adaptation of Chinese graduate students in a Philippine university arises from the increasing trend of international student mobility and the unique challenges faced by this demographic in a multicultural context. Previous research, such as Wen-Ling Lou's study on U.S. students in Taiwan, highlights the importance of understanding adjustment challenges and coping mechanisms that international students employ to navigate their new environments. Similarly, Almukdad and Karadag's investigation into culture shock in Turkey emphasizes the role of self-efficacy and sociocultural adjustment as critical factors in mitigating the adverse effects of cultural transition. Moreover, Zimu's exploration of cultural barriers in Bangladesh illustrates how intercultural competence and social relationships significantly aid students in overcoming adaptation challenges. Additionally, Yue et al. demonstrate that psychological resources, including resilience and social support, are vital for the successful acculturation of Chinese students in Malaysia. These studies collectively underscore the need for tailored support systems for international students, particularly those from China, as they face distinct cultural and educational environments in the Philippines.

This phenomenological study focused on the cultural adaptation of Chinese graduate students in the Philippines will contribute valuable knowledge to the field of cross-cultural education thereby informing university policies and support programs aimed at enhancing the academic and social experiences of these students. This research will also help foreign students studying in the Philippines who encounters same problem. This research explores the cultural adaptation of Chinese graduate students in a Philippine university to understand their experiences and challenges in a new environment. Through a phenomenological approach, the research aims to capture the participants' reasons to study in

the Philippines, the differences noticed while studying, the adjustments encountered and the coping mechanisms they used in order to understand their cultural adaptation in educational settings.

METHODS

The study aimed to explore the cultural adaptation of foreign Chinese students in the Philippines, focusing on their profiles, motivations for studying in the country, and the cultural differences they observed in the educational system, lifestyle, and traditions. The researchers sought to identify the physical and cultural adjustments faced by the participants and how they coped in their new environment. A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gather detailed insights into the attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of the participants. Purposively selected, the participants of the study is comprised of four foreign Chinese students currently enrolled at a selected university in the Philippines. Selection criteria included: a) enrollment at a selected university in the Philippines; b) Chinese nationality; c) residing in the Philippines for at least one year; d) age is at least 43 years old; and, e) enrollment in at least one semester during the academic year. Table 1 below presents the profile of the participants.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants

Participants	Age	Nationality	Course/Program	Length of Stay
Sun	43	Chinese	PhD in PE & Sports	2 ½ years
Emily	35	Chinese	PhD in PE & Sports	2 years
Mark	34	Chinese	PhD in PE & Sports	4 years
Ocean	37	Chinese	PhD in Educational Leadership	1 year

In this study, the researcher utilized a two-page interview guide to collect data pertinent to the research questions concerning participants' experiences while studying in the Philippines. Questions were adapted from the previous studies of Amaca et al. (2012). Utilizing a phenomenological approach, the research sought to deeply understand the participants' lived experiences, focusing on the differences they observed during their studies, the

adjustments they faced, and the coping mechanisms they adopted.

RESULTS

1. Reasons why foreign Chinese students study in the Philippines.

As the researchers read and reread the transcribed interviews of the participants, several themes emerged that narrate and describe their experiences for choosing to study in the Philippines. Their narratives revealed commonalities that assisted in clustering and thematizing their experiences. Based on the participants' interviews, the researcher developed themes that reflect the results of their shared experiences.

Table 2
Reasons of the Participants for Studying in the Philippines

Theme	Participant
Geographic & Cultural Proximity	1, 2, 3, 4
Positive Educational Environment	1, 2, 3, 4
Expectations for Improvement	1, 2, 3, 4
Cleanliness and Safety	1, 2, 3, 4
Economic Considerations	4

Theme 1. Geographic and Cultural Proximity. All the participants emphasized the geographical closeness of the Philippines to China as a critical factor in their decision-making process. This proximity not only makes travel more convenient but also suggests a cultural familiarity, which reduces the challenges of adapting to a new environment. According to Participant 1, "I chose the Philippines due to its friendly relations with China and a positive cultural atmosphere". In fact, participant 1 highlighted that it is very difficult to adjust when he first arrived in the Philippines. However, as time goes by, I try to adapt to the life here in your country. Participant 2 and 3 added that they chose Philippines because of its beautiful islands and closeness to their country. Moreover, participant 4 emphasized that he chose Philippines due its different reasons: The economic cost of learning is relatively low; The distance between the two countries is close and

convenient; The cultural differences are relatively small.

Theme 2. Positive Educational Environment. The participants consistently highlighted the positive learning atmosphere at the selected University in the Philippines. They appreciated the seriousness and responsibility of teachers, the enthusiasm of classmates, and the overall supportive environment conducive to learning. This theme indicates that a collaborative and engaged educational setting is highly valued by international students.

Theme 3. Expectations for Improvement. Participants expressed a desire for continuous improvement from the university, particularly regarding support services for international students, such as visa assistance. This expectation reflects their proactive attitude toward enhancing their educational experience and suggests a hope for institutional growth and adaptation. Participants 2 and 3 are hoping that the school can provide more assistance in obtaining visas for international students like them and hoping to improve their research level capabilities and educational background. However, Participant 1 and 4 are very lucky to express their gratitude in easiness in applying for international student visa.

Theme 4. Cleanliness and Safety. The importance of a clean and safe campus environment was a recurring point in the responses. Participants noted that the University is well-maintained and secure, which contributes to their overall sense of well-being while studying abroad. Participant 1 mentioned that the school has a good learning environment. While participant 2 and 3 share that though the school is a bit small, it is very clean and tidy. Participant 4 added that security guards are very good and welcoming, and the students are very active in learning.

Theme 5. Economic Considerations. Participant 4 specifically mentioned the low economic cost of education in the Philippines, which can be a significant factor for many international students. This consideration indicates that

affordability plays a crucial role in the decision to study abroad.

In analyzing the responses of the participants, it concludes that there are several interconnected themes regarding their motivations and experiences at the University. Geographic proximity, positive educational environments, expectations for institutional improvement, campus cleanliness and safety, and economic factors all contribute to their overall satisfaction and choice to study in the Philippines.

Chaiyasat (2023) examined the socio-cultural adaptation challenges faced by German exchange students in Thailand, identifying six key themes: language barriers, interpersonal communication issues, academic-related difficulties, community involvement, ecological adaptation, and extracurricular activities. Their findings suggest that educators and university administrators should develop targeted policies and support systems to enhance the experiences of international students, addressing their specific needs and expectations during their study abroad programs. In this study, one of the participants is hoping that the school can provide visa assistance for international assistance.

2. Differences observed by the foreign Chinese students while studying in the Philippines.

Table 3
Observed Differences Noticed by the Participants while Studying in the Philippines

Theme	Participant
Educational Approaches	1, 2, 3
Independence and Lifestyle Changes	1, 2, 3, 4
Social and Cultural Traditions	1, 2, 3, 4
Comparative Comfort Levels	1, 2, 3, 4

Theme 1. Educational Approaches. A significant theme among the participants is the contrast in educational philosophies between the Philippines and China. Participant 1, 2 and 3 specifically noted a shift from a rigid, exam-focused system in China to a more flexible, quality-centered approach in the Philippines.

According to Participant 1, "China's education attaches great importance to exam-oriented education, while education here (in the Philippines) focuses more on comprehensive quality education". Participant 2 and 3 added, "The University is relatively free in class and advocates self-directed learning. In China, classes are very strict and cannot be late or leave early". However, Participant 4 respond that in terms of teaching style between the two countries, there is no difference.

In terms of the Curriculum, Grading System, Professors and their teaching styles, all the participants agreed that learning in the University is good and beneficial to improve their quality in learning. As participant 2 and 3 said, "The research level of the professors is very high, and it is worth learning from here". Participant 4 added that, "The Curriculum is very reasonable. The grading system is good. The teacher's strategy is also good". This educational approach's theme highlights the value participants place on self-directed learning and the perceived benefits of a less stressful academic environment.

Theme 2. Independence and Lifestyle Changes. Another prominent theme is the change in lifestyle and the development of independence. Participant 1, 2, and 3 discussed how moving to the Philippines has required them to adapt to a more self-sufficient way of living, contrasting with the support and comfort they experienced at home. Participant 1 shares his response in describing his way in living in the country "In my country and living environment, it is easy for me to do things because there are many familiar people and environments that provide me with a lot of help. Daily life is much easier with the company and assistance of family, and life is also very comfortable. Nightlife is rich, and social interaction is also very extensive. However, here, most of my time is spent personally dealing with life and learning, which has improved my ability to live independently. Participant 2 and 3 highlighted their responses in this way "I like the life here and the teachers and classmates here. But China has my family and friends, and it's very happy there. Daily life is work, and holidays are when the whole family

travels and goes shopping together. I don't have nightlife; my life is very healthy. I feel very comfortable and relaxed coming here. Participant 4 however, noted minimal changes, indicating a more stable transition "My life in the Philippines is pretty much the same as my life back home, no change. In the Philippines it is study, in China it is work. This Independence and Lifestyle Changes theme reflects the varying degrees of adaptation among participants based on their previous life experiences.

Theme 3. Social and Cultural Traditions. All participants acknowledged the importance of cultural traditions in different ways. Participant 1, 2 and 3 highlighted the joy and communal aspects of festivals in both cultures. According to Participant 1 "In China, there are also many festivals, both traditional and international. In the Philippines, there are also many such festivals. I think having such festivals is great, as people's happiness index is higher and happier. While Participant 4 expressed a more pragmatic view of traditions in this way "I respect tradition, but I don't pay much attention to tradition, live well, work well, I think that's the best. This theme emphasizes the participants' recognition of cultural celebrations as integral to social life, enhancing their overall experience in the Philippines.

Theme 4. Comparative Comfort Levels. The students' responses also suggest differing levels of comfort and satisfaction with their new environment. Participants 1, 2 and 3 expressed positive feelings about their experiences in the Philippines, appreciating the relaxed atmosphere and supportive educational environment. In contrast, participant 4 responses suggest a lack of significant change, indicating a more neutral stance toward his experience. It can be concluded that it illustrates how individual backgrounds and expectations shape participants' perceptions of their new surroundings. These different themes highlight the complexities of transitioning to a new country for education. These themes can help educational institutions better support international students as they have their academic and cultural journeys.

In the study of Nurhayati et al. (2024), the researchers explored the social experiences of seventh-semester students from the English language education program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari who had completed the International Credit Transfer (ICT) program at Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology in the Philippines. Using a phenomenological research design, findings revealed that the ICT program significantly expanded the students' perspectives, improved their communication abilities, and enhanced their capacity to accept and adapt to diverse social surroundings. Likewise, in this study, the researcher explores the cultural adaptation and experiences of graduate school Chinese students in Philippine school, and it was found out that there is a difference between the educational approaches in China and the Philippines.

In terms of differences in experiences, Baffour (2024) examined the cross-cultural adaptation challenges faced by African international students in the Southern United States, emphasizing the critical link between their mental and social well-being and overall college success. The findings indicate that interactions between African international students and domestic students are often suboptimal, highlighting significant barriers in relationship formation and communication that impede the adaptation process.

3. Adjustments encountered by the foreign Chinese students while studying in the Philippines.

Table 4
Adjustments Encountered by the Participants while Studying in the Philippines

Theme	Participant
Cultural Adaptability	1, 2, 3, 4
Physical Adjustments and Challenges	1, 2, 3, 4
Positive Social Interactions	1, 2, 3, 4
Mental Resilience and Coping Strategies	1, 2, 3, 4

Theme 1. Cultural Adaptability. A prominent theme across all participants is cultural adaptability. Participant 1 demonstrated a

proactive approach to adjusting to local customs. When asked about how to be able to culturally adjust on food, traditions, beliefs, lifestyles, religion, fashion and language, his response was "I can adapt to local customs when in Rome, and I quickly adapted to everything here" while participant 2 and 3 showed some resistance regarding food preferences but maintained positive social interactions. They added "I am still used to Chinese food. We like to eat vegetables and fruits. I don't like to eat sweets and fried chicken" Participant 4 highlighted his respect for diverse food cultures, indicating an openness to new experiences. This theme reflects the varying degrees of cultural integration and the importance of a flexible mindset in adapting to a new environment.

Theme 2. Physical Adjustments and Challenges. All participants expressed different experiences related to physical adjustments. Participant 1 adapted quickly to the climate, while participant 2 enjoyed the weather but faced challenges with transportation as they said during the interview "I really like the climate in the Philippines, but I'm not used to the transportation here". Participant 4's love for sports suggests a proactive approach to physical well-being. He emphasizes to "Love sports, love life, you will adapt to everything". This theme shows how participants navigate environmental changes and the role of physical activity in facilitating adjustment.

Theme 3. Positive Social Interactions. All the participants reported positive relationships with their Filipino classmates and professors. Participant 1 highlighted the support he received from his Filipino classmates and professors, as he said, "My Filipino classmates are very friendly, and my professors are also very charitable. They know that I am a foreigner, and they take care of me a lot. While participant 2, 3, and 4 emphasized their sense of belonging and acceptance. As they share "My relationships with classmates and teachers are very good" "I and my teachers, classmates, we are very good, we get along very well, very happy". This theme underscores the importance of social support networks in easing the transition for

international students and fostering a welcoming educational environment.

Theme 4. Mental Resilience and Coping Strategies. When participants asked about how they could be able to mentally manage the pressure brought by school works and activities, the participants exhibited varying strategies. Participant 1 viewed challenges as enriching experiences like “I can accept the fact that I am here to learn, so I am happy to receive the education here. I will also strive to learn more from my roots. In many hardships and difficulties, it is a wonderful experience”. While participant 2 and 3 expressed confidence in handling their workload like “I have a lot of academic work, but I can. I can also complete it” “I can manage my work and listing all the priority submissions”. Participant 4 advocated for reading and exercise as means to build resilience against stress “Read more books to improve your abilities and cognition. Do more exercise and build up your physique. This will resist all kinds of stress in life and work”. Participants’ responses reveal several interconnected themes regarding their adjustments while studying in the Philippines and analyzing these themes can help educational institutions better support international students as they navigate the complexities of adjusting to a new educational and cultural environment.

According to the study of Ellis et al. (2024) on cultural adaptation and transitions within international higher education, university students’ experiences of studying abroad during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, the researchers identified four key response categories that revealed personal strategies, acculturation challenges, and resilience exhibited by the students as they navigate the disruption and transition to virtual platforms, shedding light on important considerations for international professionals supporting study abroad programs in the future.

Li et al. (2024) explored the perspectives of 11 Mandarin-speaking participants on gratitude and their experiences in a culturally adapted Mandarin gratitude group (MGG) intervention at

a U.S. university. The findings revealed eight key themes, including the central role of family, communication styles, and barriers to verbalizing gratitude, as well as the participants’ experiences of gratitude as a behavioral contagion and holistic growth, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive gratitude-based interventions for Chinese cultural communities.

4. Coping mechanisms of the foreign Chinese students while studying on the Philippines.

Table 5
Coping Mechanisms Used by the Participants while Studying in the Philippines

Theme	Participant
Immersion and Acceptance	1, 2, 3
Social Connections	1, 2, 3, 4
Gradual Adaptation	1, 2, 3, 4
Positive Outlook	1, 2, 3, 4

Theme 1. Immersion and Acceptance. An important theme in the participants’ responses is the importance of immersion and acceptance in coping with their new environment. Participant 1 exemplifies this by actively engaging with his surroundings and appreciating the local culture. His belief that “every experience is the best experience” reflects a positive mindset that aids in adaptation. “For the new environment, I strive to immerse myself in it, get used to and adapt. As for the weather, I like the climate here. I think as long as I accept this fact in my heart, I will adjust my body well. My classmates in the Philippines are very friendly. We study together, buy clothes together, and exercise together. We are very happy together” he added. Participant 2 and 3’s gradual acceptance of the climate and scenery further emphasizes this theme, indicating that finding joy in one’s environment can significantly enhance the adjustment process as she narrates “At first, I was very uncomfortable, but over time, I like the climate and scenery here, and gradually adapted to the pace of life here”.

Theme 2. Social Connections. The role of social connections emerges as an important coping

mechanism. Participant 1 highlighted the friendly nature of his classmates and the joy of participating in activities together, fostering a supportive social network. Participant 2 and 3's acknowledgment of their initial discomfort suggests that building relationships over time helped them feel more at ease. Participant 4 mention the historical similarities between the two cultures suggests that existing cultural ties can facilitate social integration. This theme underscores the importance of friendships and social interactions in easing the transition for international students.

Theme 3. Gradual Adaptation. The process of gradual adaptation is evident in participant 2 and 3 responses, where they describe their initial discomfort evolving into appreciation for their new environment. This theme reflects the idea that adjustment is not instantaneous but rather a journey that involves overcoming challenges and embracing new experiences over time. Participant 1 and 4 insights also indicate that adaptation may involve recognizing shared cultural elements, which can ease the transition. As participant 4 said, "China and the Philippines are neighbors. Our two countries have had friendly exchanges for more than two thousand years. There are many similarities in the life and diet of our two peoples".

Theme 4. Positive Outlook. A positive outlook is a recurring element in the participants' coping strategies. Participant 1's emphasis on viewing every experience as valuable and participant 2 and 3's eventual enjoyment of their surroundings illustrate how a positive mindset can facilitate adaptation. Participant 4's recognition of similarities between the two cultures further reinforces this theme, suggesting that a constructive perspective helps students navigate challenges more effectively.

In terms of coping mechanisms, Almkudat and Karadag (2024) investigated the interaction effects of self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and sociocultural adjustment on culture shock among 323 international students in Turkey. Their findings indicate that self-efficacy has a significant negative relationship with culture

shock, where students with higher self-efficacy experienced lower culture shock and interpersonal stress. Additionally, life satisfaction and sociocultural adjustment were found to mediate the relationship between self-efficacy and culture shock, suggesting that self-efficacy may be particularly beneficial for coping with culture shock for individuals who do not share the dominant religious beliefs in the local culture.

Andrews and Aydin (2024) investigated the educational experiences of Turkish refugee college students in Turkey and the U.S. following the 2016 coup attempt, revealing their challenges related to adapting to a new culture, language, and educational systems. Despite these difficulties, the participants demonstrated resilience and achieved personal and academic success, highlighting the importance for educational stakeholders to understand the unique needs of refugee students and to provide the necessary resources for a supportive educational environment.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study employed a narrative format to explore the cultural adaptation experiences of Chinese graduate students studying in the Philippines. Through thematic analysis of interviews from four (4) selected participants in one selected university, interconnected themes emerged that shed light on their motivations for studying in the Philippines and the adjustments they encountered during their academic journey.

The study revealed that participants' reasons for selecting the Philippines revolved around geographic and cultural proximity, the positive educational environment, expectations for institutional improvement, campus cleanliness and safety, and economic considerations. Geographic proximity was emphasized as a critical factor, not only for convenience in travel but also for fostering a sense of cultural familiarity. This aligns with existing literature, such as the findings of Chaayasat (2023) suggesting that the geographical closeness of host countries can ease the adaptation process

for international students. Participants consistently highlighted the supportive and engaging learning atmosphere at the University. The appreciation for the seriousness and responsibility of educators, alongside the enthusiasm of classmates, reinforces literature that emphasizes the importance of a collaborative educational setting for international students. This theme suggests that an encouraging academic environment significantly contributes to students' overall satisfaction, supporting the findings of Nurhayati et al. (2024), which highlight the role of positive social interactions in enhancing students' educational experiences. The participants' expressed desire for improvements in support services, particularly regarding visa assistance, reflects a proactive attitude towards enhancing their educational experience. This expectation resonates with Baffour's (2024) findings on the importance of addressing the specific needs of international students. The mixed experiences regarding visa applications among the participants illustrate varying levels of institutional support, suggesting that universities need to enhance their services to better accommodate international students. The emphasis on a clean and safe campus environment further underscores the importance of institutional maintenance in fostering a sense of well-being among international students. The participants' positive reflections on campus safety and cleanliness align with literature indicating that a secure environment is crucial for students' comfort and adaptation. Economic factors also played a significant role in participants' decisions to study in the Philippines, with one participant noting the relatively low costs of education.

The study identified several themes regarding the adjustments participants faced, including cultural adaptability, physical challenges, and the importance of positive social interactions. The participants' varying degrees of cultural adaptability reflect the complexities of integrating into a new cultural context, as evidenced by their experiences with local customs, food preferences, and lifestyle changes. This aligns with the research of

Almukdad and Karadag (2024), which underscores the role of self-efficacy and life satisfaction in managing cultural shock. Participants reported various coping mechanisms, such as immersion and acceptance, building social connections, gradual adaptation, and maintaining a positive outlook. These strategies emphasize the importance of resilience and proactive engagement in navigating the challenges of studying abroad.

Since some of the participants are having difficulties in processing their visa, the educational institution should consider developing targeted support services for international students, particularly in areas such as visa assistance, cultural orientation, and academic counseling. The institution should provide and maintain the culture of implementation programs that promote interaction between local and international students that can elevate cultural understanding and friendships, making it easier for foreign students to adjust. Activities such as cultural festivals, language exchange sessions, and collaborative projects can facilitate these connections. Institutions should prioritize mental health resources to help students manage the pressures of academic life. Offering workshops on stress management, coping strategies, and resilience can equip students with tools to navigate challenges effectively. Prior to arriving in the Philippines, foreign students should thoroughly research about the educational institutions they are enrolled, its cultural norms, and lifestyle differences in order to understand the local culture and can ease the adaptation process. Establishing regular feedback mechanisms where international students can voice their experiences and concerns will enable universities to adapt and improve their services continually. This can help institutions stay attuned to the needs and expectations of their international student body. If possible, the institution should hire foreign assistant or employee that will assist foreign students for a better communication. Future studies could explore the long-term adaptation experiences of international students beyond their initial

arrival. This can provide deeper insights into how these students integrate into the academic and social fabric of the university over time. Conducting comparative studies between different universities in the Philippines or other countries can shed light on varying adaptation experiences and support strategies, helping to identify best practices across institutions.

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