

Living in a Parallel Society Characterized by Cultural Similarity: The Adaptation of Chinese Students in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

This study investigates the adaptation challenges of mainland Chinese students in Penang, focusing on socio-cultural adaptation, academic challenges, and daily life adjustment. While cultural similarity reduces culture shock and facilitates integration into the local Chinese community, it may also hinder deeper engagement with Malaysia's multicultural society. Interview findings from 16 Chinese postgraduate students indicate that reliance on the Chinese community limits intercultural interactions, weakens language development, and narrows social networks. Academically, English proficiency gaps, differences in teaching methods, and assessment standards create challenges, requiring additional effort for adaptation. In daily life, students experience dietary differences, climate discomfort, and difficulties navigating the healthcare system, despite the familiarity provided by the Chinese community. Although cultural similarity offers convenience, over-reliance on it may restrict long-term adaptation. The study highlights the need for students to actively expand social networks, enhance intercultural communication, and engage more deeply with Malaysia's diverse environment.

Keywords: Cultural Similarity, Adaptation, Chinese Students, Penang, Malaysia

Introduction

In recent years, Malaysia has emerged as a key higher education hub in Asia, attracting a significant number of Chinese students. According to Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS), the total number of Chinese students in Malaysia reached 76,528 between 2020 and 2023, reflecting a remarkable increase of 198.64 per cent in 2023 compared to 2020 (EMGS, 2024). Among the various study destinations, Penang stands out as a popular choice due to its strong Chinese cultural heritage. Therefore, this study focuses on the experiences of Chinese students living and studying in Penang, aiming to explore their adaptation process and the challenges they encounter within this distinctive socio-cultural environment.

Penang is unique in that it has the highest proportion of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, accounting for 43.9 per cent of the total population in 2023 (DOSM, 2024). This distinctive social structure makes Penang something of a 'parallel world' to mainland China's culture. From language and cuisine to festivals and business practices, the Chinese community in Penang exhibits a high degree of superficial cultural resemblance to mainland China, offering Chinese students a familiar cultural environment. This cultural similarity mitigates the initial culture shock typically experienced when moving abroad and provides a social support network that facilitates a smoother adjustment process.

However, this apparent cultural familiarity does not necessarily translate into an entirely seamless adaptation experience. In fact, cultural similarity can, in certain ways, serve as a barrier to deeper acculturation, rendering the adaptation of Chinese students in Penang distinct from that of their counterparts in Europe or the United States. On the one hand, the presence of a well-established Chinese community minimises language barriers and cultural divides for international students. On the other hand, this convenience may inadvertently limit their interaction with local Malays and Indians, thereby restricting their intercultural communicative competence and hindering their full integration into Malaysia's multicultural society. These underlying challenges can affect various aspects of their social adaptation, influencing their daily interactions, academic collaborations, and even future career prospects. As such, it is academically significant to investigate how cultural similarities in Penang impact the adaptation process of Chinese international students and whether these similarities may, paradoxically, act as obstacles to their adjustment.

Existing research has extensively examined the adaptation experiences of Chinese students in Europe and the United States, with a focus on language barriers, culture shock, academic challenges, and social integration (Brisset et al., 2010; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, relatively little scholarly attention has been given to the adaptation experiences of Chinese students within the 'parallel society' context of Malaysia, particularly in Penang. While the Chinese community in Malaysia shares cultural affinities with mainland China, it nonetheless exists within a fundamentally multiracial and multilingual society. Consequently, the adaptation process of Chinese students in this unique socio-cultural setting is shaped by both the advantages of cultural familiarity and the challenges that distinguish their experience from those of Chinese students in Western contexts. Therefore, this study focuses on a cohort of mainland Chinese students in Penang, examining their adaptation experiences in this 'parallel world', analysing the dual impact of cultural similarity on their adjustment process, and further exploring whether such similarity might serve as an impediment to deeper integration. This research not only contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the cross-cultural adaptation of international students but also offers practical insights for Malaysian universities to enhance their international education management and optimise support systems for Chinese students.

Literature Review

The adaptation of international students is a multidimensional and dynamic process, encompassing social and cultural interactions, academic adjustments, and the reconstruction of daily life. Existing studies indicate that these students typically encounter three core challenges during their time abroad: the dilemma of social integration arising from cultural

value conflicts, fluctuations in learning efficacy due to differences in academic environments, and practical obstacles associated with changes in daily life circumstances.

International students often face multiple pressures, including culture shock, stereotyping, and the restructuring of social networks. Wenhua and Zhe (2013) observed that cultural differences create adaptation barriers at deeper levels, particularly in values, behavioural norms, and cognitive frameworks. This culture shock initially manifests as misjudgements and anxiety in intercultural communication (Poedjiastutie, 2009). The challenge is further compounded by language proficiency limitations: Spencer-Rogers and McGovern (2002) identified a significant positive correlation between non-native English-speaking students' social engagement and their language skills. Social network studies suggest that international students typically follow the triple relationship model proposed by Bochner et al. (1977), in which same-country friendships provide emotional support, host-country friendships facilitate cultural integration, and multinational friendships expand global perspectives. Hendrickson et al. (2011) found that international students often develop strong ties within their own cultural groups, employing what Berry (1997, p. 9) describes as a 'separation strategy'—a coping mechanism that alleviates initial loneliness but may delay the development of intercultural competence (Hayes & Lin, 1994). This pattern of adaptation contrasts with that of students in Euro-American settings, who are typically compelled to expand their intercultural networks. This suggests that cultural similarity may create an adaptive comfort trap (Selmer, 2007).

Language barriers and academic challenges are central to international students' academic adjustment. Lin and Yi (1997) confirmed that Chinese international students' English proficiency directly influences their classroom participation and the quality of teacher-student interactions. Differences in academic writing conventions—such as citation formats and argumentation structures—further intensify cognitive load, requiring students to allocate additional time to coursework completion (Zhou, 2023). Bilecen et al. (2024) found that academic stress not only affects performance but also interacts with homesickness, forming a compound adjustment crisis. Notably, differences in educational systems significantly shape the adaptation process (Zhou, 2023). For instance, the Commonwealth education system emphasises self-directed learning and critical thinking (Grapragasem et al., 2014), whereas the Asian educational tradition is more teacher-centred and knowledge-transfer-oriented (Othman et al., 2011). This structural divergence may heighten academic adjustment difficulties. However, empirical studies on non-English-speaking education systems—such as Malaysia's—remain insufficient, as much of the existing literature focuses on European and American contexts.

Beyond academic concerns, international students must navigate practical challenges related to diet, climate, and healthcare. Edwards et al. (2010) theorised that 'food neophobia'—a reluctance to try unfamiliar foods—leads some students to struggle with dietary adaptation, a phenomenon that may be exacerbated in culturally similar contexts due to implicit differences. Climate adaptation is another common issue: Holubnychy et al. (2022) suggested that extreme weather conditions can affect students' health and learning efficiency, yet research on adaptation in tropical regions remains limited. Differences in healthcare systems also pose potential risks. Kusumawardani and Suharyanto (2024) found that international students' unfamiliarity with host-country healthcare policies and insurance

frameworks may lead to delays in seeking medical treatment. Financial stress is another concern. Although Malaysia's relatively low cost of living alleviates some financial burdens, cross-border payment restrictions and differing consumption habits still create financial management pressures (Zhao et al., 2023). These micro-level challenges are often overshadowed by macro-level discussions of cultural adaptation, yet they play a crucial role in shaping students' overall quality of life (Wenhua & Zhe, 2013).

The impact of cultural similarity on cross-cultural adaptation has long been a subject of theoretical debate. While existing research generally agrees that cultural and linguistic similarities reduce initial adaptation costs (Dongqi et al., 2020), scholars have recently begun to recognise that such superficial familiarity may introduce new adaptation challenges due to hidden differences and social inertia. At a supportive level, cultural similarity mitigates culture shock through shared symbolic systems. Studies have shown that linguistic interoperability significantly shortens international students' adaptation periods (Kim, 2001). For example, the widespread use of Chinese within the Malaysian Chinese community may facilitate communication for Chinese students. Furthermore, value alignment enhances students' understanding of local social norms. Hendrickson et al. (2011) observed that international students tend to prioritise culturally similar groups in their social networks—a tendency particularly pronounced in collectivist cultures. In contrast to the social isolation commonly faced by international students in Western countries (Maundeni, 2001), those in culturally similar environments may benefit from emotional and practical support through diaspora communities, such as the territorial service networks established by the Chinese community (Zhou, 2023).

However, cultural similarities can also create cognitive traps. Berry's (1997) acculturation theory suggests that individuals who are overly reliant on their home culture may adopt separation strategies to avoid cross-cultural engagement. This tendency is particularly insidious in culturally similar settings. Hayes and Lin (1994) found that international students often remain within their cultural comfort zones due to linguistic convenience, thereby limiting meaningful intercultural interactions. More critically, superficial similarities in cultural symbols can obscure deeper structural differences. For instance, although Malaysian Chinese communities retain traditional Chinese festivals, their cultural practices have been influenced by Islamic values of tolerance. This long-term evolution may lead to cultural misjudgements—when international students equate superficial similarities with cultural homogeneity, subtle differences may disrupt their adaptation strategies (Selmer, 2007). Differences in education systems further compound this challenge. The implicit conflict between the Commonwealth academic tradition and the Chinese education model—such as expectations regarding classroom participation and citation norms—may create gaps in academic adaptation.

Current research remains disproportionately focused on English-speaking contexts, overlooking the complexities of multicultural societies in Southeast Asia. For example, the Malaysian education system integrates elements of both the Commonwealth and Asian traditions (Othman et al., 2011), yet the nuanced effects of this hybrid structure on student adaptation have not been thoroughly examined. Moreover, the dual impact of cultural similarity has not been sufficiently explored. While shared language and customs may lower initial adaptation costs (Dongqi et al., 2020), the superficial resemblance of cultural symbols

often conceals deeper divergences in institutional norms and value systems, leading to cognitive mismatches that can result in long-term adaptation stagnation. Existing theories are predominantly based on conventional cross-cultural contexts—such as East-West differences—leaving the dynamic adaptation mechanisms within multicultural environments, such as Penang, underexplored.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, with in-depth interviews serving as the primary data collection method. As a key qualitative research tool, in-depth interviews enable the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the acculturation process and the psychological experiences of international students by capturing a comprehensive account of their real-life experiences through multiple rounds of communication (Minichiello et al., 1990). Given that this study aims to examine the impact of cultural similarity on the acculturation process and assess whether it may act as a barrier, semi-structured interviews are adopted to ensure both the richness and flexibility of the data. During the interviews, the researcher will pose follow-up questions based on participants' responses, allowing for the exploration of individualised experiences and emotions while maintaining consistency in addressing the core research themes (Adams, 2015).

This study utilises purposive sampling to select participants, recruiting a total of 16 international students from mainland China. All participants are master's or doctoral students who have been residing in Penang for at least six months, with an age range of 22 to 30 years. These criteria ensure that participants have had sufficient exposure to the study-abroad experience and have navigated different stages of cultural adaptation. The researcher adhered strictly to the following selection criteria: first, participants must hold the nationality of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and currently reside in Penang to ensure the cultural relevance of their background to the research topic. Second, participants must have lived in Penang for a minimum of six months to ensure a substantial degree of immersion in the local environment, while short-term exchange students or those who had resided in the region for less than six months were excluded. Additionally, the study exclusively focuses on students from mainland China, deliberately excluding students from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan to avoid potential discrepancies in findings arising from differences in cultural and educational backgrounds (Lai, Wang, & Ou, 2023). Finally, participants must fall within the 22–30 age range, which aligns with the typical demographic of postgraduate students, ensuring that respondents have had a certain level of adaptation experience and the capacity for self-reflection and emotional articulation.

Data collection in this study is structured around three core themes to investigate the adaptation experiences of mainland Chinese students in Penang and the role of cultural similarity. First, the study explores the key adaptation challenges encountered by Chinese students in Penang's 'parallel world' social environment, covering academic, socio-cultural, and economic aspects. Second, it examines how cultural similarity influences the adaptation process, including the role of the local Chinese community in facilitating adaptation and the potential dependency issues that may arise. Third, the study investigates whether cultural similarity could act as a barrier to adaptation by assessing whether it reduces Chinese students' interactions with other ethnic groups, thereby impacting their intercultural

communicative competence. All interviews will be audio-recorded with the participants' consent, with each session expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes.

For data analysis, this study employs thematic analysis to systematically identify and synthesise acculturation patterns among mainland Chinese students in Penang, as well as the challenges they face. Thematic analysis is a widely recognised method in qualitative research that allows for the extraction of key themes from interview data, facilitating an in-depth examination of respondents' experiences and perceptions of acculturation (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). NVivo software will be used for coding, enabling the researcher to extract core concepts influencing the acculturation process. Thematic coding will then be refined, with similar codes grouped to develop initial research themes.

To safeguard participants' privacy, all interview data will be anonymised, ensuring that no identifiable information is included in the study. Furthermore, all audio recordings and textual data will be encrypted and securely stored, with access restricted to authorised research team members. At the conclusion of the study, all data will be permanently deleted to maintain confidentiality and data security.

Adaptation Challenges in Penang, Malaysia

Adaptation challenges have always been at the centre of international students' cross-border study, but the complexity of intertwining cultural similarities and differences in the unique parallel society of Penang has resulted in a paradoxical picture of surface facilitation and deep tension in the adaptation process of mainland Chinese students. Existing studies have focused on adaptation in environments with significant cultural differences (Kim, 2001; Wenhua & Zhe, 2013), but have failed to adequately explain how environments with similarities can simultaneously mitigate and exacerbate adaptation challenges.

Social and Cultural Adaptation

The cultural similarity of the Chinese community in Penang alleviates the initial culture shock experienced by Chinese students upon their arrival in a foreign country, enabling them to establish social networks more quickly and gain emotional support. Interview data revealed that most informants identified with the Chinese culture in Penang and believed that this familiar environment facilitated their adaptation process. For instance, Dang noted,

Penang's Chinese culture is very similar to Chaoshan culture; the festival celebrations and daily customs feel familiar and make me feel at home.

This finding aligns with the studies of Poedjiastutie (2009) and Dongqi et al. (2020), which suggest that cultural similarity effectively mitigates culture shock for international students. However, such similarity does not equate to complete cultural integration, as international students continue to face challenges related to religious beliefs, socialisation patterns, and intercultural communication.

Firstly, Malaysia is a multicultural society where religious beliefs play a significant role in social life, yet many Chinese students lack in-depth knowledge of Islamic culture. Fan and Huan mentioned that when they first arrived in Penang, the sound of Muslim prayer calls made them feel somewhat uncomfortable. Meanwhile, Chen and Wen highlighted the importance of observing dietary restrictions when interacting with Malay and Indian friends.

Tian also noted the need to modify his behaviour, such as avoiding the consumption of pork or alcohol in the presence of Muslim peers. Additionally, he mentioned adapting to specific dress codes on certain occasions. Huan's experience further corroborates Oduwaye et al.'s (2023) argument that culture shock does not always manifest as overt conflict but may instead emerge as a process of environmental adaptation and behavioural adjustment.

Secondly, while the strong presence of Chinese culture in Penang provides social advantages for Chinese students, this familiar environment may also restrict their cross-cultural interactions by confining their social circles primarily to fellow Chinese students and the local Chinese community. Consequently, their engagement with Malay, Indian, and other international students remains relatively limited. This phenomenon is consistent with Hendrickson et al.'s (2011) study, which found that international students tend to socialise with compatriots to maintain a sense of cultural identity and emotional security. For example, Qin stated,

I don't take much initiative in socialising, and I find myself withdrawing even more when interacting with non-native speakers.

Similarly, Fu remarked,

I am Chaoshan, and I speak Chaoshan, so I don't have much difficulty communicating here.

These accounts suggest that Chinese students' social adjustment in Penang is heavily reliant on cultural similarity, leading to a lower propensity for engaging with the broader multicultural environment.

However, in the long run, a lack of cross-cultural interactions may hinder international students' social adaptability and career prospects. Maundeni (2001) and Kim (2001) argue that while social networks composed of compatriots provide psychological support in the short term, prolonged reliance on such networks may reinforce cultural isolation and prevent students from developing a diverse social network. Kim's (2001) further asserts that only through active intercultural communication can international students achieve true integration into the host society. Therefore, while Penang's cultural similarity lowers the initial adaptation costs for Chinese students, it may also contribute to a deficiency in intercultural communicative competence, thereby constraining their overall adaptation process.

Academic Challenges

Rather than offering academic adaptation advantages, the cultural parallelism of Penang has, in some respects, exacerbated challenges due to institutional differences and competency mismatches. The primary obstacle lies in the structural deficit in English-language academic competence. Despite the widespread use of Mandarin in Malaysia, tertiary education adheres strictly to the Commonwealth system, which demands full English proficiency in all aspects of academic engagement, from classroom discussions to essay writing (Othman, Mohamad & Ilmuwan, 2011). Dang's frustration is representative of this struggle,

The language issue has a greater impact on academics, particularly the need to adjust to English modes of thinking when listening to lectures and completing assignments, which was a significant challenge when I first arrived.

This aligns with Zhou's (2023) findings that deficiencies in language proficiency force international students to allocate additional time to academic tasks while simultaneously reducing classroom participation, ultimately impacting overall academic performance. This issue is particularly pronounced in academic reading and writing, as illustrated by Wen's experience,

I had a limited foundation in English, with an IELTS score of 5.5, and struggled with reading academic literature when I first arrived. Teachers required us to read a substantial number of articles—such as a reading review assignment covering 70 papers in a single semester—which was an immense challenge for me.

A deeper challenge stems from the fundamental differences between educational systems. Malaysian higher education institutions have inherited the British tradition of independent enquiry, which places a strong emphasis on critical thinking and self-directed research (Othman, Mohamad & Ilmuwan, 2011). By contrast, Chinese students are typically accustomed to a teacher-centred model of knowledge transmission. Qin highlighted this disparity,

The Malaysian education system places greater emphasis on self-directed learning, which demands a high level of self-discipline.

Grapragasem, Krishnan, and Mansor (2014) further argue that Malaysian higher education blends elements of the British system, requiring students to develop strong time management and self-regulation skills. For Chinese students, who are more familiar with a teacher-directed approach, this often necessitates a prolonged adjustment period.

Additionally, the rigorous assessment criteria of Malaysian higher education further compound adaptation difficulties. Fan observed,

The competitiveness of Asian education is reflected in the high standards of evaluation—for instance, only an A is considered excellent.

Bilecen et al. (2024) also note that academic stress is not merely an intellectual burden but a significant emotional strain, often intensifying feelings of loneliness and homesickness, thereby adding further challenges to the adaptation process.

Life Adjustment

Adapting to daily life involves a delicate balance between convenience and alienation. While dietary adjustment was initially relatively smooth due to the availability of Chinese cuisine, the localisation of Chinese food by the local Chinese community—such as Penang's Hokkien Mee incorporating Malay flavours—posed a subtle challenge. As Huan remarked,

Diet is the biggest challenge. The food culture in Malaysia is very different from home, and as someone from a country with a rich culinary tradition, I find it difficult to adjust

to the flavours here. Last year, I cooked for myself almost every day and ate mostly Chinese food.

This phenomenon is explained by Edwards, Hartwell, and Brown's (2010) concept of food neophobia, which suggests that international students tend to be less receptive to unfamiliar cuisines, leading them to rely on familiar eating habits, such as home cooking or dining at Chinese restaurants. This pattern aligns with the gradual dietary adaptation process described by Shi, Lukomskyj, and Allman-Farinelli (2020). However, despite the presence of a strong Chinese food culture in Penang, differences in dietary structures between Malaysia and China mean that some students experience a slower adaptation process. While the availability of Chinese cuisine eases dietary adjustment for some, differences in flavour profiles and ingredient use remain significant factors influencing the overall daily life experience of Chinese students.

Climate is another crucial factor affecting adaptation. Penang's consistently hot and humid weather contrasts sharply with China's distinct four-season climate, causing discomfort for some students, particularly in the early stages of their stay. As Qin noted,

The hot and humid weather in Penang was one of the hardest things for me to adapt to.

Research indicates that climate adaptation difficulties can affect both students' physical health and learning efficiency (Holubnycha et al., 2022).

In addition, unfamiliarity with the healthcare system poses another significant challenge for Chinese students adjusting to life in Penang. Interview data revealed that some informants experienced anxiety when falling ill, primarily due to a lack of knowledge about local medical resources and healthcare procedures. Mo expressed this concern,

The medical system is the most uncomfortable aspect for me. I was treated at the on-campus infirmary, but I felt there was a gap between the services here and those back home. Although my issue was eventually resolved, I might still feel overwhelmed if I encounter a similar situation again.

Kusumawardani and Suharyanto (2024) highlight that international students typically go through an adjustment period when encountering an unfamiliar healthcare system, particularly regarding the allocation of medical resources, prescription habits, and health insurance policies, which often differ significantly from those in their home countries. Therefore, even though the cultural environment in Penang is generally more accommodating for Chinese students, they still face notable challenges in adapting to various aspects of daily life.

Despite these adaptation difficulties, financial pressure is not a major concern for Chinese students in Penang. Compared to the high tuition fees and living costs in Europe and the United States, studying in Malaysia is relatively affordable, reducing the financial burden for most students. As Chen stated,

There isn't much financial pressure. Although the exchange rate makes things slightly more expensive than back home, my overall expenses are manageable.

Fei et al. (2023) also identified Malaysia as one of the most cost-effective study destinations for Chinese students due to its low tuition fees and high-quality education. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2023) found that Malaysia's relatively low cost of tuition and living significantly alleviates financial stress, allowing international students to complete their studies in a more financially stable environment.

Cultural Similarity: Facilitation and Dependency

As the state with the highest percentage of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, Penang's socio-cultural environment exhibits a high degree of similarity to that of mainland China (DOSM, 2024). Compared to study-abroad experiences in Europe and the United States, this cultural similarity provides Chinese students with a unique mode of adaptation, allowing them to integrate into local society more quickly and reducing the discomfort associated with culture shock. However, the impact of cultural similarity extends beyond ease of adaptation—it also shapes Chinese students' socialisation patterns, emotional support systems, and perceptions of cultural differences in Penang, making their adaptation experience distinct. Interview data indicate that cultural similarity in Penang facilitates the adaptation process of Chinese students primarily in four key areas: language, food, traditions and customs, and social networks. At the same time, it subtly influences their cultural identity and social choices.

The Chinese community in Penang is not only large in number but also actively preserves many traditional aspects of Chinese culture, including language, customs, and social norms. This environment allows Chinese students to communicate with minimal or no language barriers. Most informants agreed that the widespread use of Mandarin, Cantonese, and Minnan dialects within the local Chinese community enabled them to integrate quickly without undergoing the language adaptation period that is typically necessary in Western study environments. For example, informant Fu remarked,

When you go shopping, dine at restaurants, or even handle administrative matters at university, you can communicate in Chinese, Chaoshan, or Cantonese—it's not much different from home.

This finding aligns with Poedjiastutie (2009) and Dongqi et al. (2020), who argue that cultural and linguistic similarities significantly reduce culture shock, allowing international students to adjust more quickly. In contrast, in countries where English or other foreign languages predominate, international students often undergo a prolonged language adaptation period, which can negatively impact both their academic performance and social integration, exacerbating feelings of isolation (Kim, 2001). The language environment in Penang alleviates such pressures, offering Chinese students a clear advantage in their adaptation process.

Another key factor facilitating adaptation is the similarity in food culture. Chinese cuisine in Penang closely resembles that of certain regions in China, particularly the Chaoshan, Fujian, and Guangdong styles, which means that many informants reported minimal dietary adjustments. In contrast, international students in Europe and the United States frequently cite food-related difficulties as one of the most significant cultural challenges (Shi, Lukomskyj

& Allman-Farinelli, 2020). In Penang, Chinese students can easily find familiar dishes and maintain their usual eating habits within the Chinese community. Fu further noted,

Eating here is similar to eating at home—tea restaurants and food stalls offer familiar flavours, unlike in Europe and the United States, where a lot of the food is unfamiliar.

This sense of familiarity not only reduces dietary discomfort but also fosters stronger social connections with the local Chinese community, reinforcing students' emotional and social support systems.

Beyond language and food, cultural similarity also plays a vital role in providing emotional support and shaping social interactions. Hendrickson et al. (2011) suggest that international students prefer to form social connections with individuals from similar cultural backgrounds to gain a sense of security and identity. The Chinese community in Penang not only shares strong cultural ties with mainland China but also upholds collective social norms that enable Chinese students to establish a sense of belonging relatively quickly (Zhou, 2023). Interview data reveal that most informants successfully integrated into the local Chinese community upon arrival and received substantial assistance in both academic and daily life matters. For instance, Jijia recalled,

When I first arrived in Penang, I was unfamiliar with many places, but other Chinese students and local Chinese friends helped me find an apartment and showed me around.

This kind of immediate emotional support is relatively rare in study-abroad environments in Europe and the United States, where individualism is more pronounced, and international students often require more time to build stable social networks (Maundeni, 2001). The strong Chinese community in Penang thus provides a crucial support system that fosters a sense of security and eases the overall adaptation process.

However, this cultural similarity also influences the socialisation patterns of Chinese students, making them more inclined to remain within familiar cultural circles. Interview data suggest that most informants preferred to socialise with local Chinese or other Chinese students, with relatively little interaction with Malays, Indians, or other ethnic groups. As Qin stated,

Our usual social activities are mostly with Chinese or local Chinese—we don't have much contact with Malays or Indians.

This trend aligns with Hendrickson et al. (2011), who found that cultural similarity encourages international students to form social networks within their own cultural groups to minimise adaptation costs. In contrast, in countries with greater cultural differences, international students must actively engage with the host culture and establish connections with locals to secure social support (Berry, 1997). However, in Penang, the presence of a well-established Chinese community means that Chinese students do not need to adjust their social patterns deliberately; instead, they can rely on existing cultural networks to establish social relationships quickly. While this reduces the difficulty of social adaptation, it also limits their exposure to the wider multicultural society of Malaysia.

Although Hayes and Lin (1994) argue that international students generally seek cultural integration by forming relationships with local residents, this pattern was not strongly observed among Chinese students in Penang. Interview results indicate that most informants preferred to remain within the Chinese community rather than initiate interactions with Malay or Indian groups. As Yan explained,

I don't actively seek out Malays or Indians because the Chinese community is sufficient for me to fit in—I don't feel the need to engage with other cultures.

This phenomenon can be understood through Berry's (1997) acculturation strategy, which suggests that individuals in culturally familiar environments often adopt a "separation strategy" (p. 9), prioritising integration within their own ethnic group while maintaining a certain distance from more culturally distinct groups. While this strategy effectively reduces culture shock, it also means that Chinese students' experiences in Penang are largely confined to Chinese cultural spaces, limiting their deeper engagement with Malaysia's broader multicultural society.

Overall, the cultural similarity of Penang significantly facilitates the adaptation of mainland Chinese students by easing challenges related to language, food, socialisation, and emotional support. Compared to study-abroad experiences in Europe and the United States, this cultural familiarity reduces initial culture shock and enables Chinese students to integrate into the local Chinese community more rapidly. However, this adaptation pattern also shapes their social choices, leading them to rely predominantly on culturally similar groups and engage less proactively in cross-cultural interactions. This phenomenon suggests that while cultural similarity lowers adaptation costs, it may also limit Chinese students' engagement with Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape in the long run. Although this cultural familiarity aids in their adjustment, it ultimately restricts their development of intercultural competence, confining their study-abroad experience largely to the Chinese community rather than the wider Malaysian society.

Cultural Similarity as a Barrier: Limits to Intercultural Interaction

Cultural similarity facilitates mainland Chinese students' adaptation in Penang to a certain extent, enabling them to quickly integrate into the local Chinese community, reduce culture shock, and gain emotional support. However, cultural similarity is not a wholly positive adaptation factor; while it facilitates adaptation, it may also be a hidden barrier preventing students from further integrating into local society and expanding their intercultural experiences. Over-reliance on cultural similarity may limit Chinese students' social scope, homogenise their social networks, weaken their intercultural communicative competence, and undermine their in-depth understanding of multicultural societies. This phenomenon is consistent with Berry's (1997) theory of acculturation, which suggests that when international students choose to integrate only into similar cultural groups and avoid interaction with other cultural groups, a separation strategy may develop, leading to long-term acculturation dilemmas. In Penang, Chinese students may suffer from the limitations of cultural similarity in various dimensions such as language, socialisation, academics, and career development, with their adaptation barriers primarily manifesting in the limitations of social networks, weakened intercultural communication skills, and one-sided perceptions of the local culture.

The Chinese community in Penang is highly culturally similar to mainland China, enabling Chinese students to quickly establish a familiar social network and gain a sense of belonging. However, this convenience may also lead to the homogenisation of social networks, limiting them in the long-term adaptation process. Hendrickson et al. (2011) found that international students usually tend to associate with culturally similar groups and are less likely to initiate connections with other ethnic groups in the host country. This phenomenon was particularly evident among the Chinese student population in Penang. Interview data revealed that most Chinese students' social circles consisted mainly of other Chinese students and local Chinese, with less interaction with Malay and Indian groups. For example, Nana mentioned,

My friends are basically Chinese or local Chinese, and I have limited contact with Malays and Indians.

While this mode of socialisation provides a sense of security and emotional support in the short term, in the long term, it may limit students' social skills and cause them to miss out on opportunities to build cross-cultural relationships in a multicultural environment. In contrast, in Europe and the United States, where cultural differences are greater, international students are usually required to take the initiative to adapt to new cultural environments and actively expand their social networks in order to better integrate into the local society (Hayes & Lin, 1994). The cultural similarities in Penang reduce the need for Chinese students to expand diverse social relationships, leading to lower social adjustment in Malaysia and further exacerbating cultural isolation.

Language similarity reduces the cost of adaptation for Chinese students to a certain extent, but at the same time, it may also be a hindrance to the development of their intercultural communicative competence. The widespread use of Mandarin, Cantonese, and Minnan in the Chinese community in Penang eliminates the need for Chinese students to adapt to a Malay or English-speaking environment in their daily lives and social interactions. However, this accessibility also reduces their opportunities to use other languages, thereby weakening their ability to communicate in an internationalised environment. For example, Chen stated,

There is almost no need to use Malay here. Even when I go to the supermarket, I can communicate in Chinese, so I have never learnt Malay.

This phenomenon is consistent with Kim's (2001) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, which suggests that a lack of in-depth interaction with other cultural groups may lead to stagnant acculturation, making students less competitive in cross-cultural environments. In contrast, in Europe and the United States, where the language environment is completely different, international students must continuously improve their language skills through daily interaction to better adapt to academic and social life (Zhou, 2023). In Penang, cultural similarity reduces this pressure to adapt, which may stagnate the language development of Chinese students, ultimately affecting their long-term academic, professional, and social integration.

In addition, cultural similarity may lead Chinese students to develop one-sided perceptions of Malaysian culture, causing them to overlook the complexity of the multicultural context during the adaptation process. For example, Dang mentioned,

I thought Penang's culture was similar to China's, but then I realised that the cultural habits of Malays and Indians were completely different, yet I rarely had the chance to understand them.

This phenomenon suggests that cultural similarity may create a cultural illusion, whereby students focus primarily on familiar cultural elements and overlook cultural diversity during the adaptation process (Gomes, 2014). This limitation may affect their overall perception of the host culture, leading to challenges in future intercultural communication and professional development.

In addition to affecting socialisation and cultural awareness, cultural similarity may also influence students' adjustment patterns in the academic environment. The Chinese community in Penang provides a familiar learning atmosphere, making some Chinese students less likely to experience culture shock in the traditional sense during their academic adjustment. However, interview data revealed that some Chinese students were less likely to interact with non-Chinese students in group work or classroom discussions, as their social circles were mainly confined to the Chinese community, resulting in weaker adaptation in cross-cultural academic collaboration. For example, Wen mentioned,

For group work, I prefer to team up with my Chinese classmates or local Chinese because communication is smoother. When I work with Malays, I sometimes don't get used to their way of working.

This phenomenon is consistent with Griffiths et al.'s (2005) study, which suggests that when international students rely primarily on co-cultural groups, they may struggle to adapt to multicultural cooperative environments, potentially affecting their academic performance. In contrast, in Europe and the United States, where cultural differences are greater, international students usually need to be more actively involved in multicultural cooperation in order to better adapt to a globalised academic environment. While Penang's cultural similarities reduce the difficulty of academic adaptation, they may also put Chinese students in a more passive position in cross-cultural academic cooperation.

Overall, cultural similarity facilitates Chinese students' adaptation in Penang to a certain extent, enabling them to integrate into local society more quickly and reduce culture shock. However, this similarity may also serve as a hidden barrier to their adaptation process, limiting their social networks, intercultural communication skills, and in-depth understanding of the host culture. The homogeneity of their social networks makes them less likely to connect with other ethnic groups, weakening their competitiveness in a globalised environment; the accessibility of the language environment reduces their need to improve their Malay or English proficiency, making them less adaptable to a multilingual environment; and the one-sidedness of their cultural perceptions prevents them from gaining a comprehensive understanding of Malaysian multiculturalism, which may affect their long-term adaptation and career development.

Conclusion

This study examines the adaptation process of mainland Chinese students in Penang, analysing the impact of cultural similarity on their socio-cultural, academic, and daily life adaptation, while also exploring whether it may act as a hidden barrier. Findings suggest that Penang's strong Chinese cultural presence reduces culture shock, facilitates integration, and lowers adaptation costs by providing a familiar social environment. However, cultural similarity is not purely advantageous—it may limit students' social engagement, weaken intercultural competence, and restrict their understanding of Malaysia's multicultural society, potentially affecting long-term development.

While the large Chinese community enables students to establish social networks quickly, many reduce interactions with non-Chinese groups, leading to a narrower social scope and weaker intercultural communication skills. Additionally, cultural similarity does not significantly ease academic adaptation, as Malaysia's British-based higher education system requires critical thinking and independent learning, posing challenges for Chinese students. This study has certain limitations. It focuses on postgraduate students, potentially overlooking adaptation patterns among undergraduates or exchange students. The geographical scope is limited to Penang, meaning findings may not be fully generalisable to other regions. Furthermore, while in-depth interviews provide valuable insights, future research could incorporate quantitative methods to strengthen data support.

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