



Vera A. Fedotova

National Research University Higher School of Economics (Perm), master of
psychology, postgraduate, senior lecturer, School of Management, Faculty of Economics, Management,
and Business Informatics

The peculiarities of social adaptation of international students with regard to their cultural affiliation

In the 21 century, many universities have chosen to internationalise their activity, making it their strategy of first importance. The number of international students is one of the indicators of how successful an institution is on the world market of educational services. The international character of modern education can be noticed in the increase of academic mobility and the growth of numbers of international students. Our research demonstrates the peculiarities of coping strategies, reveals the differences in socio-cultural adaptation scales among students from China and students representing the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The respondents who took part in this research are students from the CIS countries (n=103) and from China (n=69), currently studying in Russian institutions of higher education. It was found that students from the CIS countries, their culture being similar to the Russian culture for their poly-activity, collectivism and poly-chronicity, have the indirect coping strategy and the passive coping strategy (cautious model of behaviour) as their dominating strategies. At the same time, Chinese students – whose culture may be characterised as high context, reactive, with prevailing collectivism and femininity – have demonstrated the domination of pro-social behavioural strategy that is based on seeking social support. The scales of socio-cultural adaptation show differences in the students' academic adaptation and command of the Russian language. Representatives of high

context and reactive cultures (Chinese students) find it most difficult to adapt to the peculiarities of learning process, to the requirements set by the higher education system and to the need to communicate in the native language of the hosting country. **Keywords:** culture, coping strategies, socio-cultural adaptation, adaptation scales.



Most often, people manage to adapt to a new socio-cultural environment by making changes to their stereotypes and behavioural patterns; however, they remain internally alienated from the social environment (Zhdanova, Pecherkina, 2016). Increasing popularity of the subject of international students and creating a favourable educational environment for them in Russia makes the researchers interested in studying the peculiarities of how such students adapt to radically new living and learning conditions. Successful adaptation ensures fast integration into the learning process and overall increase in quality of education for those young people.

So far, several papers have been written on the subject of adaptation of international students and related problems (K. Ishaka, 2012; Glebov, 2013; Fedosov, 2015; Ishkineeva and others, 2017, Ivanova, Raerindzatuvu, 2017, etc.) The common weakness of those works consists in their theoretical character. Another weak point is that the adaptation programmes that were developed in the course of the research are too generic and don't differentiate respondents by their culture. Besides, there is a contradiction, more and more visible, between the amount of empiric data on the adaptation of international students and the lack of research aimed at exploring the peculiarities of predicting difficult situations in the context of higher education and figuring out how to prevent them.

Coping behaviour strategies

Psychology distinguishes constructive and non-constructive behaviour strategies (Cheremisina, 2015). Constructive strategies include: relying on one's own forces or seeking help from others on the way to achieving one's goals; analysing the situation and planning; reconsidering. Non-constructive strategies include being predisposed to using psychological defences; avoidance; aggressive reactions (Cheremisina, 2015). Normally, a person doesn't stick to one and the same coping strategy but combines their variations according to the situation. Besides that, a strategy that is acceptable in one situation may prove inefficient in a different situation. The problem of coping strategies is most often researched using the example of Russian students during the period of their adaptation to the learning environment (Krayushkina, 2014; Tarasova, 2016).

For instance, N.A. Krayushkina conducted a research on social and psychological adaptation and coping strategies with students during the period of academic practice (Krayushkina, 2014). The research showed that male and female students tended to use pro-social behaviour strategies, but male students were more likely to initiate a social contact, while female students tried to find support in their environment. In addition,



male students preferred direct coping strategies, while female students used manipulative strategies (Krayushkina, 2014). L. E. Tarasova studied coping strategies as adaptation mechanisms of coping behaviour with students of middle and high school in Russia. In the cognitive aspect, successful students most often show adaptive strategies. Students in this group quite rarely recur to non-adaptive strategies: solely 8% of the respondents chose to avoid and ignore problems (Tarasova, 2016).

There is a series of research works that use international students in Russia as respondents. For example, a study conducted at the Pskov State University was aimed at exploring the coping strategies used by international students (Petrova, Leontyeva, 2017). But the study only had 30 participants, and the international respondents were not differentiated by their nationality or cultural affiliation. This study presented problem-oriented coping as the prevailing strategy with international students (51%), with emotion-oriented coping as the second popular strategy (29 %). The avoidance coping strategy proved to be the “least popular” (20 %).

Also, we shall mention a number of Western studies that had students’ coping strategies as their object. One of those studies was focused on the coping strategies used by the students of the Faculty of Economy and Management at the Czech University, within the “Governmental management and regional development” study programme (n=177). The research indicated age differences between students, as well as differences between the groups of part-time and full-time students, with regard to the following coping strategies: situational control, reaction control, positive self-teaching (Natovova, Chylova, 2012).

Another study involved Turkish students as respondents: precisely, 12 EFL students who had finished their study practice at the Anadolu University. The participants were suggested to keep a diary where they had to describe their adaptation issues. The research data also included semi-structured interviews and field notes taken by researchers. The analysis of the data showed that the most serious adaptation problems were related to interpersonal communication inside a group, and the most successful coping strategy consisted in cooperating both with students who had a similar mindset and with teachers (Merc, Subasi, 2015).

A research done by Australian authors (Khawaja et al., 2001) used quantitative approach to investigate problems that international students may encounter. Twenty-two international students from a university in Australia participated in 4 focus groups.



It was found that the students' problems included their social isolation, their lacking English skills, academic struggles, expectations that weren't satisfied, tight schedule, cultural shock and psychological discomfort. The main coping strategies implemented by the international students involved seeking additional information, leaving their comfort zone, interacting actively with native speakers in the hosting country, practising their social skills, developing time management skills, and going to the University centre for psychological counselling.

A series of studies was based on the responses of Chinese students (Cao, C., et al., 2017; Cao, C., et al., 2018). The methodology of consensual qualitative research (CQR) was used to analyse data gathered from semi-structured interviews. The selection of respondents was performed out of Chinese students in various universities of the world. The authors defined a number of academic stressors and differentiated them according to frequency labels. The main sources of academic stress were: academic incompetence, cultural shock, different academic standards, and intercultural communication issues. As a result, it was found that Chinese students had been getting the main social support in the academic context from their compatriots of the same age. The results coming from the research data implied that behavioural peculiarities of Chinese students were mainly influenced by their culture and not by general academic context.

Although there is a number of Russian and foreign studies aimed at researching adaptation strategies used by international students, it is necessary to point out that most studies do not differentiate the students by their nationality (in Russian studies), not to mention their culture-specific traits (in foreign studies). Secondly, most respondents in Russian studies are Chinese students. Thirdly, the selection does not include many informants. In the fourth place, the studies do not provide any analysis of the differences between coping strategies used by representatives of different cultures.

Research Method

To study the coping strategies and the peculiarities of socio-cultural adaptation we used the following research methods and approaches: "Revised Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale" (SCAS-R) (Wilson, 2013), "Coping Strategies for Stress Situations" (Strategic Approach to Coping Scale – SACS) (Vodopyanova, Starchenkova, 2009).

Revised Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS-R) (Wilson, 2013). This method is based on a questionnaire that includes 21 statements. A respondent must assess their agreement or disagreement with the given statements using a 1 to 5 scale. Afterwards, using the assessment key, a grade is calculated for each of the 5 scales that are contained in the method and selected by exploratory factor analysis using the principal



components analysis with Varimax rotation applied to the correlation matrix (Interpersonal Communication, Academic/Work Performance, Personal Interests & Community Involvement, Ecological Adaptation, Language Proficiency). This method was tested and adapted within a doctoral dissertation by Jessie Kaye Wilson in 2013 (with more than 2000 respondents) (Wilson, 2013).

« **Coping Strategies for Stress Situations» (Strategic Approach to Coping Scale – SACS)** (Vodopyanova, Starchenkova, 2009). This method uses a questionnaire of 54 statements. Using the assessment key, a grade is calculated for each of the following scales: «assertive actions», «initiating social contact», «seeking social support», «cautious actions», «impulsive actions», «avoidance», «indirect actions», «asocial actions», and «aggressive actions».

Selection of Respondents

The respondents for this research originate from China, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. All of them are students in institutions of higher education in Perm, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Ufa, Kazan, Saratov, and Yekaterinburg. The overall number of respondents equals to 172 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample study

Respondents	Number of respondents	Age
Chinese	45 male - 21 female - 24	Min: 18 Max: 24 Median: 22
Representatives of Uzbekistan	36 male - 19 female - 17	Min: 18 Max: 25 Median: 22
Representatives of Kazakhstan	42 male - 23 female - 19	Min: 18 Max: 24 Median: 21

69 Chinese students who have been studying in Russia for one to five years are representatives of a high context and reactive culture, with prevailing collectivism and femininity. 103 students have come from the CIS countries where the culture is similar to the Russian culture because of its poly-activity, collectivism and poly-chronicity.

Since the present paper is specifically aimed at studying coping strategies and anticipatory competence of international students depending on their cultural background, we shall describe the culture-specific traits of the respondents.



So, Chinese culture is a high context culture, a reactive one, with predominating collectivism and femininity. In such cultures, it is typical to use a lot of innuendos, implications, figurative expressions etc. Due to this peculiarity, students find themselves poorly informed and in need for additional information in order to understand representatives of different cultures as they communicate. A high context culture has several characteristic traits, such as a non-expressive and reserved manner of speaking, meaningful and numerous pauses in the speech, an important role of non-verbal communication and the skill of “speaking with one’s eyes”; detailed information is seen as something excessive since the primary background knowledge is enough to communicate; dissatisfaction is never expressed openly, whatever the conditions or the communication results are (Lewis, 2001; Fedotova, 2016; Yuangyang, 2018). The Chinese culture gives a special place to respect and politeness. Representatives of this type of culture are introverted, taciturn, respectful, punctual, task-oriented; they avoid confrontation, their gestures and mimics are difficult to observe. For instance, a research by N.M. Lykova and R. Caravedo Intriago has demonstrated that Chinese students, during their adaptation period, use a style of communication with the dominating coping strategy of “seeking social support” (Lykova, Caravedo Intriago, 2010). In another research where Chinese students from the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) had been selected as informants, the main barriers were the language barrier, intercultural communication issues, and the psychological barrier (Glebov, 2013). One of the most problematic moments in the learning process of Chinese students is their Russian language level. Actually, their command of Russian language may be described as concerning (Glebov, 2013). The majority of students (62,4%) only have elementary knowledge of Russian. Just a few can speak Russian well or at least read texts in it without difficulty (the respective 7% and 5% of students) (Glebov, 2013).

Science definitely lacks knowledge of the cultural peculiarities of the people from the CIS countries. One can assume that the culture of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is close to the Russian culture. The Russian culture is very particular and definitely different from other world cultures. In earlier studies, it was demonstrated that the Russian culture can be described by a high tendency towards uncertainty avoidance, by more significant power distance; it is a short-term oriented culture with prevailing collectivism (Hall, 1983, Lebedeva, Tatarko, 2017; Fedotova, 2016). In addition, Russian culture may be described as poly-active, with prevailing collectivism, poly-chronic and transitional with regard to the collectivism vs. individualism dimension (Lewis, 2001).

Research Results and Interpretation

Coping strategies detection



Let us take a look at the results obtained using the method called “Strategies for overcoming stress situations” (Vodopyanova, Starchenkova, 2009) which is aimed at researching dominant coping strategies. The primary analysis of the answers given by the respondents enabled us to calculate the mean value and the standard deviation for each of the variables (see table 2).

Table 2
Strategies for overcoming stress situations among representatives of the CIS countries and Chinese students

Coping strategy	Models of coping	Representatives of the CIS countries		Chinese students	
		Degree of severity of coping models	Standard deviation	Degree of severity of coping models	Standard deviation
Active	Assertive Actions	20,5	0,64	19,8	0,83
Pro-social coping strategy	Entering into social contact	22,5	0,95	26,2	0,90
Pro-social coping strategy	Seeking social support	21	0,73	28	0,74
Passive	Cautious behaviour	22,85	0,99	24,2	0,69
Direct	Impulsive actions	20,4	0,71	20,6	0,93
Passive	Avoidance	19,65	0,68	22,6	0,84
Indirect	Avoidance	23,25	0,82	20	0,61
Asocial	Asocial actions	19,95	0,9	24,58	0,85
Asocial	Aggressive actions	21,05	0,82	22,16	0,75

*** - the differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.001$

** - the differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.01$

* - the differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.05$



According to the theory suggested by Hobfoll, the models of coping are characterised by three axes of an individual's behaviour. The strategic direction of coping behaviour is supposed to be described by three coordinates: the pro-social/asocial strategy axis, the passive/active axis, and the direct/indirect (manipulative) action axis (Vodopyanova, Starchenkova, 2009).

The table shows that representatives of the CIS countries have mostly demonstrated indirect and passive coping strategies, which is manifested in their cautious behaviour and indirect actions. At the same time, such behaviour models as avoidance and asocial actions have been the least expressed of all. The "avoidance" coping strategy becomes the main strategy to form the addictive behaviour. This strategy is intended to cope with stress and reduce it, but as a result, the individual will be functioning and developing at a lower functional level. From all of the above, we can see that the representatives of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, whose culture may be characterised as poly-active, poly-chronic and transitional with regard to the collectivism vs. individualism dimension, mostly tend to ponder on all the possible choices and solutions; they typically avoid doing their best, unless it is really needed, and prefer to save their resources; they do not trust others without proof and prefer to keep everything under control. Respondents of this culture can manipulate other people, play along with other people or mimic them in order to achieve their goals. However, it is extremely rare that they commit asocial actions against other people. At the same time, the respondents are less likely to postpone actions needed to resolve an issue in the hope that the problem will be resolved on its own; they are also less likely to avoid decisive actions that require high concentration and responsibility for the possible outcome. Behavioural patterns like giving priority personal interests, even if it harms other people, demonstrating power and superiority in order to reinforce one's authority, researching weaknesses in other people with the intention to use them in one's own interest, are very scarcely expressed with representatives of the CIS countries.

Chinese students in Russia have demonstrated the prevalence of the pro-social coping strategy that expresses itself in seeking social support. Respondents belonging to this type of culture tend to associate with other people when they need to resolve an issue, they ask advice from friends and relatives, and they do not hesitate to ask for help. In difficult moments, they need to feel emotional support coming from people close to them. Behavioural models based on avoidance and assertive actions are less typical of the Chinese respondents. They may find it difficult to refuse when they are asked to do something, they feel awkward when others praise them or give compliments. They are less likely to manipulate other people, play along with them or mimic their actions, to withhold truth in order to achieve their goals.



Peculiarities of social adaptation

Let us analyse the results from the second part of the questionnaire that is focused on researching peculiarities of socio-cultural adaptation (Wilson, 2013).

The primary analysis of the answers given by the respondents has enabled us to calculate the minimum, maximum and mean values, standard deviation for each variable, as well as differences revealed using Student's t-distribution (see Table 3).

Table 3

Scales of sociocultural adaptation (according to the method of the Revised Sociocultural Adaptation Scale) (differences according to Student's t-criterion)

Scales	Students from the CIS countries			Chinese students		
	Mean	Min- Max	St. dev.	Mean	Min- Max	St. dev.
Interpersonal communication	3,85	1-5	1,07	4,23	2-5	1,05
Academic adaptation	4,21**	3-5	0,75	3,2**	2-5	0,9
Group involvement	3,62	2-5	1,04	3,5	1-5	1,23
Ecological adaptation	3,3	1-5	1,06	3,25	1-5	1,29
Level of proficiency in Russian	4,35*	1-5	1,09	3,7*	2-5	1,1

*** - the differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.001$

** - the differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.01$

* - the differences are significant at the level of $p < 0.05$



Students from the CIS countries have the highest grades in academic (learning) adaptation and language level self-assessment; they rarely experience problems with ecological adaptation that represents, according to the method, their adaptation to the noise level, density of population and the rhythm of life. Since their cultures are similar to the Russian culture, these students adapt quite easily to the language, which includes reading and writing in Russian, as well as communicating with Russian native speakers. Also, this group of respondents adapt more easily to the learning process, which implies that they successfully fulfil their academic duties, work together in groups with other students, receive feedback from teachers and group mates, and they are able to suggest and discuss ideas in a group of learners, using the manner of communication typical of the hosting country.

As for the Chinese students who attend Russian institutions of higher education, they have the highest grades on the “interpersonal communication” scale. This means that the respondents tend to participate in social life, show empathy, build and maintain relations with other people and alter their behaviour depending on the rules, norms, beliefs and relationships.

Significant cultural differences have been detected between the “academic adaptation” and “command of language” scales. Earlier research had shown that one of the main adaptation barriers experienced by Chinese students is the language barrier. Their Russian language level is one of the biggest issues in the learning process of Chinese students (Glebov, 2013; Yuanyang, 2018)

Results

1. Representatives of the CIS countries, their culture being similar to the Russian culture for its poly-activity, collectivism and poly-chronicity, use indirect and passive coping strategies (cautious behaviour model) as their dominant coping strategies.
2. The dominant coping strategy used by Chinese students whose culture may be characterised as a high context, reactive culture with prevailing collectivism and femininity is the pro-social strategy of behaviour that translates into seeking social support.
3. With regard to the scales of socio-cultural adaptation, there are differences in academic adaptation and command of the Russian language.

Conclusion



The academic success of international students depends on their socio-cultural adaptation in the country where they are studying. Most often, adaptation to a new socio-cultural environment is reached through changes in stereotypes and behavioural patterns, while on the inside, the student remains isolated from his or her social environment. Successful adaptation favours the students' involvement in the learning process and the quality of their learning in general.

The present research has shown that students from the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, their culture being similar to the Russian culture for its poly-activity, collectivism and poly-chronicity, tend to use indirect and passive (cautious behaviour model) coping strategies as their preferred ones. At the same time, Chinese students, whose culture may be described as a high context and reactive culture, with prevailing collectivism and femininity, choose the pro-social behaviour strategy as the dominant one. This strategy consists in seeking social support and establishing social contact. The "seeking social support" coping strategy is one of the most powerful coping resources. Social support reduces the influence of stressors upon the body, thus protecting the health and well-being of the individual. The "social support" coping strategy may have both a positive and negative effect on the person; for example, it may find a manifestation in an excessively external locus of control, interpersonal dependence or defensive mechanisms, like confluence. The scales of socio-cultural adaptation have shown differences in academic adaptation and language command. Representatives of high context and reactive cultures (Chinese students) find it most difficult to adapt to peculiarities of the learning process and academic requirements of the higher education system. In addition to successfully completing academic duties, respecting rules and meeting requirements of higher education, academic adaptation also includes group work with other students, getting feedback from teachers and fellow students, positioning oneself in the study group. These behavioural patterns also prove difficult for Chinese students.