

Navigating sociocultural adaptation: The experiences of Chinese international students in Baguio City, Philippines

¹Jing Chang & ²Marilou Saong

Abstract

Amid rising academic competition in China, Chinese students pursuing higher education abroad face sociocultural adaptation challenges. This study investigates the sociocultural adaptation processes of Chinese international students in Baguio City, Philippines. A qualitative descriptive design was used, with a sample of 20 Chinese students from Baguio-based higher education institutions. Data collection included in-depth semi-structured interviews and a structured survey exclusively for demographic profiling. The findings show that students faced significant adjustment difficulties, which include adjusting to interactive teaching methods, lack of proficiency in English, relying on networks of friends from their home country, dealing with infrastructure problems, and dealing with inefficiencies in the administration. Peer support, cultural resilience, and gradual engagement were among the coping mechanisms. Differences in experience were also mediated by demographic factors like age, sex, and educational attainment. This study sheds light on the multifaceted sociocultural experiences that Chinese international students encountered in the Philippines, which were influenced by institutional, linguistic, emotional, and educational contexts. The findings underscore the importance of institutional and policy-level interventions that address systemic and cultural disparities.

Keywords: *Chinese international students, sociocultural adjustment, cross-cultural adaptation, higher education in the Philippines, Baguio City*

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About the authors:

¹Doctor of Education Candidate, University of Baguio. Email: m13699179227_1@163.com

²Corresponding author. PhD in Education. Professor, University of Baguio. Email: marilousaong@e.ubaguio.edu



1. Introduction

In recent years, increasing academic competition within China has prompted many Chinese students to pursue primary or higher education abroad. Studying abroad was once an exclusive privilege of China's affluent class, but after decades of rapid economic growth, more middle-income families can now afford to send their children overseas (Lu et al., 2023).

The Philippines has lately become a popular destination for international study. Chinese students are drawn to the country primarily because it is the third-largest English-speaking nation, allowing students who received English-medium instruction in China to use a language they are already familiar with (Ma, 2024). Additionally, the Philippines provides a favorable language environment and distinctive English teaching approaches (Heng & San Juan, 2023). Despite the growing prominence of the Philippines as a study destination, existing research on Chinese international students has concentrated mainly on metropolitan areas such as Manila and Cebu (Bantugan et al., 2024), with limited attention to non-capital regions that also host substantial student populations.

Baguio City, located in the Cordillera Administrative Region, attracts many Chinese students due to its pleasant climate and reputable academic programs offered by local institutions. It also presents a unique sociocultural setting influenced by indigenous Igorot culture, a smaller expatriate presence, and a more close-knit local community, conditions that differ significantly from those in larger Philippine cities. This distinctiveness positions Baguio as an understudied yet important context for understanding how Chinese students adapt to culturally diverse host environments.

However, for Chinese students, studying abroad remains a challenging experience regardless of the destination. Students commonly encounter academic, linguistic, social, and cultural difficulties as part of their adjustment process (Consoli, 2024). Chinese students in Baguio City are no exception. Yet, research on their adaptation in the Philippines rarely explores non-metropolitan locations such as Baguio or examines how the city's unique characteristics shape student experiences. By focusing on Baguio, this study addresses these gaps by exploring the socio-cultural experiences of Chinese students and analyzing how the city's identity influences their daily lives, social relationships, and cultural adjustment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Adaptation Challenges of International Students

Over the past few decades, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has expanded rapidly. According to data released by the Ministry of Education in 2020, the number of students studying abroad has increased significantly from 2000 to 2019, surpassing the 700,000 mark by 2019. Although traditional study-abroad destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia continue to dominate the most popular destinations (Erudera, 2022), the rise in the number of students studying abroad does not directly equate to their satisfaction with local academic or non-academic experiences.

Zhao et al. (2022) observed that cultural disparities and transitions within academic systems pose challenges not solely for Chinese students but for all international students who encounter emotional challenges. As the international student population grows more diverse, their challenges are frequently neglected, with related research concentrating on the obstacles these students face concerning mental health and environmental adaptation (Minutillo et al., 2020). Notably, existing research on Chinese international students has predominantly focused on Western nations, with insufficient attention to non-traditional Asian host countries like the Philippines, a gap that underscores the need for targeted exploration of their adaptation experiences in such contexts (Heng & San, 2023).

Academic adaptation challenges. International students frequently encounter different difficulties while integrating into unfamiliar educational systems, and these challenges are particularly pronounced for Chinese students in non-traditional destinations. Hussain and Shen (2019) identified key academic obstacles, including struggles with course selection, instructor communication, comprehension of course materials, and adaptation to new assessment techniques. Brown and Holloway (2008) further indicated that cultural and geographical distance from family and social support systems exacerbates academic difficulties, resulting in feelings of loneliness and stress that further hinder learning. In the Philippine context, Li (2024) specifically found that Chinese students face distinct academic challenges rooted in systematic and pedagogical disparities: cultural shock from differences in educational systems, social norms, and daily habits not only disrupts their learning rhythm but also contributes to isolation, heightened stress, and diminished academic performance. Additionally, Wen et al. (2018) and Jiang et al. (2021) observed that in the Philippines, the shift from teacher-centered to interactive learning models, coupled with limited teacher-student interaction, has become a

barrier to academic adaptation, as students often struggle to adjust their learning strategies to align with local expectations.

Language barriers as a cross-cutting obstacle. As English is the primary language of instruction in the Philippines, language proficiency emerges as a critical barrier impacting both academic and non-academic adaptation. Zhangli et al. (2025) noted that many Chinese students struggle with academic English, significantly impairing their classroom participation and understanding of the course material. Beyond the classroom, Santillan et al. (2018) emphasized that language issues extend to social contexts, and limited English fluency prevents Chinese students from engaging in meaningful interactions with local peers, service providers, or community members. Therefore, cultural empathy, an open and inclusive attitude, and the language support provided by schools are crucial. This cross-cutting nature of language barriers highlights that addressing linguistic gaps requires support beyond academic English training.

Social integration difficulties. Social integration continues to be a significant challenge for Chinese international students, with research indicating structural and attitudinal obstacles to cross-cultural connections. Bing (2022) discovered that Chinese students in the Philippines frequently depend on their fellow nationals to establish support networks that offer emotional solace. These networks, on the other hand, also limit valuable chances for people from different cultures to meet and talk to each other, which makes social isolation worse. Pei Yang et al. (2023) noted that students who want to become involved often have a challenging time making meaningful connections with local students. This problem is partly because of language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and a lack of institutional programs that encourage cross-cultural interaction, which makes it harder for them to fit in with others.

Mental health impacts of adaptation stress. The cumulative effects of academic challenges, language barriers and social isolation often manifest in mental health issues for Chinese students. Khawaja and Stallman (2011) noted that international students face elevated risks of anxiety and depression, induced by cultural shock, academic pressure, and homesickness, and these risks are amplified for students in non-traditional destinations like the Philippines, where institutional mental health support is often less developed. To address this, Bantugan (2022) proposed that educational institutions adopt intervention strategies, including peer mentoring initiatives, to enhance interactions between students and local communities and deliver culturally responsive mental health services.

International students' cross-cultural adaptation is a highly complex process involving the interaction of multiple factors such as academic, linguistic, social, and psychological aspects. If universities can provide targeted support, it will help improve study-abroad experiences and promote the inclusive development of global education. Future research could focus more on study abroad destinations such as the Philippines, which have received limited attention, to provide references for policy-making and practice.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This research is based on sociocultural theory. The intellectual origins of sociocultural theory are found in 18th and 19th century German philosophy, alongside the sociological and economic theories of Marx and Engels. Nonetheless, its fundamental theory, the “cultural-historical activity theory,” was introduced by Vygotsky (Fletcher et al., 2009). Lantolf (2006) posits that social and cultural factors are pivotal in the cognitive development of individuals during the course of human development.

This theory does not solely investigate human society or culture; it emphasizes the evolution of advanced psychological functions. This underscores the necessity of integrating the examination of human cognitive and psychological functions with the social and cultural milieu in which individuals exist, as these functions emerge and evolve profoundly within their social and cultural contexts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Social and cultural factors include a lot of different things, like things that affect how people act, think, and interact with others. These encompass language, social norms, values, educational systems, familial background, social support networks, and religious beliefs. Horne et al. (2018) considered sociocultural factors as significant determinants affecting international students' academic performance, social interactions, and mental health.

Vygotsky (1978) asserted in his sociocultural theory that individual cognitive development is inextricably linked to social interaction and the cultural context. This means that international students who move to a new country must learn and live in new ways by interacting with other students, teachers, and people in the community (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Wekullo (2019) and Wen et al. (2018) conducted research that corroborated the notion that international students frequently encounter difficulties, including cultural shock, language barriers, and social isolation during the adaptation process.

Berry (1997) put forward an assimilation model that includes four strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Ammigan and Jones (2018) observed that sociocultural factors, including the level of cultural inclusivity for international students, the establishment of social support networks, and the school's internationalization policies, affect students' selection of assimilation strategies. For instance, in a culturally diverse and welcoming setting, international students are more inclined to embrace an integration strategy that significantly aids their social and academic adjustment (Li et al., 2021). Therefore, sociocultural factors significantly influence the cross-cultural adaptation process of international students. A more thorough understanding of these factors will not only help universities create effective support systems, but it will also make the living and learning environment better for international students, which will improve their overall study abroad experience.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design to comprehensively investigate the socio-cultural adjustment experiences of Chinese international students in Baguio City, Philippines. The primary aim was to examine the challenges they encountered, the coping mechanisms they employed, and the demographic factors that influenced their adjustment and integration. Ultimately, the study sought to propose institutional interventions that could enhance their academic achievement and sociocultural well-being. The investigation focused on the students' lived experiences related to accommodation, academic life, health and safety, and sociocultural adaptation. These insights were obtained through in-depth interviews that allowed for a detailed understanding of the key challenges and strategies described by the participants.

A structured survey was used solely to gather demographic information, including age, gender, and educational attainment. This quantitative data was utilized exclusively for participant profiling, with no statistical analysis conducted to examine its impact on adaptation experiences. This approach aligns with the qualitative descriptive design, which prioritizes contextualized and experiential insights rather than quantitative pattern identification.

3.2. Participants of the Study

This study focused on Chinese students enrolled in bachelor's, master's, or doctoral programs at accredited higher education institutions (HEIs) in Baguio City, Philippines, as the city hosts multiple HEIs with distinct academic program offerings. Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to select 20 Chinese international students based on explicit criteria: (a) current enrollment in undergraduate or graduate programs at Baguio-based HEIs, and (b) residence in Baguio for at least three months to ensure adequate adaptation experience. The sample was stratified to balance two dimensions: institutional affiliation, 12 students from comprehensive universities and 8 from specialized colleges, and academic level, 10 undergraduate (Bachelor's) students and 10 graduate students (Master's and Doctorate levels).

Students enrolled in basic education programs or those who had resided in Baguio for less than three months were excluded from the study. The choice to include 20 participants was guided by qualitative research principles, particularly the concept of data saturation. In qualitative research, the adequacy of the sample depends not on numerical size but on the richness and depth of the information collected. Guest et al. (2006) noted that data saturation is commonly achieved with approximately 12 participants when no new themes or insights emerge. Therefore, the inclusion of 20 participants was considered appropriate and sufficient for meeting the study's objectives.

3.3. Data Gathering Tools

This study primarily used a semi-structured interview outline and a demographic questionnaire as research tools. The semi-structured interview outline ensured that the researcher gathered comprehensive information regarding the experiences of Chinese students and the difficulties they encountered while pursuing their studies in Baguio City, Philippines. To establish content validity, the initial outline was reviewed by two experts in cross-cultural education to confirm its alignment with the study's objectives, and it was revised based on feedback from a pilot interview with two Chinese students. For reliability, the final outline included standardized probe questions to maintain consistency in the depth of information obtained across interviews.

The demographic questionnaire was used to collect basic participant information. Its face validity was confirmed by a research faculty member with relevant expertise, ensuring that the items were clear and appropriate for participant profiling.

3.4. Data Gathering Procedures

The researcher sought approval from both the Graduate School of the university where the master's and doctoral students were enrolled and the departments where the selected bachelor's students belonged. To enhance the cultural and institutional relevance of the study, the researcher collaborated with faculty members, student organizations, and support units at a local university. This helped provide a deeper understanding of the local context and ensured the applicability of the research methods and results.

After receiving approval, the researcher began recruiting participants based on the sampling plan using purposive sampling. The researcher first approached acquainted Chinese international students who met the sampling criteria and considered them as first-round participants. These first-round participants then shared the recruitment information with other qualified potential participants they knew until the required number of participants for the sampling plan was reached.

After recruitment, the researcher conducted individual interviews online via Voov and distributed questionnaires to the identified participants. Once all information was collected, the researcher transcribed the qualitative data and organized the quantitative data.

3.5. Treatment of Data

This study primarily used thematic analysis to process the data. Thematic analysis was applied to the information concerning the experiences of Chinese international students and the challenges they encountered, while frequency counts were utilized only to descriptively summarize the participants' demographic profiles.

The researcher independently conducted the thematic analysis following several steps. These included familiarizing with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to understand the core content; generating initial codes; coding the data and marking content relevant to the research questions; identifying potential themes by grouping similar codes; reviewing the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data; defining and naming the themes by clarifying their meaning and assigning appropriate titles; and writing the report by organizing and integrating the analysis results into a coherent research narrative.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The researcher ensured that participation in the study was completely voluntary. Before conducting any interviews or administering surveys, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time should they experience discomfort or inconvenience. Upon completion of the research, the results were shared with participants and potential beneficiaries via email for their reference and review.

Given the possible emotional stress associated with academic challenges, participants were informed in advance about the nature of the interview process and were made aware of available support services, such as the university counselling center. Additionally, appropriate rest periods were incorporated into the interview process to ensure the participants' psychological comfort.

To enhance the cultural and institutional relevance of the research, the study engaged with faculty members, student organizations, and support units at the local university. This collaboration facilitated a deeper understanding of the local context and strengthened the applicability of the research methods and findings.

The results of the study were disseminated to university management and relevant departments in the Baguio area through seminars, reports, and other channels. The findings were used to develop or refine support policies and programs for Chinese international students, improve their learning experiences and satisfaction, and contribute to the broader internationalization efforts of the university.

4. Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from the thematic analysis of interview data with Chinese international students in Baguio City, focusing on their sociocultural adjustment experiences, demographic-related patterns, and targeted adaptation recommendations. Table 1 outlines the comprehensive thematic coding framework. The themes that emerged are Socio-Cultural Adjustment Experiences, Demographic-Experiential Correlations, and Challenges and Recommendations. The analysis highlights patterns linked to demographic factors, such as age, academic level, and length of stay, which influence the students' experiences and coping mechanisms.

Table 1*Thematic coding framework with theoretical alignment*

Main themes	Sub-themes	Initial codes	Berry's Acculturation Strategies	Vygotsky's cognitive development constructs
Socio-Cultural Adjustment Experiences	Cultural Adjustment in Academic Contexts	Interactive teaching & collaborative learning	Integration	Collaborative Learning
		Critical thinking & practical application	Integration	-
		Course/assessment diversity (including feedback)	Integration	-
		Language & cross-cultural communication barriers	Marginalization Tendency	Mediating Tools
		Professors' approachability & supportive guidance	Integration	Social Interaction
	Health, Safety, and Institutional Support Systems	Self-medication behavior	Separation Marginalization Tendency	-
		Medical language barriers	Separation Marginalization Tendency	Mediating Tools
		Healthcare efficiency/accessibility	Integration	-
		Healthcare cost-effectiveness	Integration	-
		Safety perception & behavioral strategies	Integration	-
Demographic-Experiential Correlations	Accommodation choice & demographic links	Shared accommodation (gender/age/level)	Separation-Integration Continuum	Social Interaction
	English proficiency & demographic links	Language proficiency (gender/age/level)	Integration	Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
Challenges and Recommendations	Academic adjustment & study skills	Critical thinking/self-directed learning	Integration	Social Interaction
		Practical life & safety preparation	Separation-Integration Continuum	-
		Mindset & social support	Integration	Social Interaction
		Administrative & policy support needs	Marginalization Tendency	-

Theme 1: Socio-Cultural Adjustment Experiences of Chinese International Students in Baguio City

Sub-theme 1: Cultural adjustment in academic contexts

Interactive teaching, collaborative learning, and teacher-student interaction. In the context of intercultural education, interactive teaching and group collaboration represent the core perceptions of Chinese international students concerning differences in pedagogical approaches. More than half of the respondents who answered (P1, P4, P6, and P8) said that

overseas classrooms made students much more engaged by having small class sizes and high-intensity interactive activities. P1, for instance, said that "*group work and class presentations take up most of the course time.*" This is very different from the traditional Chinese education model, where teacher lectures are the main focus. This change in how teachers teach is similar to the constructivist learning theory, which says that knowledge is built up through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Notably, most interviewees highlighted the shifting role of teachers. P18 said, "*Teachers are more like discussion leaders,*" and P5 noted, "*significantly increased direct interaction*", reflecting Western "student-centered" education (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, Lehtimäki et al., 2025). For instance, the Philippine "roundtable discussion" simultaneously fosters language skills and critical expression. Some students also said that while small class sizes help with individualized attention, they can be hard for introverted students, which shows that people adapt to new cultures in different ways.

Group work emerges as the core mechanism for cross-cultural interaction with Filipino teachers and students. It functions as a social bond that forces proactive communications. P1 pointed out that "*group assignments are the main scene for interacting with classmates,*" while P3 said, "*group tasks force me to actively communicate with local classmates.*" This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which states that cognitive development is achieved through collaborative learning. The prevalence of group work in Philippine classrooms may come from cultural values like *pakikisama* (good company) and a strong sense of community responsibility, which are very clear in Filipino teachers (Zabala, 2021). This cultural background makes it easier for Chinese students to learn together.

The project-based learning (PBL) model commonly used in Philippine universities is in stark contrast to traditional Chinese classrooms. For example, P6 mentioned that "*my classmates were very cooperative and we formed regular study groups*", which promotes both language skills and cross-cultural understanding. Many students extended this collaboration through social media. P10 mentioned that "*after class, we discuss the details of homework through Line*", confirming Kunjiapu et al.'s (2025) observations on Philippine digital education. However, there are challenges in group collaboration. P4 pointed out, "*initially, differences in work habits led to inefficiency*", which reflects the dilemma of implementing integration strategies in Berry's (1997) cultural adaptation theory, that is, students from different cultural backgrounds need time to establish collaborative mechanisms.

Integration of critical thinking and practical applications. The integration of critical thinking with practical applications is another prominent feature of overseas education. Respondents generally pointed out that course content is often combined with real-life situations, and assessment methods also overcome the limitations of traditional written tests (P17). For example, P7 observed that “*the teaching style pays more attention to the overall integration of values and moral considerations,*” which echoes the pragmatist educational philosophy (Rashid et al., 2022) that “education is life.”

This practical orientation is particularly pronounced in the Philippines. P16 mentioned that “*the curriculum emphasizes practical applications,*” such as case studies and simulation projects, which are closely related to the country's tradition of vocational education orientation (Vandenberg & Laranjo, 2021). Simultaneously, the openness of teachers to challenging questions (P12) provides room for the development of critical thinking. For example, a professor's encouragement of students to question authoritative theories in class reflects the cultivation of the “evaluation” level of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Hui et al., 2021). However, this teaching method may initially cause cognitive conflict among Chinese students who are used to standard answers, and they need to gradually adjust their learning expectations through adaptive strategies.

Diversity in course structure and assessment methods. The diversity of course structures and assessment methods is an important adaptation challenge for international students. Interviewees mentioned rotating instructors for the same course (P3), the in-depth integration of online platforms, and frequent detailed feedback (P14), all differed from the domestic education system. For example, a modular course structure requires students to have stronger self-directed learning skills, which contrasts with the linear progress of traditional Chinese classrooms, and aligns with the “four R criteria” (richness, recurrence, relevance, and rigor) of the postmodern curriculum (Dolye et al., 1993; Twissell, 2019).

Formative assessment's growing importance (P17) reflects Western emphasis on the concept of valuing the learning process (Song, 2021). However, as an integral part of assessment diversity, the feedback mechanism is characterized by polarization. Some students reported “*timely feedback after each submission*” (P2), while others criticized “*fragmented feedback requiring multiple revisions*” (P13, P18). This difference is highly relevant to Wen et al.'s (2018) research on differences in teaching methods: Filipino teachers pay more attention to cultivating critical thinking, whereas Chinese students are used to standardize answers. For

example, P4 mentioned that “*the tutor first focused on the structure and then revised the language, which required multiple adjustments,*” which is consistent with Adebajji and Gumbo's (2013) conclusion that students from non-English-speaking countries face difficulties adapting to academic norms. Cultural differences in feedback styles further emerge. P15 pointed out that “*teachers tend to give point-by-point feedback rather than overall evaluations,*” attributed to the Philippine education system’s emphasis on detail. However, this flexibility can confuse students about assessment reflecting cultural differences in perception of educational fairness.

Language challenges and cultural adaptation. Language challenges and cultural adaptation pose double barriers to the integration of international students. The use of English as the medium of instruction (P9) and communication barriers due to cultural differences were the most direct barriers. For example, P10 mentions that “*the pace of teaching is relatively slow,*” which may be due to language accommodation for non-native speakers or differences in cross-cultural perception. This phenomenon is consistent with Friedman’s (2023) view of “academic language socialization,” which states that language ability is not only a tool but also a carrier of cultural identity.

Cultural differences are also reflected in the communication patterns. For example, the habit of “*expressing opinions directly*” in the Philippine classroom (P20) contrasts with the tradition of “respecting authority” in Chinese education. This difference may have led to misunderstandings or silence, as in the case of P9, who remained silent in the group discussion due to a lack of language confidence. In addition, differences in the pace of teaching (P10) reflect different definitions of “efficiency” in educational cultures: Western classrooms place more emphasis on in-depth discussions, while Chinese students may be more accustomed to rapid knowledge transfer. This conflict must be mitigated through cross-cultural training and peer support (Adam, 2024).

Approachability and supportive attitudes of professors. The teaching staff showed a high degree of openness and support. All respondents mentioned that teachers actively provided help, such as P1, “*professors have open office hours for consultation at any time,*” and P5, “*teachers patiently answer questions in the office.*” This mode of interaction between teachers and students is consistent with Jiang et al.'s (2021) research on emphasis on humanistic care in higher education in the Philippines. This fits with the strong cultural values of pakikipagkapwa (shared identity) and hospitality that Filipino academic leaders have

(Zabala, 2021). These values create a learning space that encourages people to talk to each other and respect each other. Of particular note is the fact that teachers generally adopt an encouraging approach, as in P7 “*the tutor will first affirm progress before giving advice,*” which is consistent with Khawaja and Stallman's (2011) theory of positive psychological support to promote adaptation. However, this supportive attitude also involves cultural adaptation issues. P9 said, “*At first, I was not used to expressing my confusion directly,*” which reflects the conflict between Chinese students' traditional perception of authoritative relationships and equal teacher-student relationships in the Philippines. This conflict is a typical challenge of integration strategies in Berry's cultural adaptation model; that is, how to adapt to a new environment while maintaining one's cultural identity.

Sub-theme 2: Health, safety, and institutional support systems

Dependence on own medication. Self-medication has become a prominent theme in the health experience. All respondents mentioned carrying Chinese medicine to deal with common illnesses. This pattern of behavior is highly consistent with the “separation strategy” in Berry's cultural adaptation theory – international students reduce the uncertainty caused by culture shock by maintaining their original cultural habits. For example, when P3 had a stomachache, his instinctive reaction was to use the stomach medicine he brought from China rather than seek local medical help. This phenomenon implies a double logic: on the one hand, Chinese students have a cognitive inertia about the safety and effectiveness of domestic medicines, as P10 emphasized, “*It's more reassuring to bring basic medicines*”; on the other hand, the unfamiliarity with the Philippine healthcare system prompts them to choose self-medication. This is consistent with Malay et al.'s (2024) conclusion that cultural differences in non-traditional study destinations can exacerbate adjustment pressure on international students. It is worth noting that some students attempted to combine simple dietary adjustments, which reflects limited exploration of adaptability; however, overall, they still maintained their original behavioral patterns.

Language barriers impede medical communication. Language barriers are especially apparent in medical settings. 16 respondents indicated challenges in obtaining medical treatment due to their limited proficiency in English. This phenomenon corroborates Kamalova et al.'s (2022) assertion that linguistic proficiency influences the social adaptation of international students. For instance, P1 stopped seeking for medical help because “*he couldn't*

accurately describe his symptoms," and P9 used basic English and gestures to communicate simply but felt overwhelmed by complicated symptoms. Some students, like P4 who hired an interpreter, P12 who used translation software, and P17 who used body language to help them communicate, used different methods. These actions show how "mediating tools" work in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Students use technology or outside resources to make up for their language skills. But this compensatory mechanism doesn't work very well. For instance, P20 said, *"language barriers are still the biggest obstacle,"* which means that technology alone cannot fully fix the deep-seated communication problems that come from differences in culture and thinking.

Local healthcare efficiency and accessibility challenges. The efficiency of the medical system has been a source of pain in international students' health experiences. 8 respondents mentioned long waiting times and cumbersome processes. This phenomenon is closely related to the uneven distribution of medical resources in the Philippines. For example, P4 described *"waiting for hours to be seen,"* while P9 experienced a long process of filling out forms and waiting in line. It is worth noting that students' evaluations of the on-campus clinic are polarized: P19 recognizes the convenience of its basic first aid services, while P20 criticizes it as *"inefficient despite its low price."* This difference may be attributed to the different positioning of the services; the school clinic mainly deals with minor illnesses, while complex problems still require referral to external institutions. This is consistent with the research conclusions of Muhammad et al. (2024) that the limitations of institutional support can exacerbate the adjustment pressure of international students. In addition, some students give up seeking medical treatment due to cumbersome procedures, which reflects the potential risks of "marginalization strategies" in the process of cultural adaptation.

Effectiveness and affordability of medical services. Despite efficiency issues, respondents generally held a positive attitude towards the cost-effectiveness of medical services. 12 respondents mentioned the effectiveness of the treatment and the reasonableness of the prices. This positive evaluation is closely related to the cost advantages of the Philippines as an emerging study-abroad destination (Awang et al., 2018). For example, P4 praised the *"patient-doctor and reasonable consultation fee,"* and P15 recognized the *"reasonable price"* of the dental clinic. It is worth noting that this affirmation is mainly concentrated in primary medical care, such as P16 solving skin problems with over-the-counter drugs, and P12 being satisfied with the effect of routine treatment. However, for complex conditions requiring

ongoing follow-up, students still face the problem of lengthy procedures. This ambivalence reflects Berry's "integration dilemma" in cultural adaptation theory, international students must simultaneously accept the advantages of local resources while also dealing with structural barriers at the system level. This echoes Huong and Cong's (2018) call for non-traditional study destinations to improve service quality while maintaining cost advantages.

Perceived safety affects behavior strategies. The behavior patterns of international students are significantly correlated with their perception of safety. 18 respondents coped with their safety anxiety by adjusting their travel plans and limiting their scope of activities. This behavioral strategy is consistent with the "integration strategy" proposed by Berry, in which students maintain their original perception of safety while exploring the new environment to a limited extent. For example, P10 chose to "*leave immediately after finishing things in Manila,*" which not only maintains the avoidance of high-risk areas but also fulfills the necessary social participation. It is worth noting that this strategy shows consistency among students at different educational levels: both undergraduates and graduates tend to use Baguio as a safety anchor. This is consistent with Nicholls's (2018) research, which shows that safety issues may transcend academic differences and become a universal challenge.

Theme 2: The Experiences of Chinese International Students According to Their Demographic Profile

The relationship between demographic profile and accommodation choice. There is a certain pattern of correlation between the accommodation choices of Chinese international students and their demographic characteristics. From a sex perspective, both males (8) and females (10) mainly chose to share accommodation, but the proportion of females in shared accommodation is higher (10/11), while one male chose to live alone. This phenomenon may be related to the need for social support emphasized in social and cultural theories. Female international students may be more inclined to establish emotional connections through shared accommodation to alleviate the sense of loneliness during cultural adaptation (Berry, 1997). It is worth noting that language barriers and social isolation (Khakunova et al., 2020) may encourage students to form a support network of compatriots through shared accommodation. However, this living arrangement may also limit cross-cultural interactions, which is potentially contradictory to the integration strategies proposed by Berry.

In terms of age distribution, 10 people in the 18-30 age group chose to share accommodation, while 6 people in the 30-40 age group chose to share accommodation, and both participants aged 40-50 chose to share accommodation. This shows that older students are not more likely to live alone due to greater financial independence, but are more likely to promote social integration through shared accommodation. This result echoes Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which states that cross-cultural adaptation requires continuous social interaction. Sharing accommodation provides students of different ages with the opportunity to observe and learn about the local culture.

The difference between study stages is also significant: undergraduates (9 people sharing accommodation) and master's students (3 people sharing accommodation) are more inclined to live in groups, while one of the doctoral students chose to live alone. This difference may be related to changing academic needs – doctorate students may need more independent space to complete research, while undergraduate and master's students rely more on peer collaboration due to the pressure of coursework (Wen et al., 2018). In addition, the difference in teaching methods mentioned in the literature (such as interactive learning) may encourage younger students to enhance academic exchanges through shared housing (Jiang et al., 2021).

It should be noted that the “other” option was zero for all accommodation options, which may reflect the centralization of Baguio City University's accommodation resources or students' satisfaction with the available options. However, the data did not reflect the cultural background of roommates, which may affect the depth of social integration. Future research can further explore the balance mechanism between living with people of the same ethnic group and cross-cultural interaction to improve the understanding of adaptation strategies for international students.

The relationship between demographic profile and English proficiency. From a gender perspective, there are more English-fluent women (2) than men (1), while the proportion of men (2) reporting basic communication difficulties is slightly higher than that of women (1), which may be related to the difference in language learning investment during gender socialization (Berry, 1997). The age distribution shows that the 30-40 age group has the highest proportion of communication difficulties (2 people), which is consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which predicts that adult learners face greater cultural adaptation pressures during cognitive restructuring. It is worth noting that although there are

no fluent speakers in the 40-50 age group, the sample size limits the universality of this conclusion.

The differences in learning stages are particularly significant: 90% (9/10) of undergraduates had no significant language difficulties, while the proportions of difficulties among graduate students (1/3) and doctoral students (2/7) were 33% and 28.5%, respectively. This result contrasts with the study by Wen et al. (2018), which states that higher-level learners are more likely to adapt to an academic English environment. This may be related to the particularity of the Philippine higher education system, although English is the language of instruction, the differences in local teaching styles may pose a persistent challenge to students from non-Western backgrounds (Bing, 2022). At the same time, the English proficiency of Chinese students in the Philippines may also be more limited than those who choose to study in Europe and the United States. It is noteworthy that 28.5% of the doctoral students still reached a fluent level, which is consistent with Li's (2024) conclusion that academic immersion promotes language acquisition.

The data also shows differences in language adaptation strategies between groups: the 18-30 age group is more likely to improve their language skills through social interaction (10 people without difficulty), while the over-30 group relies more on formal language training (3 people in the 30-40 age group without difficulty). This phenomenon confirms Berry's cultural adaptation model – younger students are more likely to adopt integration strategies, while adult learners tend to choose separation strategies. The findings also revealed the inadequacy of the existing support system: more than 15% of the participants had basic communication difficulties, which echoes the need for institutional language support proposed by Santillan et al. (2018).

Theme 3: The Recommendations for Chinese International Students' Challenges and Problems

Academic adjustment and study skills. Academic adaptation is one of the core challenges Chinese students face in Baguio. Respondents generally emphasized the importance of active learning and communication. For example, P1 mentioned that “*more effort needs to be put into assignments and essays,*” which reflects the difference between the requirements of critical thinking and independent research skills in Philippine higher education and the traditional Chinese education model. According to sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this

academic adaptation requires cognitive restructuring through interactions with teachers and classmates. P8's suggestion to "*communicate with professors as early as possible*" is consistent with the research of Khakunova et al. (2020) that the interactive teaching style in the Philippine classroom requires students to actively express their views. In addition, P14 and P16 mentioned "*actively improving English proficiency*" and "*developing time management and self-discipline skills,*" respectively, which echoes Bing's (2022) research on the impact of language barriers on academic performance. It is worth noting that P5's "*freedom to express oneself*" reflects the shift from a teacher-led to a student-centered teaching model, which requires international students to break through cultural taboos and adapt to new academic norms. Chinese students' efforts to adapt to interactive and student-centered teaching methods correspond with the strategies for self-regulation identified by Magsino (2021), including goal setting and seeking assistance. These strategies are very important in performing successfully in school in a new educational culture that values autonomy and critical thinking.

Practical life preparation. Challenges in adapting to life mainly focus on resource management and emergency response capabilities. Respondents generally recommend planning a budget in advance (P3), preparing medicines (P6, P9), and learning basic cooking skills (P11). These suggestions reflect the particularity of the infrastructure in Baguio City, such as dealing with water and power outages mentioned in P12. According to Berry's model of cultural adaptation, the preparation of such practical skills is part of the "integration strategy" that helps international students adapt to a new environment while maintaining their cultural identity. P19 emphasizes the importance of "*keeping electronic and paper copies of important documents,*" which is consistent with the research of Martirosyan et al. (2019) on the complexity of administrative processes in non-traditional study destinations. It is worth noting that there are significant gender differences in the advice on preparing for life: female respondents pay more attention to medicine and cooking, while men pay more attention to budget management, which may be related to gender role expectations in culture.

Mindset and social support. Psychological resilience and social network building are key factors in the adaptation process. P2 suggests "*finding hometown companions to share experiences,*" which is consistent with Khakunova's (2020) research on the alleviation of loneliness by fellow countrymen's networks, but it may also limit cross-cultural interactions. P14 and P18, respectively, propose "*joining interest clubs*" and "*adapting to an English-only thinking mode,*" which reflects the combination of integration strategies and psychological

adaptation. According to sociocultural theory, participation in club activities can promote language practice and cultural understanding. P20 emphasizes “*maintaining realistic expectations and a resilient attitude,*” which echoes Khawaja and Stallman's (2011) research on psychological coping strategies. It is worth noting that some interviewees mentioned the difficulty of switching to academic thinking, which involves deep cultural cognitive differences and requires a longer adaptation process.

Administrative and policy challenges. Visa and administrative processes emerged as prominent issues. P4 noted the “*increased complexity of various procedures*”, while P7 and P10 mentioned the “*increased difficulty of applying for a student visa*” and the need for “*great patience*”. This is consistent with Peczalska's (2025) research on the Philippines' study abroad policy, and reflects the direct impact of the institutional environment on the international student experience. Berry's model shows that policy support is an important factor affecting the choice of cultural adaptation strategies. Current administrative barriers may force students to adopt “*detachment strategies*”. It is worth noting that the doctoral student population is more sensitive to such issues, which may be related to long-term visa requirements and the administrative complexity of academic programs.

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of key adjustment experiences across demographic subgroups. This table contextualizes the prevalence of key themes across different student subgroups, complementing the qualitative narratives with descriptive frequency data.

Table 2

Demographic-key experience cross-tabulation

Demographic characteristics	Academic interaction & collaboration	Critical Thinking/ Practical Application	Language/ Cultural Barriers	Professors' Supportive Guidance	Healthcare Access Challenges	Safety-Related Adjustments	Shared Accommodation Preference
Gender							
Female (n=11)	10	9	7	11	9	10	10
Male (n=9)	9	8	5	9	8	9	8
Academic Level							
Undergraduate (n=10)	9	8	9	10	7	8	9
Master's (n=3)	3	3	1	3	2	2	3
Doctoral (n=7)	7	7	2	7	7	7	6
Age Group							
18–29 years (n=10)	9	8	6	10	7	8	10
30–39 years (n=6)	6	6	3	6	5	5	6
40–50 years (n=4)	4	4	3	4	4	4	4

Academic interaction and collaboration is nearly universal (19/20 respondents), with all male students referencing this theme, underscoring its centrality in Philippine academic settings. Language and cultural barriers are widespread across genders and age groups, confirming it as a core integration challenge. Notable differences emerge in healthcare access, more commonly reported by doctoral and older students, and shared accommodation preference, stronger among females and younger students. These patterns align with qualitative findings, reinforcing the link between demographic characteristics and adaptation experiences.

This study focused on the small sample of Chinese international students in Baguio City, restricting generalizability to other Philippine regions, cultural groups, or urban/rural contexts. Methodologically, reliance on semi-structured interviews and the cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot of adaptation, not long-term change. Future research could expand sample or geographic scope, integrate mixed data sources, and adopt a longitudinal approach to enhance generalizability.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the complex sociocultural experiences of Chinese international students in the Philippines, shaped by institutional, linguistic, emotional, and educational contexts. Most students demonstrate resilience by seeking support from friends and employing personal coping strategies, but the responsiveness of the host environment, including institutional support, pedagogical practices, and policy frameworks, emerges as a critical factor influencing their adaptation. The findings underscore the necessity for institutional and policy-level interventions to address systemic and cultural disparities. The transition in the educational paradigm towards critical thinking and interactive learning in Philippine higher education presents developmental opportunities for students, but it also highlights the need for contextualized academic and linguistic scaffolding aligned with Chinese students' prior educational experiences. Theoretically, these insights illustrate nuanced applications of Berry's acculturation framework, emphasizing that integration strategies are shaped by host institutions' inclusivity and adding context-specific detail to how acculturation unfolds in emerging study destinations. The findings also align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that mediating tools, such as academic English support and cross-cultural feedback, are practical enablers of cognitive and social adaptation for Chinese international students.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. For Chinese students planning to study in the Philippines, it is advised to actively participate in interactive learning by familiarizing themselves with Philippine classroom practices, such as group projects, in-class debates, and peer reviews, while practicing critical thinking and collaborative discussion skills. Students should also work to improve their English proficiency, particularly academic English, using campus or online language centers to strengthen listening and speaking skills. Careful financial planning is essential, including budgeting for living expenses, setting aside emergency funds, and bringing necessary medications. Students are also encouraged to familiarize themselves with medical and safety resources, such as the campus clinic, nearby hospitals, and basic English medical terminology, while being aware of local safety conditions. Building mental resilience through journaling, sports, hobbies, or early use of campus counseling services is recommended to cope with stress or loneliness. Additionally, students should allow sufficient time for visa processing by preparing materials 3 to 6 months in advance, monitoring policy changes, and seeking assistance from their school's international office when necessary.

For Filipino teachers and schools, recommendations include strengthening English for Academic Purposes courses to address context-specific gaps identified in student narratives, particularly disciplinary writing conventions, oral academic discourse, and critical reading strategies. These courses should be embedded in first-year curricula to support students during their initial adaptation phase. Teachers should also provide clear, phased feedback that bridges students' familiarity with holistic evaluation and local expectations for critical analysis, for example, focusing first on structural clarity before addressing argumentative depth, framing feedback as growth-oriented to reduce anxiety caused by cultural differences. Mental health services should be expanded to include multilingual counseling teams paired with structured peer integration programs, such as subject-specific study groups with Filipino peers, cultural navigators, and workshops on local social norms. Activities promoting cultural exchange, including joint projects, cultural festivals, and community service initiatives, should be credited in coursework to incentivize participation and mitigate reports of superficial socialization and exclusion from local networks.

For Philippine policymakers, it is recommended to establish dedicated service windows for international students, staffed with Chinese-speaking personnel to assist with visa applications, document verification, and extension inquiries. Policies should be regularly

updated and communicated through official channels to reduce anxiety caused by information asymmetry. Scholarships and grants should be offered to outstanding Chinese students to alleviate financial burdens related to tuition, accommodation, and medical expenses, which were highlighted as significant stressors in the study.

For future researchers, increasing the sample size to include additional cities in the Philippines, such as Manila and Cebu, as well as students from various subject areas, is recommended to examine regional disparities in adaptation experiences. Longitudinal studies tracking graduates' career trajectories, cultural identity development, and the overall impact of their study abroad experiences are also suggested to gain a more comprehensive understanding of long-term adaptation outcomes.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Baguio Research Ethics Review Committee.

AI Declaration

The authors utilized ChatGPT, QuillBot and OpenPaperpal in the preparation of this work to improve readability and language. The authors reviewed and edited all content produced through the use of these tools, for which they fully accept responsibility in the final publication. Consensus AI and Elicit AI were used for the purposes of literature review, while Scribbr helped with reference formatting.

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