

# ***Framework for Implementation of Chinese Tea Culture Education for Acculturation of International Students***

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to understand the acculturation challenges of international students studying in China and examine avenues for better adaption to the Chinese society by integrating Chinese tea culture into their education. This paper outlines the social and psychological distances of acculturation and challenges in adapting to the Chinese society, and how the Chinese tea culture, with its linguistic, artistic, and ideological features, would be a good means of addressing the linguistic, cultural and psychological challenges that international students face. Practical suggestions are put forward for Chinese universities to provide various tea cultural experiences for international students.

## **1. Introduction**

As global education develops rapidly, international students are crucial for the long-term success of higher education institutions. In terms of cultural benefits, international students may enrich the host country's social diversity, increase global recognition and spread national values, traditions, and views to the world. However, international education can be challenging as it presents students and the institutions hosting them with some challenges, due to the cultural differences, when international students are away from their home countries, they may be struggling to adapt or to establish a sense of belonging to their new learning environment. Consequently, distinctive stresses posed by the acculturation process can have profound negative effects on the students' well-being and general educational experience.

Thus, Chinese universities should be well-prepared to address international students' acculturational issues for them. With better learning experiences, the students would also be able to develop competitive advantages in the global-learning era. However, conventional teaching methods appear to be insufficient or even ineffective for international students to assimilate into Chinese society. Despite the learning experience within the universities, more opportunities to communicate with the local society and culture are necessary for international students to adapt to the hosting environment.

This paper aims to present a conceptual framework for adopting the Chinese tea culture to ease the acculturation process for international students. The research questions include:

What types of acculturation stresses do the international students face while learning in Chinese society?

What components of Chinese tea culture could be beneficial to improve international students' acculturation process?

What practical procedures could be established by the Chinese universities to introduce tea culture to international students for their acculturation?

## **2. Research background: The sustainable development of Chinese tea culture**

Chinese tea culture has a profound history. It was formed two thousand years ago and culminating in the Tang and Song dynasties. Throughout its history, Chinese tea culture has constantly supplemented and enriched itself with the essence of other ideological streams and intellectual fields to make it vibrant and dynamic in different eras. At present, many are exploring ways for better integration of Chinese tea culture, as a component of Chinese traditional culture, into the global modern society and realize its sustainable development in the future.

In fact, during its long history, Chinese tea culture has been spread to many countries in the world through commercial, cultural, and political links, and through multiple routes. It has taken roots in some countries, integrated with the local culture, and developed tea culture with local characteristics, such as British tea culture, West Asian tea culture, Japanese tea culture, and South Asian tea culture. Although the tea cultures in these countries or regions developed their own characteristics, in many aspects they are closely related to the Chinese tea culture and share many common connotations with it. At present, there are more than 3 billion people who like to drink tea as a beverage in 160 countries and regions. Because of the cultural connections and the common favor of tea drinking among the Chinese, it would be a good attempt to enhance the cross-cultural sustainable development of Chinese tea culture, and introduce its rich contents to the world through education for the international students in China.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1. Acculturation of International Students**

Originally acculturation was conceptualized as a model merely concentrates on the experiences of migrants, due to the increase of migration in decades, and it was defined as a pressure on migrants to discard their cultural heritage and adapt to the culture of the host country. However, over the past thirty years, studies have involved acculturation to the pedagogical field because acculturative changes occur in international students' learning experience abroad.

Based on the acculturation models of Safdar et al. (2003) [1], it is expectable that international students may face many life changes while being in a new culture. These changes could potentially turn into sociocultural stressors. Previous research suggested that affective variables such as attachment style, isolation-anxiety, and sense of unfamiliarity would hinder international students' ability to form normal lives, and the development of socio-cultural and psychological adaptation (Brisset et al., 2010 [2]; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006 [3]). Cultural norms, language barriers, and historical factors of the host society may also hinder their sense of belonging, and possibly result in loneliness.

Ten participants in an Australian qualitative study found difficulties for international students in socializing with the local people (Townsend & Poh, 2008 [4]). In another qualitative study by Sawir, et al. (2008) [5], two hundred Australian international students experienced loneliness, and 67% students complained about isolation in their host country, especially in the beginning period of their stay. In other studies, international students complained about less social support than domestic

students (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008) [6], and more loneliness and homesickness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002) [7]. In summary, besides merely studying in the universities, international students would generally also like to assimilate or integrate with the host culture, to establish friendships and form “colorful” living experiences abroad. The host institutions should attempt to introduce local cultures and social environments to international students. As for the Chinese universities, Chinese tea culture would be a great means of getting international students closer to the cultural background of society.

### 3.2. Tea culture education in China

The character “tea” was firstly found in “The Book of Songs” written in the preliminary period of the Western Zhou dynasty. Shen Nong was legendarily the first Chinese person to found tea plants and started the habit of tea drinking. According to the book “The Bible of Tea”, it was estimated that the discovery and use of tea by ancient Chinese people dated back to around 5000 years, however, tea was not a common drink among the public for leisure purposes till the Tang dynasty.

Tea culture is nowadays seen as an important item and one of the symbols of Chinese culture. It is quite complex and combines numerous elements including humans and art, and the nature and environment. Tea culture also symbolizes the spiritual pursuit of tea markers and drinkers. The value of tea culture lies in its positive impacts on human physiological, mental, and emotional health, and social etiquette that influence interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, many Chinese scholars have adapted the tea culture to their educational practices. Li (2022) [8] experimented with incorporating the spirit of tea culture in the ideological and political education of Chinese universities and vocational colleges, in order to improve the effects of ideological education for Chinese students; Other teachers have applied tea culture in different majors for Chinese students such as Chinese literature, English, music, fine arts, interior design classes and so on (Wang, 2022 [9]; Su, 2022 [10]; Zhang, 2022 [11]; Guo, 2022 [12]). Positive feedback was recorded in terms of cultural confidence and national identity recognition of the students.

As for international students, tea culture has been regarded as an effective topic for linguistic and cultural education. Tea literacy and poems are considered an inspiration for international students at all levels to appreciate the beauty of the Chinese language, and the activities on tea culture are used as ice-breaking practices for international students as a means of better integrating into local society. For instance, Russian students in Kiamusze University found themselves more confident to learn the Chinese language and culture after taking part in the tea cultural activities and made fewer communicative errors in their daily life (Li, 2021 [13]), and the Korean students in Tianjin expressed a sense of closeness and attachment to the local community after learning about Chinese tea culture and its influence on Korean culture (Gao, 2018 [14]). These practices have proven the effectiveness and usefulness of tea culture education to international students to improve their acculturation experiences.

## 4. Discussion

Based on the literature review and previous studies, the research questions highlighted earlier will be discussed separately.

### 4.1. Types of acculturation stresses that international students face while learning in Chinese society

International students suffer from both social and affective variables while studying abroad. In terms of international students in China, we can refine those variables into the followings:

(1) Challenges in adapting to the Chinese language for international students in China, or linguistic distance.

Language as a necessity for communication can be deemed as an obstacle of accepting different cultures. Therefore, once students integrate into a new language environment, it is inevitable that they may face difficulties in all aspects of lives in the host country. For international students from non-Chinese speaking countries, the Chinese culture may not be easily understood. It would explicitly hinder their learning initiative and cognition of Chinese culture. If not addressed, international students may even have a negative attitude toward learning Chinese and Chinese culture and be less self-confident to communicate in the Chinese language. According to survey data, international students who have been in China for three to four years still feel a little dazed and have difficulty communicating fluently in the Chinese language. The frustrations and incomprehension of the language itself would in turn affect their studies and daily life in China.

(2) Challenges in adapting to Chinese regional culture for international students in China, or cultural distance.

China has a vast territory and a large population, and between different provinces or even within one province, there are unique regional cultures and different artworks. Although international students may learn about the Chinese language in the classroom, they may still inevitably face difficulties in their social lives because of the cultural shock of a completely “strange” environment. It may be difficult to truly understand the Chinese cultural atmosphere in their spare time, and they may find it challenging to appreciate the artistic elements around them. Interviews with international students showed that many of them were confused or unfamiliar when they visited local museums or other cultural attractions by themselves. Thus, exposure to the cultural practices is an important window for international students to learn about the Chinese cultures and to be familiarized with regional art.

(3) Challenges in adapting to Chinese social life and values for international students in China, or psychological distance.

Numerous studies highlighted earlier have found that international students may face difficulties really fitting into the circle of Chinese people and truly integrate into the local community because of differences in social manners, communication principles, religions, and perceptions of lives. It can be very distressing to be treated like “foreigners” incapable of understanding the Chinese lifestyle. When living with the locals, the feeling of anxiety or strangeness could hinder communication; and for the Chinese community, they in turn hope their international friends understand the Chinese ideology and values in addition to merely speaking the language.

#### **4.2. Components of Chinese tea culture that could be beneficial to improve international students’ acculturation process and solve the problems of stresses**

Chinese tea culture has rich connotations, which can be divided into three categories, namely, intellectual and cultural connotations, artistic and aesthetic connotations, and spiritual and ideological connotations. Each of these connotations can be applied to the education of international students.

(1) Introduce the features of the intellectual and cultural connotations of Chinese tea culture to international students, and solve the problem of linguistic distance.

Chinese tea culture is characterized by a profound knowledge system. On the one hand, the system is composed of the tea knowledge itself, such as the cultivation, production, types of teas, tea sets, drinking methods, etc., and on the other hand, it has been greatly integrated with many other fields. For example, the integration of tea knowledge and history makes tea culture more closely connected with Chinese history and even world history. Tea politics plays a very prominent role in the Tea-Horse Road, Silk Road, and other historical facts. In addition, the knowledge system of the Chinese tea

culture is embodied in architecture, art, literature, poetry, music, and many other aspects, such as tea introduction books, tea poems, tea paintings or tea activities, etc. In this regard, integrating the basic knowledge and historical connotation of tea culture into the teaching process of international students in China would enable them to learn more about the Chinese language, and have a better understanding of Chinese culture and history, beyond the limitations of textbooks and to appreciate the different cultural aspects of China. This is expected to greatly enhance their cross-cultural adaptation.

(2) Introduce the features of the artistic and aesthetic connotations of Chinese tea culture to international students, and resolve cultural distance.

The heritage of Chinese tea culture to this day is inseparable from its artistic and aesthetic value. Tea songs and dances, tea artistic performances, tea ceremony demonstrations, and others are considered concrete presentations of the aesthetic connotation of tea culture. Although international students may have some knowledge of the tea culture of their own country, the variety and integrity of Chinese tea art would continue to amaze them artistically. Therefore, integrating the artistic and aesthetic connotation of tea culture into the studies and lives of international students in China would offer them great ecstatic appreciation and enrich their lives abroad.

It is worth pointing out that Chinese tea ceremony is especially a unique culture, and it fulfilled the pursuit of spiritual enjoyment, and healthy supplement of water, and bio-activators supplement to the human body. Tea ceremonies are originally performed on special occasions such as wedding days, birthdays, formal parties, traditional festivals, and other significant events. Therefore, learning about tea ceremonies is not only learning the procedures of tea-drinking but also understanding traditional etiquette cultures. In addition, the tea ceremony establishes relationships with other arts such as traditional music, clothing, decorations, perfumes, flower arrangements, and cuisines. Therefore, the demonstrations of the tea ceremony could develop international students' aesthetic interests and feelings of excitement.

(3) Introduce the features of the spiritual and ideological connotations of Chinese tea culture to international students, and resolve the challenges of psychological distance.

The profound spiritual and ideological connotations of Chinese tea culture have been able to permeate all aspects of the daily lives of the Chinese and to a certain extent affect the Chinese national character and philosophy. For instance, since there are religions such as Confucians, Taoist, and Buddhist, as well as people without any religion in China, Chinese tea arts are separated into branches such as Confucianism tea, Taoism tea, Buddhism tea, and vulgar tea ("tea of the public"), to conform to the corresponding religious morals and behavior principles. Taoists regarded tea-drinking as self-cultivation, to keep the unification between the soul and the body; meanwhile, Buddhists considered drinking tea useful for the deep understanding of Zen; tea and drinking tea are regarded as a way of hospitality and an embodiment of the humanistic quality by Confucians. Chinese tea culture also possesses the Confucius philosophy of "self-development, family management, state governance, and peace maintenance" in society, which inspires people to improve themselves and associate their ideas, and ambitions with the nation as well as to make their own contributions to the national development and revitalization.

Therefore, integrating these connotations into the education of international students via Chinese tea culture will enable them to gain knowledge of the Chinese language to the understanding of Chinese national spirit and value pursuit. This would enhance a better understanding of Chinese life philosophy and social principles, better interact with the Chinese community, and better integrate themselves into the learning and social environment in China.

#### **4.3. Practical procedures that could be established by the Chinese universities to introduce tea culture to international students for their acculturation.**

Drawing on the different characteristics and patterns among all the components of tea culture mentioned above, Chinese universities can organize a variety of cultural activities and practices in different locations and occasions. Here are some suggestions for the universities to integrate tea culture in their educational process.

(1) To integrate tea culture into the classroom education of international students in China to learn about the Chinese language and culture.

Practically, international students in China would certainly undergo Chinese language education and education on Chinese culture and society, therefore universities can consider incorporating more tea cultural knowledge into Chinese language lessons. In this process, it is necessary to select the appropriate knowledge from tea culture in relation to the textbook/course content, to integrate tea culture more skillfully and less intentionally. In the process of teaching, it is also important to innovate and enrich the pedagogical methods and media. For instance, tea calligraphy and articles reading, movies, songs, and opera plays related to tea culture can be incorporated into the course for the international students to enjoy the lessons while simultaneously learning the tea culture as well as the Chinese language and the culture.

(2) To capitalize the use of the social communication function of Chinese tea culture to improve cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China

One of the important functions of Chinese tea culture is social communication, which can be quite similar to other tea cultures in other countries. Therefore, Chinese universities should capitalize on these functions. Universities may consider organizing tea parties or salons and afternoon tea meetings where Chinese and international students can chat together over a cup of tea, to enhance mutual understanding and relationships with native speakers. In addition, universities could organize several activities such as tea art performances and tea ceremony demonstrations, for international students to gain knowledge of the profound tea culture.

Another good practice would be for international students to visit local tea houses and shops to experience the significance of tea in the real lives of the Chinese community. Opportunities like this will grant students to communicate with common people and gradually eliminate their feelings of isolation.

(3) To organize first-hand experience and practice in tea-producing sites for international students.

Many universities in China, especially those in South China, are located in tea-producing areas, such as Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Hunan. Universities in these areas ought to take advantage of availability of tea plantations and organize visits for international students to experience the process of tea planting and production, as well as to be involved in local tea picking and daily lives of the tea planters. Thus, students would have firsthand encounters to better understand tea culture beyond the textbooks and classrooms. They would experience the vibrant Chinese culture and values. This would not only enrich and diversify the social lives of international students but will also enable them to improve their cross-cultural adaptation as they strengthen ties with Chinese students and the local community. Undeniably in these practices, close contact between international students and the Chinese community could be result in future spread of tea culture worldwide when international students return to their home countries and it could also stimulate future tea business and consumption, which is vital to realize the global and sustainable development of tea culture.

#### **5. Conclusion and Proposed Framework**

With the rapid increase of international students seeking to learn the Chinese language and culture



in China, it is the responsibility of host universities to ensure effective education as well as interesting and colorful life experiences for their international students. During the process of learning and integrating to Chinese society, most of international students may experience acculturation difficulties. Chinese tea culture, with its long history and abundant connotations, may serve as a useful avenue to introduce the Chinese language, history, culture, and ideology to international students to be closely connected to local society.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the acculturation stresses of international students in China and to put forward some suggestions and methods to enhance their cross-cultural adaptation by capitalizing on the Chinese tea culture. Based on literature review and practical experiences, the proposed framework of the Chinese tea culture and international students' acculturation is illustrated in Figure 1.

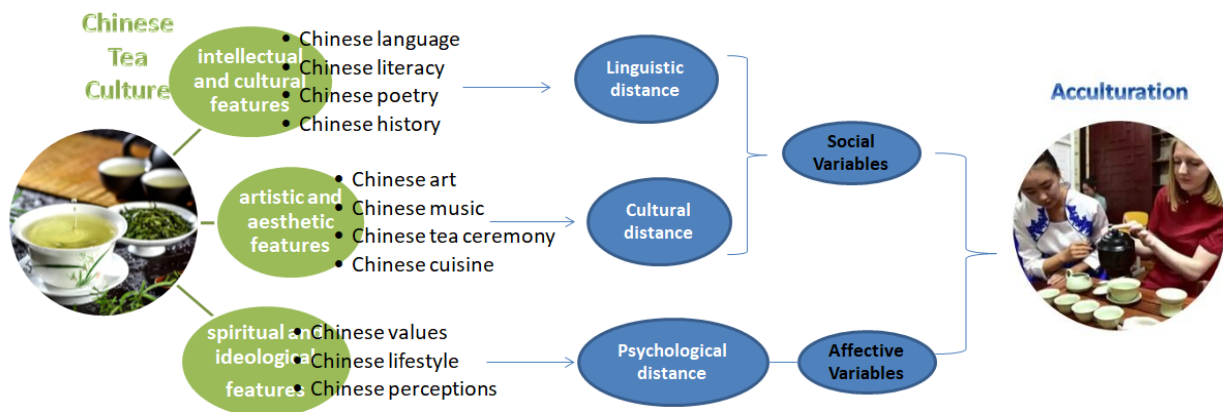


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the paper

The different components of Chinese tea culture cover a wide scope of Chinese language, culture, and ideology, which can be used to resolve the challenges in the international students' acculturation process. The intellectual and cultural features of the Chinese tea culture have influenced the Chinese linguistic system, Chinese literacy, and poetry, and have also affected Chinese historical development. Thus, introducing the linguistic and historical tea features would assist in reducing the linguistic distance of international students in China. The introduction of artistic and aesthetic features of the Chinese tea culture that have taken roots in Chinese art and music may enhance the appreciation of international students of Chinese culture, especially the practices of the Chinese tea ceremony would provide opportunities for international students to establish a systematic concept of Chinese culture, thus resolve the cultural distance that affects the daily lives of international students. As for the spiritual and ideological features that appear in the behaviors and thoughts of the Chinese community, the Chinese tea culture offers chances for international students to adapt to Chinese values and lifestyles, hence reducing the psychological distance within their acculturation. Those distances constitute the social and affective variables of acculturation that influence international students learning experiences abroad, while the Chinese tea culture may be a good solution to these challenges.

The significance of the paper lies in the positive combination of acculturation theories with Chinese traditional tea culture to assist international students in dealing with the challenges they may face, and in the same time, the study also explores the plentiful components of Chinese tea culture and relate them to the new international education environment, in order to promote the global reputation of Chinese tea culture hence realize the sustainable development of this ancient culture.

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