

Impact of Cultural Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence on Cross-Cultural Adaptation: A Literature Review on the Mediating Mechanism of Psychological Adaptation

Wang Qi¹, Mohd Shukri Ab Yajid² & Jacqueline Tham³

^{1,2&3}Post Graduate Centre, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, Section 13, 40100, Selangor, Malaysia.

¹Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, No.169 Shuang Gang East Road, Nanchang city, P.R.China.

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*Corresponding Author: Wang Qi | Email: 35703384@qq.com

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Abstract

Review Article

With the intensification of global integration and cross border mobility, the ability of individuals to effectively adapt to culturally diverse environments has become a critical area of research. This paper provides a comprehensive literature review on the determinants of cross cultural adaptation (CCA), focusing specifically on the synergistic roles of Cultural Intelligence (CI) and Emotional Intelligence (EI). By synthesizing existing empirical studies, this review explores how these two distinct yet complementary intelligence constructs facilitate adaptive outcomes.

The analysis reveals that both CI and EI serve as significant predictors of successful cross cultural transition. A key contribution of this study is the identification of a dual resource mechanism where CI provides the cognitive and behavioral tools to navigate cultural nuances, while EI offers the affective regulation necessary to manage intercultural stress. Furthermore, this paper highlights the pivotal mediating role of Psychological Adaptation (PA). It argues that CI and EI do not merely impact CCA directly but primarily function by enhancing an individual's internal psychological wellbeing and resilience, which in turn fosters better socio cultural integration.

The significance of this research lies in its integrated theoretical framework which combines the Stress Adaptation Growth model and Social Learning Theory to clarify the internal psychological path of adaptation. The innovative value of this review is found in its shift from a fragmented understanding of individual traits to a holistic mediation model that prioritizes mental equilibrium as the core of intercultural success. These findings offer critical practical implications for higher education institutions to develop targeted interventions that support the holistic wellbeing and academic integration of international students.

Keywords: Cultural Intelligence (CI), Emotional Intelligence (EI), Cross-Cultural Adaptation (CCA), Psychological Adaptation (PA).

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1. Introduction

Cross-cultural adaptation (CCA) is a complex, multi-dimensional process that international students undergo as they strive to balance academic requirements and daily life within a foreign

environment. As the internationalization of higher education continues to accelerate, China has emerged as a significant global destination for students seeking diverse academic and cultural experiences (Wang et al., 2025). However, relocating



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to a country with a distinct linguistic and social structure often triggers culture shock, leading to challenges in psychological well-being and social integration (Lin & Lou., 2023).

Current academic discourse emphasizes that successful adaptation depends not only on external social support but also on an individual's internal cognitive and emotional competencies. Among these, Cultural Intelligence (CI) and Emotional Intelligence (EI) have been identified as critical psychological resources (Cai, 2025). CI enables students to effectively decode and respond to unfamiliar cultural cues, while EI facilitates the regulation of emotions during stressful intercultural encounters.

This review aims to synthesize existing literature to explore the mechanisms through which CI and EI influence the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China. Specifically, it investigates the mediating role of Psychological Adaptation (PA) in this relationship. By establishing a logical pathway from intelligence to psychological state and ultimately to adaptive outcomes, this paper seeks to provide a theoretical foundation for universities to develop targeted psychological interventions and intercultural training programs.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Concept Analysis

2.1. Theoretical foundation

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates the Stress Adaptation Growth Model and Social Learning Theory to explain the mechanisms through which cultural and emotional intelligence influence cross cultural adaptation via the mediating path of psychological well being.

2.1.1 The Stress Adaptation Growth Model

The Stress Adaptation Growth model developed by Young Yun Kim in 2001 offers a dynamic perspective on cross cultural adaptation as a cyclical process of stress, adaptation, and growth. According to this model, encountering a new culture inevitably introduces stressors such as confusion and anxiety which challenge an individual's internal equilibrium.

Adaptation occurs when the individual employs internal coping resources to manage these stressors, eventually leading to psychological growth (Labrie et al., 2022).

In the context of this study, the Stress Adaptation Growth model provides the primary justification for the mediating role of psychological adaptation. It posits that successful cross cultural integration is not a direct result of external exposure but is achieved through an internal bridge of emotional regulation and mental stability. Therefore, individuals must first achieve a state of psychological equilibrium before they can effectively flourish in the host social and academic environment. This theory supports the hypothesis that personal intelligences act as resources that facilitate this internal growth process (Sisk & Gee, 2022).

2.2.2 Social Learning Theory

While the Stress Adaptation Growth model explains the process of adaptation, Social Learning Theory pioneered by Albert Bandura in 1977 clarifies the role of specific individual competencies in this journey. The theory emphasizes that learning and adaptation occur within a social context through observation, modeling, and cognitive processing. A core element of this framework is self efficacy, which refers to the belief of an individual in their capability to perform and succeed in specific tasks (Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022).

Social Learning Theory is highly relevant to the study of cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence. Cultural intelligence allows students to observe and emulate prevailing cultural practices effectively, while emotional intelligence provides the self efficacy needed to manage interpersonal relationships and emotional feedback during the learning process. Within this framework, cultural and emotional intelligences are viewed as cognitive and affective tools that enable international students to learn the new culture more efficiently, thereby reducing the psychological burden of adaptation and fostering better social cultural outcomes (Rumjaun & Narod, 2025).

2.2 Dimensions of Cultural Intelligence and Its Role in Intercultural Settings

Cultural Intelligence (CI) is defined as an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings (Els & Jacobs, 2023)). Unlike general intelligence, CI focuses specifically on the cognitive and behavioral flexibility required to navigate multiple cultural environments simultaneously (Li et al., 2024). According to the foundational model proposed by Earley and Ang (2003), CI is not merely about possessing cultural knowledge but involves the integration of three core dimensions: cognitive, motivational, and behavioral.

The cognitive dimension involves an individual's mental map of different cultural norms, values, and social structures, enabling them to interpret unfamiliar cultural cues accurately (Earley et al., 2006). This cognitive clarity often fuels the motivational dimension, which refers to the intrinsic interest and confidence in interacting with diverse cultures, whether driven by career goals or personal curiosity (Rachmad, 2022). Finally, the behavioral dimension reflects the ability to translate these internal insights into appropriate verbal and non-verbal actions (Moslehpour et al., 2024).

These dimensions are interdependent; for instance, high cognitive CI enhances an individual's understanding of local practices, which in turn boosts their motivation to engage, eventually leading to more effective behavioral adaptations in real-world scenarios, such as multinational management or cross-cultural research (Chen et al., 2024). In the modern era of global mobility, CI serves as a vital meta-capability for international students to minimize culture shock and foster successful integration.

2.2.1 Emotional Intelligence and Affective Regulation in Diverse Cultural Environments

While cultural intelligence provides the strategic framework for navigating new environments, Emotional Intelligence (EI) offers the essential affective foundation for cross-cultural success. Broadly defined, EI involves the capacity to

identify, understand, and regulate both personal and collective emotional states (Bru-Luna et al., 2021). Grounded in the framework established by Goleman and Cherniss (2024), this competency encompasses four integrated dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

In the context of international education, self-awareness functions as a real-time monitor, allowing students to recognize their immediate psychological reactions to cultural discrepancies, such as underlying frustration or anxiety (Goleman et al., 2013). This awareness is a prerequisite for self-management, which empowers students to temper these emotional responses. By maintaining a regulated internal state, individuals can preserve an open-minded and flexible stance even when confronted with jarring or conflicting communication styles (Jabeen et al., 2024).

By extension, the social dimensions of EI enable a deeper form of empathy. This allows students to accurately interpret the emotional signals of their local peers, a skill that proves indispensable for building mutual trust and long-term social networks (Sadiqzade, 2024). This proactive emotional regulation serves as a critical buffer against the stresses of cultural displacement. Ultimately, by mitigating initial negative impulses and fostering a sense of belonging, high levels of EI facilitate a much smoother transition into the host society, transforming potential cultural conflicts into opportunities for meaningful engagement (Sadiqzade, 2024).

2.2.2 Distinguishing between Socio-cultural and Psychological Dimensions of Cross Cultural Adaptation

Cross-cultural adaptation (CCA) represents the dynamic process through which individuals navigate and eventually function within the social, communicative, and cultural frameworks of a foreign environment (Banai, 2022). As a multidimensional phenomenon, CCA involves several developmental stages, including initial culture shock, the activation of coping mechanisms, and eventual stabilization

(Kim, 2024). While individual factors such as personality traits, social support networks, and prior experiences significantly influence the speed and success of this transition, the core of adaptation lies in the modification of an individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024).

A critical distinction within the literature, pioneered by scholars, divides the adaptation process into two primary dimensions: socio-cultural and psychological. Socio-cultural adaptation pertains to the behavioral domain, specifically the ability of an individual to acquire the necessary skills to navigate daily life and social interactions in the host culture (Farida et al., 2024). This aspect is heavily reliant on communication competence and cultural learning. Effective intercultural communication enables individuals to bridge cultural gaps, allowing them to not only observe local behavioral patterns but also to internalize the intangible values and beliefs that underpin them (Vallis et al., 2024).

In contrast, psychological adaptation focuses on the internal affective state of the individual, encompassing subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and emotional resilience within the new cultural context. This dimension is deeply intertwined with how individuals perceive and manage the stress of relocation. Genuine adaptation requires more than just outward behavioral conformity; it necessitates a fundamental cognitive and emotional alignment with the host environment (Vallis et al., 2024). By distinguishing between these two domains, it becomes clear that while socio-cultural adaptation reflects external functional success, psychological adaptation provides the essential internal equilibrium required for an individual to truly flourish, rather than merely exist, in a foreign land.

3. The Direct Impact of CI and EI on Cross-Cultural Adaptation

3.1 Cultural Intelligence as a Predictor of Adaptive Success

Cultural intelligence serves as a primary predictor of an individual's capacity to execute cross-cultural adaptation successfully. Research

consistently demonstrates that higher levels of this competency foster effective intercultural interactions, allowing for smoother navigation through diverse social and academic landscapes (Waseem and Hasan, 2020). For instance, expatriates with greater cultural intelligence are better equipped to adjust to new cultural settings, underscoring its profound influence on successful transition (D'Souza, 2022). Beyond personal adjustment, this capability extends to academic contexts where cultural adaptation driven by intelligence directly enhances the performance of students in foreign environments (D'Souza et al., 2023).

The impact of cultural intelligence is often facilitated by internal psychological factors. Resilience and self-efficacy act as critical mechanisms within this construct, helping international students in China and other regions manage the stress of relocation (Chu and Zhu, 2023). Furthermore, this intelligence promotes clearer communication and reduces misunderstandings, which is essential for knowledge sharing and collaboration within multicultural teams (Jayanto and Putra, 2022; Yue and Wei, 2023). However, the adaptation process is not without barriers. Even with high intelligence levels, factors such as ethnocentrism can moderate the effectiveness of adaptation, suggesting that while cultural intelligence enables students to navigate biases, personal stereotypes must still be actively managed (Jayanto, 2022). Ultimately, evidence suggests that through targeted training and experience, individuals can leverage their cultural intelligence to achieve better integration in highly globalized contexts.

3.2 Emotional Intelligence as a Buffer for Intercultural Stress

Emotional intelligence plays an equally vital role in the adaptive performance of individuals in foreign environments. Scholars have documented that this competency, alongside psychological resilience, aids in coping with the stressors and cultural differences encountered during relocation (Wang and Chiu, 2024). Individuals with high emotional intelligence demonstrate superior cultural adaptability, which subsequently leads to more

effective social and occupational integration (Kai et al., 2024). This emotional foundation is indispensable during the transition to new surroundings as it improves interpersonal relations and facilitates the overall change process (Gebregergis et al., 2024).

The significance of emotional intelligence is particularly evident in the realm of interpersonal communication. Individuals capable of identifying and regulating their emotions can interact more effectively with people from different backgrounds, a skill that is paramount for successful adaptation (Alifuddin and Widodo, 2022). Some research even suggests that emotional intelligence may have the strongest influence on job performance and cultural adjustment among employed groups (Abdyrahmanova and Poór, 2023). Recent theoretical developments have further proposed the concept of culture bound emotional intelligence, which explains how emotional expression must be specifically adapted to the host culture's norms (Pathak and Muralidharan, 2020). By managing emotions and fostering social resilience, emotional intelligence meeting the complex challenges of cross cultural adaptation and ensures that individuals can flourish in unfamiliar environments.

3.3 Psychological Adaptation as a Driver of Cross Cultural Adaptation

Psychological adaptation is a fundamental component of the intercultural adjustment process, providing the emotional and cognitive stability necessary for long term success. Research indicates that psychological adjustment significantly enables both academic and social integration among international students, with emotion regulation and effective coping models serving as key catalysts (Bethel et al., 2020). Individuals who demonstrate robust psychological adjustment are typically more capable of building cultural competency and engaging in proficient cross cultural relations (Liang et al., 2023). Furthermore, the success of intercultural training programs is often contingent upon the psychological readiness of participants; those who possess higher emotional resilience and adaptability are able to master the nuances of new

cultures more readily (Mishu et al., 2023).

The positive influence of psychological adaptation extends across various professional and social domains. In multinational business contexts, greater psychological adjustment is closely associated with higher levels of entrepreneurial achievement and cross cultural competence (Ye and Dong, 2021). Similarly, in the context of humanitarian interventions, refugees who are psychologically adapted demonstrate a superior ability to cope with cultural stressors, leading to more successful integration into their host environments (Heim and Weise, 2021).

The relationship between psychological and socio cultural adjustment can also be influenced by the degree of connection an individual feels toward the host society. For instance, international students with strong host national identification often report higher levels of psychological well being, which subsequently drives more effective cross cultural adaptation (Bethel et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings imply that psychological adaptation improves the overall transition process by offering essential emotional support and coping strategies. By fostering a state of psychological readiness, individuals are better equipped to navigate the complexities of new cultural settings and achieve successful integration.

4. The Mediating Mechanism of Psychological Adaptation

4.1 The Mediating Role of Psychological Adaptation between Cultural Intelligence and Cross Cultural Adaptation

A significant body of research highlights how cultural intelligence indirectly enhances cross cultural adaptation through the mediation of psychological resilience and adjustment. For instance, international students in China with high cultural intelligence are more likely to develop psychological resilience, which in turn facilitates their successful adaptation to the host culture (Chu and Zhu, 2023). This mediating effect is also evident among expatriates, where emotional control and psychological adjustment serve as the internal

mechanisms through which cultural intelligence exerts its influence on cultural transition (D'Souza, 2022).

Beyond general social integration, psychological adaptation acts as a critical bridge in academic and professional settings. Research on students in Thailand indicates that those with superior cultural intelligence achieve better academic performance primarily because they are better able to psychologically and socioculturally adjust to their new environment (D'Souza et al., 2023). Similar patterns are observed in vocational contexts; for nursing students, psychological adaptability mediates the influence of cultural intelligence on career flexibility, underscoring the importance of mental resilience in coping with diverse work cultures (Sevinc and Ozdemir, 2024). These findings collectively suggest that while cultural intelligence provides the necessary cognitive and behavioral tools, it is the resulting psychological stability that ultimately ensures a smooth and effective transition into a new culture.

4.2 The Mediating Role of Psychological Adaptation between Emotional Intelligence and Cross Cultural Adaptation

The literature almost universally supports the assertion that psychological adaptation serves as a vital conduit between emotional intelligence and cross cultural adaptation. Emotional intelligence enhances adaptive performance largely by fostering psychological resilience and positive coping strategies (Wang and Chiu, 2024). Empirical studies on international students confirm that emotional intelligence exerts a strong positive effect on resilience, which subsequently facilitates the broader adaptation process (Chu and Zhu, 2023). Among younger populations, such as high school students, emotional intelligence has been shown to drive psychological adjustment through active coping styles, thereby supporting emotional stability in new cultural contexts (Wen & Wang, 2022).

The mediating influence of psychological adaptation is further underscored by its role in fostering both academic and general cultural

competence. Emotional intelligence aids in psychological adjustment, which is a prerequisite for successful integration into foreign academic systems and social environments (Al Botoush and Al Sarairoh, 2024). In professional domains, such as expatriate management in Taiwan, emotional intelligence directly impacts psychological well being and cultural competence, thereby mediating the final adaptation outcome (Liao et al., 2023). Furthermore, the role of emotional intelligence in fostering systems adaptability and academic adjustment suggests that its impact on psychological well being is a universal driver of cross cultural integration (Namugumya et al., 2022; D'Souza et al., 2023). By strengthening an individual's emotional and coping resilience, psychological adaptation ensures that the benefits of emotional intelligence are translated into successful and sustainable cultural adjustment.

6. Conclusion and Research Findings

6.1 Summary of the Research

This literature review has systematically examined the intricate mechanisms through which individual intellectual competencies influence the cross cultural adaptation of international students. By integrating the Stress Adaptation Growth model and Social Learning Theory, the study highlights that adaptation is a dynamic process driven by both cognitive and affective resources. The synthesis of existing research underscores that Cultural Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence are not merely isolated traits but are essential strategic tools that enable students to navigate the complexities of a foreign environment. Furthermore, this review identifies psychological adaptation as the critical internal state that determines whether these intellectual resources are successfully translated into visible socio cultural outcomes.

6.2 Key Research Findings

The first major finding of this review is that Cultural Intelligence serves as a robust predictor of adaptive success. By providing a cognitive map of cultural norms and the behavioral flexibility to

mirror local customs, Cultural Intelligence reduces the initial impact of culture shock and facilitates smoother social interactions. This suggests that students who possess high levels of cultural awareness and motivation are better equipped to decode unfamiliar social cues and minimize intercultural friction.

The second finding emphasizes the role of Emotional Intelligence as a psychological buffer. While cultural knowledge is essential, the ability to regulate personal emotions such as anxiety and frustration is what allows students to maintain long term persistence in a new environment. High emotional intelligence fosters resilience and empathy, enabling students to build trust with local peers and manage the affective demands of cultural displacement effectively.

The most significant finding of this study is the pivotal mediating role of psychological adaptation. The literature consistently suggests that the influence of cultural and emotional intelligence on cross cultural adaptation is largely indirect. Instead of affecting behavioral adaptation directly, these intelligences first enhance the individual's subjective well being and mental equilibrium. According to the Stress Adaptation Growth model, this internal psychological stability acts as the necessary bridge that converts latent intellectual potential into successful socio cultural integration. Without a foundation of psychological resilience, even highly intelligent students may struggle to achieve genuine adaptation.

7. Implications of the Study

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contributions of this review lie in the integration of multiple frameworks to explain the complex internal mechanisms of cross cultural adaptation. By combining the Stress Adaptation Growth model with Social Learning Theory, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individual intelligence constructs influence behavioral outcomes. A key theoretical implication is the validation of the mediation pathway where psychological adaptation serves as the essential

conduit between innate competencies and external success. This shifts the academic focus from a direct intelligence adaptation link to a more nuanced model that prioritizes internal psychological equilibrium.

Furthermore, this review expands the scope of Social Learning Theory by demonstrating that cultural and emotional intelligences are not static traits but dynamic learning tools that facilitate cognitive and affective modeling in foreign environments. By highlighting the synergistic relationship between cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence, the study suggests that intellectual and emotional resources are interdependent in overcoming the stressors of cultural displacement. This integrative perspective offers a robust foundation for future research to explore how varied psychological states can moderate the effectiveness of personal intelligences in different global contexts.

7.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this review offer several practical recommendations for higher education institutions and international student management. First, universities should move beyond providing general social support and instead implement targeted training programs that specifically enhance students' cultural and emotional intelligence. Workshops focused on developing meta cognitive cultural awareness and emotional regulation strategies can equip students with the necessary internal tools to navigate culture shock more effectively.

Second, this research emphasizes that psychological well being should be the core of international student support policies. Since psychological adaptation acts as the primary bridge to social and academic success, institutions must prioritize mental health services and resilience building interventions. Rather than treating psychological distress as a separate issue, it should be addressed as a fundamental component of the adaptation process.

Finally, by fostering an environment that encourages meaningful cultural interactions and

provides social learning opportunities, universities can better support international students in translating their intellectual potential into visible social integration. Implementing mentorship programs that facilitate peer modeling and social feedback can significantly reduce the psychological burden of relocation. Collectively, these practical measures ensure that international students can achieve both academic excellence and holistic well being in a globalized academic world.

8. Limitations and Future Research Directions

8.1 Limitations of the Study

Despite the comprehensive nature of this review, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, much of the existing literature relies on cross sectional data, which captures a snapshot of adaptation at a single point in time. This makes it difficult to establish a definitive causal sequence between intelligence constructs, psychological states, and behavioral outcomes over a long term period. Without longitudinal evidence, the dynamic evolution of cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence throughout the various stages of the adaptation cycle remains insufficiently explored.

Second, there is a notable degree of sample homogeneity in the reviewed studies. A significant portion of the research focuses on international students within specific geographic regions or academic disciplines. This narrow focus may limit the generalizability of the findings to more diverse populations, such as short term exchange students or those in non traditional educational settings. Furthermore, while psychological adaptation is recognized as a mediator, the specific components of this state, such as the distinction between affective well being and cognitive life satisfaction, are often grouped together, potentially masking more nuanced internal processes.

8.2 Directions for Future Research

To address these limitations, future research should prioritize longitudinal study designs to track how international students' cultural and emotional

competencies evolve over their entire academic tenure. Such studies would provide deeper insights into the developmental nature of psychological resilience and how it sustains long term socio cultural integration. Understanding the fluctuations in mental equilibrium during different phases of the adaptation process would allow for more timely and effective institutional interventions.

Another promising direction for future study involves exploring additional moderating variables that may influence the intelligence adaptation pathway. Factors such as digital literacy and the quality of virtual intercultural communication are becoming increasingly relevant in the modern globalized academic environment. Future frameworks should investigate how online social networks and digital peer support can either enhance or hinder the mediating role of psychological adaptation.

Finally, researchers should aim to diversify the cultural and professional backgrounds of study participants to ensure a more holistic understanding of cross cultural adaptation. Comparing the adaptive strategies of international students across different host countries and varying degrees of cultural distance could reveal how external environmental factors interact with internal psychological resources. By incorporating these dimensions, future studies can continue to refine the theoretical models of adaptation and provide more precise practical guidance for fostering global talent.

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