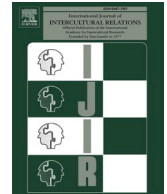




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Is everywhere I go home? Reflections on the acculturation journey of African international students in China

Allan Muganga ^{a,1}, Yohana Kifle Mekonen ^{b,c,2}, Michael Agyemang Adarkwah ^{d,*},
Oluwasegun A. Oladipo ^{e,4}, Chiamaka Nneoma Nweze ^{f,5}, Saira Bibi ^{f,6}

^a Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Institute of International and Comparative Education, China

^b International Center for Teacher Education, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

^c Department of Educational Psychology and Administration, Asmara College of Education, Asmara, Eritrea

^d Institute for Education and Culture, Chair of Adult Education, Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Am Planetarium 4, Jena 07743, Germany

^e Graduate School of Education, Peking University, Beijing, China

^f Faculty of Education Southwest University Chongqing China, China

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the acculturation journey of African international students in China, focusing on the evolution of their experiences. While previous research has often overlooked the progressive nature of international students, particularly from Africa, this study addresses this gap by examining how these students navigate academic, cultural, and psychological challenges over time. Using a conceptual framework informed by existing acculturation theories, the study identified six key dimensions shaping the acculturation process. Fifteen African international students, aged 25–36 years, with lengths of stay ranging from 4 to 7 years, were selected from three research-intensive universities in China. The findings reveal that early acculturation stress, including challenges like language barriers and culture shock, significantly impacts these students' psychological well-being and makes securing internships more difficult. However, students who accessed strong peer networks and received supervisor support demonstrated better coping strategies and higher satisfaction by their final year. This study shows that acculturation is a dynamic process and suggests that educational institutions should improve support systems to better support the well-being and academic success of international students.

Introduction

The trend of globalization has resulted in a gradual increase in the mobility of international students seeking educational and career opportunities worldwide. China, in particular, has become a choice destination and hub for a significant number of international

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: adarkwahmichael1@gmail.com (M.A. Adarkwah).

¹ 0009-0006-7887-4973

² 0000-0002-1051-3964

³ 0000-0001-8201-8965

⁴ 0000-0002-9666-8958

⁵ 0000-0001-8934-5213

⁶ 0000-0002-9794-0714

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students (Zhang & Zeng, 2023). This is partly attributed to its national diplomatic policies to foster bilateral economic and trade relationships through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and various partnership agreements (Oladipo & Sugandi, 2022). According to the Ministry of Education (2019) statistics, there were 492,185 international students from 196 countries in China in 2018. Most international students in China (60 %) are from Asia, with a significant percentage hailing from South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, and India respectively. Africa has recently emerged as the second-leading global region of international students in China, following China's position as Africa's biggest economic partner and source of foreign investment (Bodomo, 2018; Changsong, 2013). For instance, between 2015 and 2018 alone, the number of African students in China spiked by 64 % (Education in China, 2019), with Nigeria, Ghana, and Tanzania being the leading sending countries. In 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Education (2019) reported that 81,562 African students were studying in China. While international higher education as a whole offers tangible reciprocal benefits and enhances the host country's intellectual capital through the knowledge and skills of international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), the expectations of these students are impacted by various acculturation-related factors.

From a broader perspective, international students contribute more than just financial benefits to universities. This student population fills some voids in their host countries by sharing diverse cultural backgrounds and viewpoints, thus stimulating greater cultural understanding and appreciation (Harrison, 2002). African international students in China, for example, contribute a diverse array of knowledge and expertise in a variety of disciplines, thereby enhancing the intellectual resources of their host nation and providing valuable skills to its workforce. Although the experience can be quite mutually beneficial, whereby international students contribute valuable skills to the host country and, in return, receive higher education, there are a number of factors that influence their acculturation process. Acculturation, which is defined as the transformations that transpire when various cultures interact (Berry, 2005), poses distinctive challenges. Acculturative stress, which is the strain that results from adapting to a new cultural environment (Berry, 2006), could be a common challenge for African international students studying abroad in China.

However, to break it down a little more, acculturation is a process that is prevalent among a variety of groups, each of which must manoeuvre adaptation in its manner. Frequently, refugees are compelled to migrate as a result of war, conflict, persecution, or disasters, which results in involuntary adaptation and complex acculturation challenges in their host countries (Berry, 2005; Bhugra & Becker, 2005). On the other hand, migrants frequently relocate by choice, mainly with the intention of establishing permanent or long-term habitation. They engage in a process of incremental acculturation as they endeavour to assimilate into the host culture over an extended period (Sam & Berry, 2010). International students, for example, who are also referred to as sojourners, undergo a unique acculturation process. They temporarily integrate into a new cultural environment with the intention of returning to their native country. As a result of this transitory residence, their acculturation is frequently concentrated on short-term academic, cultural, and social adaptation rather than permanent integration (Berry, 2006).

This study looks at the acculturation process of sojourners, specifically African international students in China, who are confronted with the dual requirements of adapting to a Mandarin-dominated environment and meeting academic requirements in English. For all international students in China, inclusive of African international students, a case in point is that for linguistic requirements, all international students at the bachelor's level on a Chinese scholarship (CSC), particularly those from African countries are required to study their chosen majors with Chinese as the medium of instruction. For master's and PhD students who wish to study their majors in Chinese, they must have passed the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi level 5 (HSK 5) (Team, 2020). This is in contrast to those who choose to pursue their studies in English as the medium of instruction, where no HSK requirement is needed, most of the times. Furthermore, previous research recommends studying the acculturation of international students over time to inform how institutions support student well-being (Koo et al., 2021). Therefore, our study addresses this gap by examining the acculturation experiences of African international students in a non-Western setting, particularly China, focusing on how these experiences evolve, and how these students cope with acculturation challenges throughout their academic journey in China. To guide the study, the following overarching research question was posed: *What are the acculturation experiences of African international students, and how do they cope with the challenges of their academic sojourn in China?*

Acculturation

The concept of acculturation has been central to theories that attempt to explain how people and communities adapt to new environments. This section explains how the phrase came to be and the several models that have been put up to do it. Redfield et al. (1936) provided the first definition of acculturation, describing it as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (p. 149). According to this preliminary description, acculturation occurs at the group level and is characterized by mutually influential cultural interactions. In addition, acculturation has also been broadly defined as the process of adapting to a new cultural environment, which comprises various models, including Berry's (1997) strategies and Ward and Kennedy's (1993) framework, that bring in the aspects of psychological and socio-cultural adjustment. For international students, however, this process is often time-limited and influenced by academic, social, and cultural pressures unique to their temporary sojourn (Sam & Berry, 2010; Ward & Chang, 1997).

Two more recent definitions of acculturation provided by Smith and Khawaja (2011) and Makarova (2019) explicitly explain more about the "changes in behaviour and attitudes through contact between individuals from different cultural backgrounds", and also "the process of change that takes place as a result of two or more cultures coming into contact" (p. 700, p. 445, respectively). Having a sceptical view of these two definitions enables us to understand how cultural interaction occurs at the individual level but, most importantly, gives us a clear indication of the traditional view of acculturation as a static process, including changes in behaviour and attitude. Bridging all these ideas together, Berry's (1997, 2009, 2019) acculturation model has been important. It wholly brings in the

different approaches of acculturation, such as assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration, and how all these four approaches explain the different ways in which people who want to keep their own culture while also participating in a new one chooses to adapt to a different culture. According to [Berry \(1997\)](#), acculturative stress is one of those challenges that brings about worry and tension, which people (international students inclusive) may feel when adjusting to a new culture.

However, some research on international students, in a way, emphasizes a number of distinct acculturation challenges, such as language barriers, academic performance, mental health concerns, and social integration difficulties ([Mori, 2000](#); [Yan & Berliner, 2011](#)). African international students in China, for instance, just like other international students in the country, encounter additional pressures acculturating in a Mandarin-dominant environment and adjusting to local cultural norms ([Akhtar et al., 2015](#); [Agyenim-Boateng, 2022](#)). Often, the replicated adjustment problems are commonly related to cultural shock, language barriers, food, belief differences, homesickness ([Alasmari, 2023](#); [Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2023](#); [Mukminin, 2019](#); [Lovin et al., 2023](#)), and educational system discrepancies ([Mekonen & Xu, 2023](#)). Recent studies by [Alasmari \(2023\)](#) and [Lashari et al. \(2023\)](#) highlighted language-related academic, social, and psychological well-being challenges experienced by international students, primarily during their first year. Moving on, the duration of stay in host countries and initial expectations always significantly impact the acculturation process of international students.

In this regard, for example, [Koo et al. \(2021\)](#) identified a reciprocal relationship between acculturation stress experienced by first-year students and their satisfaction levels upon reflecting on their final year. Initial intercultural understanding is quite useful in facilitating better acculturation, as many international students encounter numerous challenges during their first year while adjusting to the new environment ([Aladegbaiye et al., 2023](#); [Means & Pyne, 2017](#)). According to [Aladegbaiye et al. \(2023\)](#), first-year acculturation difficulties result in the mental well-being of international students. The acculturation experiences of first-year international students receive little attention, which impacts their overall psychological and physical well-being, sociocultural adjustment, and overall expectations and satisfaction ([Koo et al., 2021](#)).

As earlier mentioned, most international students can also be referred to as “sojourners” in some other studies ([Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002](#); [McKinley, 2019](#); [Stasel, 2022](#)), and they must adapt as guests facing physical and mental stress ([Stasel, 2022](#)). Frequently, upon arrival, they may experience cultural shock or stress affecting their well-being ([Yu et al., 2019](#)). In addition to that, sojourners also go on to face challenges even before the adaption process takes place ([Brown & Brown, 2013](#)). Acculturation involves not just academic aspects such as language study and classroom dynamics but also making friends, coping with loneliness, and exploring new cuisines ([Yan, 2020](#)). To be more specific, taking an example of African international students in China, [Akhtar et al. \(2015\)](#) found that over-expectations and adverse weather conditions negatively affect their overall satisfaction and adjustment. Conversely, having a broad network of friends, prior cross-cultural experience, and knowledge of cultural differences positively influence their adaptation.

The acculturation experience of international students is further influenced by factors such as pre-immigration residence, housing, academic record, family structure, and the time spent since school admission ([Karim & Hue, 2022](#)). [Wadsworth et al. \(2008\)](#) also listed homesickness, discrimination, and satisfaction with educational settings as factors that impact acculturation and academic success. [Kim et al. \(2021\)](#) add that language barriers, cultural conflicts, limited social support, and emotional problems also challenge their acculturation. Failure to integrate leads to low socio-cultural and psychological adjustment, resulting in poor academic performance and vice versa ([Pekerti et al., 2020](#)), emphasizing the importance of a strong sense of belonging ([Karim & Hue, 2022](#)). In addition, African international students in China too face challenges such as homesickness ([Nyamwana, 2004](#)), discriminatory treatment ([Agyenim-Boateng, 2022](#)), and Chinese language complications ([Mao et al., 2024](#)), among others. Overcoming cultural shock and adapting to the host culture is crucial for achieving educational goals ([Wadsworth et al., 2008](#)) as well as transitioning.

When it comes to transitioning into new and unfamiliar academic environments, more scholars have further indicated that international African students are often susceptible to feelings of academic discomfort and shock ([Bai & Wang, 2022](#)), compounded by challenges unique to China’s linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics ([Zhang & Zeng, 2023](#)). Holistically, this is regarded as acculturation stress ([Constantine et al., 2005](#)), and indeed, it does impact many African international students due to their distinct cultural values and life orientations ([Allen, 2001](#)). Additional research also suggests that strategies for acculturation have proved important in predicting the psychological and socio-cultural adjustments of international students ([Bierwiazzonek & Kunst, 2021](#)). However, despite the abundance of research on acculturation in Western contexts, studies specifically focusing on African students are lacking ([Adams & Van De Vijver, 2017](#)). Hence, therefore, our study examines the acculturation journey of African international

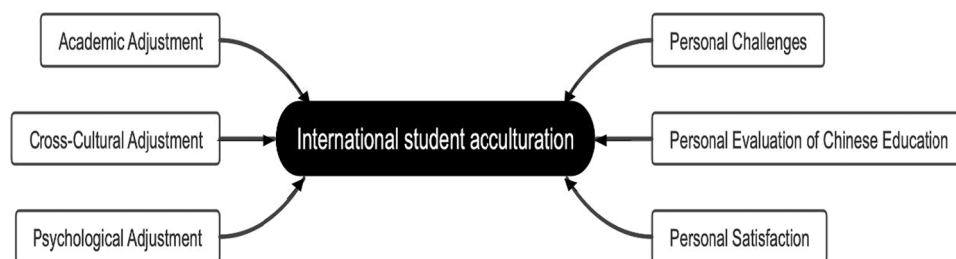


Fig. 1. A conceptual overview of the ongoing and dynamic process of acculturation of international students as they fit in from different dimensions, adapted from [Dentakos et al. \(2017\)](#); [Ward and Kennedy \(1994\)](#); [Gbadamosi \(2018\)](#).

students in China, aiming to understand how their experiences evolve over time, across the different acculturation dimensions as elaborated in the conceptual framework to follow.

Conceptual framework

The authors systematically developed a conceptual framework by drawing on existing acculturation research. A thorough review of relevant literature identified key dimensions shaping the acculturation process of international students (see Fig. 1). Through collaborative brainstorming, these dimensions were finalized: academic adjustment, cross-cultural adjustment, psychological adjustment, personal challenges, evaluation of Chinese education, and personal satisfaction. This framework was constructed based on established theories and empirical evidence from various acculturation studies (e.g., Dentakos et al., 2017; Gbadamosi, 2018; Koo et al., 2021; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

Different educational environments impact the academic adjustment of international students. According to previous literature, most academic adjustment-related challenges evolved due to international students' classroom experience discrepancies (Zhou & Zhang, 2014) or unfamiliarity (Lin & Yi, 1997) with the new educational system, instructors' expertise, lecture quality, content relevance and preparation (Ammigan & Jones, 2018) and language proficiency (Lashari et al., 2023). Language proficiency is documented as a significant contributor to academic adjustment by influencing lecture understanding, assignment writing, and courage to ask or answer in class and examinations (Mori, 2000). As the academic adjustment unfolds, students must also navigate cross-cultural challenges as outlined by various scholars in the literature. It is comprised of various factors such as distinct social values or traits (Qadeer et al., 2021) norms of novice setting and cultural mismatch (Lewthwaite, 1997), interaction level (Brisset et al., 2010), the potential to learn and assimilate new culture (Friedman et al., 2009), as well as language proficiency that impact their social interaction with people from diversified culture (Hendrickson et al., 2011). These factors hinder cross-cultural adjustment in a new host society (Dentakos et al., 2017). Now, while cross-culturally adjusting, students need to be in a proper psychological state perfect for them to face the host environment. As some scholars in the literature have put it, successful cross-cultural adjustment is closely linked with the psychological well-being of students (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Things like language proficiency mainly influence it (Luo et al., 2019) and personality factors, e.g., attachment, sociability level, and initiative to interact (Brisset et al., 2010; Koo et al., 2021). The mismatch between international students' expectations and reality (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), along with the varying quality of educational services (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017; Sherry et al., 2004), can result in psychological adjustment issues such as depression and loneliness and intensified stress (Amado et al., 2020).

After undergoing psychological adjustment, international students often encounter specific personal challenges that are significantly the nature of the host environment. Researchers have indicated that personal challenges, e.g., financial difficulties, are prevalent among international students (Li & Kaye, 1998; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007), with other factors such as work restrictions in the host country and significantly higher tuition fees (Mori, 2000). More evidence in the literature also shows that the health issues and safety of international students in foreign countries are a serious concern of these students (Arambewela & Hall, 2009). With such personal difficulties in place, it now gives international students a proper stand to have their personal evaluation of the host country's education system, for instance, their perceptions of university services, academic quality, and overall educational policies (Sherry et al., 2004). In addition, Sherry et al. (2004) pointed out that international students tend to perceive institutional services less favourably than domestic peers. This makes international students struggle to adjust to the education systems of the host country (Aubrey, 1991). Eventually, having a clear picture of the host country's education system gives students a sense of personal satisfaction to which several factors could be attributed, according to previous research in the literature. For instance, the provision of quality teaching, sufficient educational resources (Arambewela & Hall, 2009), interaction, and building social connections with locals (cited in Lewthwaite, 1997, p. 168). According to Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2006), international students' satisfaction is elevated when their actual educational experience outmatches their expectations. Each dimension of the conceptual framework is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Dimensions of the conceptual framework.

Dimensions	Definition
Academic Adjustment	Refers to supervisor support, instructor-student interaction, academic collaboration, teaching styles, and language of instruction (Lashari et al., 2023; McMahon, 2011; Mori, 2000; Telbis et al., 2014; Ying, 2005).
Cross-Cultural Adjustment	Involves the process of adapting to a new cultural context, including social norms, customs, dietary preferences, and communication styles (Lashari et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2019; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sherry et al., 2004; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).
Psychological Adjustment	Encompasses emotional and mental well-being, including issues such as depression, homesickness, loneliness, and confusion (Dentakos et al., 2017; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).
Personal Challenges	Includes a range of factors such as financial constraints, religious practices, and health issues (McMahon, 2011; Mori, 2000; Li, 2012; Luo et al., 2021).
Personal Evaluation of the Chinese Education System	Focuses on international students' perceptions and experiences regarding policies, assessment, feedback, teaching approaches, and expectations (Aubrey, 1991; Sherry et al., 2004; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).
Personal Satisfaction	Refers to international students' overall contentment and fulfilment with their academic and cultural experiences in the host country, such as academic success, social integration, and financial stability (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Li & Kaye, 1998; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Research design

To capture the acculturation experiences of African international students in China, we used a qualitative approach in order to capture the participants' experiences. Qualitative research is interested in "understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). In selecting possible participants, the study used convenience and snowball sampling, both regarded as purposive sampling techniques. Convenience sampling involves selecting individuals who are readily accessible and can offer valuable insights into an issue (Maxwell, 2013). Snowball sampling was later applied by asking participants to recommend relevant contacts of potential participants who might be interested in participating (Patton, 2015).

Three authors were involved in recruiting possible participants. They provided detailed information about the study, outlining its purpose and the voluntary nature of participation, along with a consent form attached. Finally, a total of 15 African international students from three Chinese research-intensive universities participated in the study. Participants' length of stay varied between 4 and 7 years, with ages ranging from 25 to 36 years. They were assigned codes (P1–P15) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. All the participants were in their final years of study. Demographic information is outlined in Table 2.

A self-developed interview protocol was designed to assist in data collection. The protocol comprises six sections based on the conceptual framework earlier introduced. Data collection involved individual semi-structured interviews, where participants were provided with the questions beforehand to facilitate thoughtful consideration of their experiences. After obtaining informed consent, interviews were conducted, which lasted an average of 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded for subsequent analysis.

In analyzing the interview data, both deductive and inductive approaches were employed. Initially, we applied the conceptual framework to deductively analyze the data. Subsequently, we adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic method to conduct an inductive analysis. Through multiple iterations of (re)coding, we identified key patterns and themes that reflect the acculturation experiences of participants. Consistent with Creswell and Creswell (2018), we systematically revisited the interview data employing the lens of the framework's predefined categories to determine areas necessitating additional evidence or the collection of supplementary information. Following this analytic process, we selected transcript excerpts that offer insight into participants' nuanced experiences.

Regarding positionality, all six authors share the common experience of pursuing academic studies in China, with three having completed their doctoral studies in Chinese universities and three currently enrolled. This insider status facilitated participant access and rapport. To ensure rigour, three authors participated in the collaborative analysis, and two served as peer reviewers, enhancing the study's credibility.

Findings

During the data analysis, a total of ten themes emerged, which include academic collaboration and supportive supervisor, culture shock, communication difficulties, COVID-19, psychological support, religious practices, financial stability, academic pressure, personal growth, and social activities. These themes and their subthemes fall within the categories of the study's framework and are outlined in Table 3.

Table 2
Demographic information of the participants.

Participant	Gender	Marital status	Education level	Year of Study	Field of study	Chinese language proficiency (HSK)	Country of origin	Years in China
P1	F	Single	PhD	7th	Education	HSK 3	Lesotho	7
P2	M	Single	PhD	5th	Economics	HSK 3	Uganda	4.5
P3	M	Single	PhD	5th	Education	Basic	Ghana	4
P4	F	Married	PhD	4th	Education	HSK 6	Nigeria	6
P5	F	Single	MA	5th	Mathematics	Basic	Algeria	6
P6	M	Single	PhD	5th	Environmental Science	Basic	Ghana	4
P7	F	Single	PhD	4th	Education	HSK 3	Ghana	4.5
P8	M	Married	PhD	5th	Education	HSK 3	Democratic Republic of Congo	4.5
P9	M	Single	PhD	5th	Education	HSK 3	Uganda	4.5
P10	F	Single	PhD	4th	Education	HSK 3	Liberia	4.5
P11	M	Single	BA	5th	Chinese Language	HSK 6	Nigeria	4
P12	M	Single	PhD	4th	Statistics	Basic	Ethiopia	7
P13	M	Single	BA	5th	Chinese Language	HSK 6	Nigeria	4
P14	M	Single	PhD	5th	Education	HSK 2	Lesotho	4
P15	F	Single	PhD	5th	Education	Basic	Eritrea	5

Academic adjustment

Academic collaboration and support

During the interview, participants emphasized the significance of academic collaboration and supervisor support for academic adjustment while studying in a foreign country. Participants in the Chinese language major indicated that they feel more freedom, openness, and positive relationships with their teachers and supervisors in China. Despite initial linguistic difficulties, many students eventually adapted and developed robust academic networks (e.g., with fellow students, but also with the teachers), and this enabled them to work together on class assignments and research.

In making a comparison, back home (Nigeria) I felt distant from teachers. But it's different here because most teachers are open and willing to help, even though I think it's peculiar to my major. My experience with teachers has been on a friendly basis, and although there are boundaries, teachers are quite free with students, which helps me in my studies [P11].

As a postgraduate student, I have boosted my research writing competencies from the collaboration I have with my team. We are all international students, and we discuss, learn, and share about various aspects physically or in our WeChat group. We work on research projects together, assist each other academically, and publish academic articles in teams. Our social connection is also good, and we support each other. Shortly, I built a strong collaborative network that remains even if I go back to my home country [P15].

I have a supervisor whose English isn't so fluent. So, it created a lot of problems and bottlenecks as far as communication is concerned. But these are things that I was able to overcome with time when I got myself into the Chinese culture and language classes. Although still a lot of challenges given the fact that many of the staff in China, especially even within the academia, speak and prioritize the use of Mandarin [P9].

Despite certain hiccups in communication, participants highlighted the positive impact of building professional networks/collaborations and working with international colleagues on their academic growth.

Cross-cultural adjustment

Culture shock

Culture shock was the major cross-cultural adjustment problem, according to most participants. This is mainly due to acclimatizing to different foods and etiquette, climate, and lifestyle (e.g., smoking in public areas). Especially in the first year, these difficulties were rather painful. However, students' adaptation to the local culture over time shows that their cross-cultural adjustment evolved gradually.

I was feeling lost and uncomfortable during my first year. This was because the kind of foods, culture, climate, language differences, and other minor issues had affected my stay in China during my first year as a PhD student. However, after returning from visiting my family after one year, these issues were no longer a problem. I think I started adapting to the environment [P12].

As I have studied survival Chinese language before, I don't have a problem with their culture because there is a saying, "When you go to Rome, behave like the Romans". But my only problem is some of their (locals) habits, like spitting carelessly and smoking in public places, including some restaurants [P13].

Social isolation was mentioned as a contributor to cross-cultural adjustment problems and impacted students' attitudes negatively. Participants shared their unhappiness and depression while experiencing discrimination, commonly in public transport and areas. Although these events were difficult at first, many of our participants overcame their fears by drawing on the support of their classmates and eventually settling into their new environment.

If I'm alone on a bus and I take a seat, I see that nobody wants to sit near me. They would rather stand or something. It would have been very depressing for me if I hadn't heard another African student share the same experience [P10].

I felt like everybody was a bit respectful in terms of giving you space, except for when we went outside the campus, where a lot of older people were taking photos of us. I didn't think that was such a big problem, but it always seemed like they were intrigued by how

Table 3
Themes and sub-themes.

#	Categories	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Academic adjustment	Academic collaboration and supervisor support	Develop professional rapport; Peer support; Team work
2	Cross-cultural adjustment	Culture shock	Behavioral discomfort; Dietary preferences; Social isolation
		Communication difficulties	Language barriers; Culture differences
3	Psychological adjustment	COVID-19	Lockdown; Isolation; Depression
		Psychological support	Counselling services in English; Social networking
4	Personal challenges	Religious practices	Religious practices
		Financial stability	Part-time jobs; Support to family; Future career path
5	Personal evaluation of Chinese Education system	Academic pressure	Feedback; School policies; HSK requirements; Education system discrepancies
6	Personal satisfaction	Personal growth	Academic achievement; Optimism; Cultural intelligence
		Social activities	Volunteering; Interaction with locals; Attending local events and festivals

we looked and our hair [P1].

I went somewhere for a visit after the pandemic lockdown lifted, and unfortunately, I was refused to book a hotel. I was informed that according to recent standards, the hotel could not accommodate international people. It was a sad moment [P14].

Communication difficulties

Participants mentioned that communication difficulties, particularly language barriers (Chinese language), and unfamiliarity with tradition and culture, led to hesitance in approaching their supervisors and the locals. A PhD participant with basic Chinese language proficiency indicated:

Mostly, if I have an appointment with my supervisor, I feel like I have to be ready. It's like I don't know more about the culture and how to approach it; maybe I think because my supervisor is old and I am afraid not to use inappropriate greeting or words [P15].

A female participant shared her language challenges in finding international shopping places for body care and fashion products that match her preferences:

I think in terms of communication in the beginning, it was not easy to ask how to shop for ladies' stuff, like cosmetics and other products [P1].

However, some participants disclosed that they were opportune to learn the Chinese language in their home country, making it easier to immerse in the Chinese culture. Others use translation applications (e.g., Baidu and WeChat) for daily communications. A PhD participant from Uganda expressed:

Some friends told me I could translate using mobile apps. Sometimes, the translation software has its weakness, it's upon you to know that sometimes this is not an accurate translation, but you can try to relate [P2].

Most participants identified culture shock as the main challenge in cross-cultural adjustment, citing difficulties with food, climate, lifestyle differences, and behaviours along with social isolation, which became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, other participants coped by learning Chinese before arrival or using mobile translation apps for daily communication.

Psychological adjustments

COVID-19 pandemic and psychological support

Respondents noted significant psychological adjustments from the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for those who arrived shortly before the nationwide lockdown. While the pandemic impacted everyone, some felt prolonged loneliness and depression while adapting to the new environment amidst the pandemic's uncertainties. However, participants still demonstrated an improvement in their psychological adjustment as time went on by adapting and reaching out to their social networks, psychological services, and peers for help.

The lockdown made me have a different perspective on life, that anything can happen at any time. Before COVID-19, I knew how life was, but the lockdown made me understand the importance of freedom. [P14].

If there were no African community, as I didn't have countrymate students with whom I could talk or exchange experiences, it would have been a pretty isolated time here for me as an introvert [P10].

Personal challenges

Religious practices

Participants shared similar responses regarding religious practices. In comparison to their home countries, Christian participants responded that they face challenges in practising religious activities as the churches in China are very few. As a means of coping, many resorted to continuing religious practices using internet platforms such as Zoom.

There are no Orthodox churches around. So, I only attend online programs via regular Zoom meetings. It's better to have something than nothing, so we just hold the gatherings like that. Also, as an Orthodox Christian, I have some food reservations, which limits my choice of food in the canteens and restaurants here [P15].

Financial stability

While most participants with support from the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) explained that they do not experience financial difficulties, those with dependents participants shared that they struggle financially. Non-scholarship holders stated that engaging in activities such as gym subscriptions incurs high expenses, which could pose challenges in managing their living allowance. Moreover, financial constraints influence the quality of participants' research. In order to alleviate the financial burden that some participants felt while doing research, they proposed that part-time jobs be more easily available to international students.

If you are only on a CSC scholarship living allowance, it's really difficult. There's also some extent you cannot go into your research due to that lack of financial support. For instance, you may want to do an intervention study, but it costs money to do that, the school doesn't fund that. It's difficult to do research of very good quality and rigorous enough with no budget. The little money that I have is for personal expenses, for my family back home, and all of that [P10].

Personal evaluation of the Chinese education system

Participants' evaluations of the Chinese education system were mixed.

Academic pressure

All participants indicated they have personal evaluations or perceptions about the Chinese education system ranging from policy, assessment and evaluation, feedback, and HSK exam requirements. Participants' evaluation of the Chinese education system can be viewed from two perspectives: satisfactory and partially satisfactory. Participants who indicated satisfaction with the education system cited positive factors such as having necessary learning facilities, provision of scholarships, and friendly teacher-student relationships. However, some expressed dissatisfaction with unexpected policies, such as the requirement to pass HSK for English-taught programs and the lack of feedback on assessments. Although these challenges affected their schoolwork, students overcame them by adjusting to the system's requirements and reaching out to their classmates for extra help.

As an international student, my knowledge about the Chinese education system is very little. But what I can say about the system is I am not happy with the imposed and inconsistent policies. Some policies appear suddenly, and when you try to ask, you get the response that it's a "new policy". For instance, in my admission notice, there was no HSK requirement stated, but we were forced to take it. Another aspect is the thesis assessment. You don't get feedback till the external reviews, and sometimes inconsistent feedback. I can justify that maybe because we're international students they don't give us the needed attention [P15].

As I heard and observed from the Chinese students, I'm happy with the overall Chinese education system. However, I am not happy with the education system for international scholarship students. My acceptance letter says it's an English-taught program, but the reality is most of my courses are delivered in Chinese [P5].

The Chinese education system is okay, especially for postgraduate students. They provide accessible resources [P14].

Personal satisfaction

Personal growth and social activities

Despite these difficulties, many participants of our study were pleased with their time in China overall, which they attributed to their personal growth and the opportunities presented by their volunteer and social activities. Despite the challenges, they were able to overcome them by participating in cultural exchange programs, volunteering, and making friends. They gained cultural knowledge and found a purpose in China as a result of these encounters.

I have a high level of satisfaction because I came to China for some reason, and I am performing well. Also, I gain exposure while living with others, connecting with people across the globe, and understanding life from different angles [P5].

Studying here has taught me tolerance. It has helped me to develop my intercultural communication skills and has given me opportunities that I wouldn't have gotten if I was back at home [P10].

In addition to my evident academic progress and professional development, I have actively participated in numerous volunteer activities that enhance my intrinsic motivation. At the peak of the pandemic, I contributed to initiatives aimed at preventing COVID-19 infections and collaborated with the locals on various projects. These engagements have significantly enriched my cultural intelligence, an experience that might not have been possible if I had remained in my home country [P15].

I have some Chinese friends who taught me how to use chopsticks in our canteen and helped me to know more about Chinese customs. Moreover, I have attended several Chinese and international cultural festivals organized by our school, which was like seeing the world in a small village [P2].

In sum, the findings of our study show that acculturation is an ever-changing process, beginning with academic adjustment and cross-cultural difficulties and ending with adaptability and personal development, for African international students in China. The interview responses obtained from these students show a path of changing expectations, accompanied by personal techniques for overcoming cultural and institutional challenges, psychological resilience, and professional networks. In the discussion section, this study's findings will be discussed in light of previous research, with an eye toward expanding our knowledge of acculturation and its effects on international students throughout the world.

Discussion

This study examined the acculturation experiences of African international students in a non-Western setting, specifically focusing on China as they strive to become accustomed to a new host environment, addressing the overarching research question: *What are the experiences of African international students and how do they cope with the challenges of their academic sojourn in China?* Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Koo et al., 2021; Mekonen and Adarkwah, 2023), our study found that international African students encounter numerous challenges, including difficulties with *academic adjustment*. Earlier studies reveal that international African students in China find it challenging to academically fit in, especially during their first year (Akhtar et al., 2015; Di et al., 2022). Our findings also showed that the acculturation process of these African international students is not that static but evolves significantly over time, bringing to light a tricky interaction of the academic, cultural, and personal dimensions. For instance, there is a marked difference between the academic adjustment and language difficulties that MA/PhD students face (which can even lead to feelings of isolation and difficulty in academic adjustment) as compared to the BA students. The rationale behind this is that the BA students have an easier

time integrating into the host culture and forming friendships with local students since their coursework is mostly delivered in Chinese, and this thus reduces the social language barrier they would have encountered. However, relatively, since the Chinese language as a medium of instruction is so complex in their areas of study, they are under a lot of academic pressure, especially at the very start of their academic majors. Still, eventually, as they navigate these initial difficulties, their experiences begin to transform.

In contrast, the MA/PhD students whose focus is mostly research and mostly taught in English have less trouble with the language at the university. Still, they frequently have trouble fitting in socially initially because of their poor command of the Chinese language. In addition, they could have difficulties communicating academically due to their supervisor's weak English competence. And in the long run, this may lead to acculturative stress which may as well negatively impact their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation within this whole acculturation process. One of the most evident approaches to handle this is to offer social support to these students as they strive to improve their academic research abilities along the acculturation journey. An approach of this kind is consistent with earlier studies suggesting that international students who receive ample social support tend to experience lower levels of acculturative stress and thus integrate more readily in the new setting (Geeraert & Demoulin, 2013; Ng et al., 2017; Kristiana et al., 2022).

The findings of our study also align with existing research that highlighted the impact of *cross-cultural adjustment* (cultural shock) on sojourners/international students (Jandevi & Zareen, 2020; Patrick, 2020) because most of the African international students in the present study mentioned having experienced behavioural discomfort due to encountering norms, values, and behaviours in the host environment that seemed incompatible with their own. Nevertheless, as they began to interact more with their peers, they gradually felt more at ease and a little comfortable, even when encountering behaviours they initially considered inappropriate. Therefore, to address some of these challenges, we advocate for awareness campaigns and cultural training initiatives as effective strategies. Adding vigour to that, we propose that workshops, seminars, and educational sessions be organized as part of awareness campaigns to teach international African students about the social norms, expectations, and important cultural differences in the Chinese context. The local community and student body might also be the intended recipients of these programs, which aim to promote cultural awareness and acceptance.

The *psychological adjustment* challenges encountered by international African students during COVID-19 included more mental stress, for example, in terms of depression and loneliness, and our study's finding on this further connects with Alam et al. (2021), who similarly noted that there was widespread psychological distress among international students in China during the pandemic period. Interestingly, however, despite all these challenges, participants in our study expressed universities' support through counselling and the provision of essential materials that they actually never expected or saw coming. Again, we strongly stress that ongoing institutional support remains extremely important for effective acculturation in any given situation (i.e., good or bad).

As for the *personal challenges*, our findings revealed that African international students in China encounter difficulties in openly practicing their religious beliefs, and this observation aligns with Jiang et al. (2020) research, which also indicated that many international students hold religious beliefs and may experience mental distress, such as anxiety and depression, when unable to freely practice their beliefs.

Academic pressure arising from undisclosed HSK requirements in English-taught programs was highlighted as a predominant complaint for African international students as they were asked to *evaluate the Chinese education system*. In most cases, they reported that these challenges arise from rapid and unannounced policy changes implemented without sufficient student awareness, which makes it a unique finding in this study. Often, requirements such as passing an HSK 3 exam are introduced late, with students only informed shortly before graduation. This oversight, emphasized repeatedly by students, creates undue stress and can even jeopardize their ability to graduate on time. Students expressed that such critical information should be communicated well in advance, allowing them the opportunity to prepare adequately. Therefore, to have this addressed, we urge Chinese universities to ensure clear and timely communication of essential policies and requirements because this would not only support students' preparedness but also help alleviate the academic and psychological stress that arises from last-minute changes or unexpected requirements.

Our findings also showed that academic growth and volunteering activities contributed to students' *personal satisfaction*, especially during the pandemic, thus aligning with previous research (e.g., Kwenani & Yu, 2018; Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022). To be more specific, Mekonen and Adarkwah (2022) discovered that volunteering provides students with inner satisfaction, which in turn enables them to express their ideal selves and feel energized. Overall, the findings of our study reveal that the acculturation process for African international students in China is not static but evolves significantly over time, reflecting a complex interplay of academic, cultural, and personal dimensions. In the beginning, African international students often struggle with major challenges like language barriers and culture shock, which can make them feel isolated and make academic adjustment difficult. These early stresses don't just go away; they can really affect how satisfied students feel, especially in their final year. However, the way they cope with these challenges has a big impact on their overall experience and how smoothly they adapt to the new culture.

A case in point is that, as they go through all these challenges, their experiences begin to transform. For instance, the initial discomfort often gives way to increased resilience and adaptation as students build supportive networks and develop language proficiency. Over time, the relationships forged with peers and supervisors become quite important in facilitating academic collaboration and cultural integration. A journey of this kind, therefore, shows and tells us that acculturation is a more dynamic process, where early struggles can lead to significant personal growth and satisfaction, particularly as African international students learn to find ways through which they can deal with the dual demands of a Mandarin-dominant environment while engaging in English-taught programs. A great example of this is in the first theme of *academic collaboration and support*, where one of the students shared how tough it was to work with their supervisor in the beginning because of the language barrier. But over time, as they got more used to Chinese culture and took language classes, things started to get better. This shows just how dynamic the process of acculturation can be, as students move from feeling like outsiders to gradually adapting and finding their place. Therefore, having framed acculturation as a continuous evolution rather than a series of distinct phases, our study brings into perspective the importance of ongoing institutional support and

social connections in enhancing the overall well-being and academic success of African international students. In order to emphasize this point further, our study still brings in new insights by focusing on African students in a non-Western setting, particularly the pressure of navigating a Mandarin-dominant environment while meeting academic expectations in English. Similar challenges have been documented among Chinese students in American universities (Li et al., 2017; Yıldırım, 2014), making our findings globally relevant.

Our study also ties into some key ideas about how people adjust to new cultures. For instance, we refer to Berry's (2005) acculturation strategies, which explain how individuals from one culture adapt to a dominant or destination culture. In our case, we focus on how African international students, despite facing challenges, gradually fit into Chinese culture, which becomes their destination culture. This is in line with Berry's idea that, over time, people can navigate cultural differences and eventually feel at home in a new society. We also connect our study to Ward & Kennedy's (1993) models on psychological and socio-cultural adjustment. Their work focuses on the emotional and social challenges people face when they try to adapt to a new culture. In our case, we show how African international students experience a mix of struggles, such as dealing with stress and emotional challenges, as well as difficulties in socializing and finding their place while adjusting to life in China. As a result of linking these struggles to Ward & Kennedy's models, we're able to show just how complicated the emotional and social side of adaptation can be.

Recommendation

With the growing influx of international students in Chinese universities, proactive steps are needed to create a more welcoming environment. Educational institutions should foster positive teacher-student relationships because this has proven to be more helpful to the students, as they try to deal with some academic difficulties along the way. Chinese universities should also provide supervisory and language support services, which focuses on promoting academic collaboration and prioritizing initial-year support because often, African international students in their first years find it quite complicated to establish themselves not only within the Chinese education system but also socially with the environment outside school. Therefore, establishing volunteer groups of Chinese-speaking students to assist with language barriers or offering student manuals in multiple languages would further enhance resource accessibility and comprehension for all international students. The measures mentioned would help in ensuring a smoother transition and improve the overall student experience.

Furthermore, careful consideration should be given to the pairing of supervisors with students (especially graduate students whose majors are not Chinese taught) to ensure effective academic support. It is advisable to assign supervisors who are proficient in either English or French, as these are the languages spoken by many African international students often, largely due to the historical influence of British and French colonization across the continent. Through careful matching of the students with Chinese supervisors who have academic backgrounds in English or French-speaking countries, African international students would be better positioned to communicate their academic concerns clearly and seek assistance when necessary. Most importantly, this alignment not only bridges potential language gaps but also facilitates a more comfortable and efficient academic experience, thus enhancing these students' overall integration into the academic environment.

We recommend that universities prioritize creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all international students. One way to do so, for instance, is by exploring partnerships with local communities to provide spaces where students can freely practice their cultural and religious beliefs because this, in a way, would not only help students feel supported and respected but also contribute to building a multicultural campus environment. We argue that when students can maintain their cultural and religious identities while following local laws, it boosts their well-being and makes it easier for them to adjust to life in China. Therefore, we believe that such initiatives would foster mutual respect and help create a more positive and inclusive atmosphere for everyone. When it comes to addressing financial constraints, we propose that international students should be allowed to have part-time jobs legally since this would help alleviate the financial burden and provide valuable career opportunities, moving forward.

Before getting started with their studies in China, international students should prioritize developing cultural awareness because we believe that taking this decisively important step can significantly enhance their overall experience and facilitate the acculturation process upon arrival. Also, we encourage higher education institutions and organizations in China to maintain and expand opportunities for cultural exchange, international festivals, and volunteer activities since we believe that these initiatives contribute to students' personal growth, cultural intelligence, and community engagement.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that international students experienced prolonged feelings of loneliness, cultural shock, language barriers, discrimination, and depression as they navigated the process of understanding and adapting to their new environment in China. Nevertheless, some students managed to address these challenges through self-study of the Chinese language using translation apps and documenting their daily experiences. In summary, participants in the current study emphasized the advantages of studying abroad, including the crucial role of academic collaboration, supervisor support, and language acquisition. On the other hand, challenges such as language barriers, culture shock, isolation in social spaces, and difficulties in securing internships were seen as major hindrances to smooth acculturation.

In terms of the theoretical contribution, our understanding of the diverse ways through which African international students navigate and adapt to the Chinese education system was made possible by the six dimensions of the conceptual framework used. Through the use of these aspects, we were able to capture the psychological and personal challenges that students encounter in their pursuit of academic and social integration in a foreign academic and social setting, in addition to the more obvious cultural and

academic problems. This methodologically sound strategy has substantial theoretical merit as it draws attention to the interdependence of the many elements that influence acculturation as a whole. Also, future studies on the experiences of international students, especially in non-Western settings, might build strongly on the framework. In future research, various non-Western countries' international student groups' acculturation experiences may be investigated by using or building upon these six elements. Then lastly, to further contribute to the larger knowledge of global student mobility and acculturation, researchers should think of modifying the framework by including other aspects or adjusting it to the distinct difficulties experienced by designated international student groups.

Given the limited sampling and scope of the current study, no generalizations are intended to be made. To better understand the acculturation process and coping mechanism of African international students or international students in China as a whole, a longitudinal study with a more extensive and diverse sample would be more suitable for future studies.

Code availability

Not applicable

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Saira Bibi: Writing – review & editing, Data curation. **Yohana Kifle Mekonen:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Allan Muganga:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Michael Agyemang Adarkwah:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Oluwasegun A. Oladipo:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology. **Chiamaka Nneoma Nweze:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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