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Exploring Cross-Cultural Communication and Adaptation among Chinese International Students: Insights from Kim's Integrative Theory

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Abstract

Cross-cultural communication plays a fundamental role in shaping international students' adaptation to new educational and sociocultural environments. Previous studies have explored international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment, but little has been done on how everyday communication experiences aid cross-cultural adaptation in higher education. This study uses Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation to examine Chinese international students' cross-cultural communication and adaptation at Malaysian universities. The qualitative case study comprised semi-structured interviews with 15 Chinese overseas students at five Malaysian public and private universities. The findings show that cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic, continuous, and communication-driven process that unfolds via everyday contacts, social participation, and relationship-building in multicultural university environments. While adapting to Malaysian academic and social life, participants negotiated language use, communication styles, classroom engagement, politeness norms, and cultural expectations. Meaningful friendships with local and international students, multicultural campus activities, supportive academic relationships, and openness to cultural diversity all helped with transition. According to Kim's argument, communication is the main way students manage cultural differences, build intercultural competence, create new social identities, and adjust psychologically and socioculturally during cross cultural adaptation. Adaptation is a constant process of learning, communication, and identity negotiation moulded by host educational environment interaction. This contextualised study on Malaysian higher education's communication aspects of cross-cultural adaptation adds to international student mobility literature. The findings can also help higher education improve intercultural communication, peer participation, and institutional support for international students' education and integration.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, adaptation, Chinese international students, Malaysian higher education, Kim's integrative theory, qualitative case study

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation have gained importance in higher education with increasing student mobility beyond national, linguistic, and cultural borders (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024; McLeod & Wainwright, 2009). International students need to decode unfamiliar communication norms, adapt to different social norms, and form new interpersonal relations in host settings. Nevertheless, this process tends to be complicated and difficult because of different ways of using language, motivations, cultural expectations, and interactional routines (Adler, 1983; Hofhuis et al., 2023).

Equally, it is also possible to define the process of cross-cultural adaptation as an ongoing and gradual learning process in which people learn how to operate in a new cultural setting. Adaptation itself is not something that can be achieved by means of psychological adaptation and behavioural changes but is rather a dynamic process where a person has to adapt his or her mind and behaviour (Kim, 2001). Empirical research has also shown that the key to success of the adaptation process lies in the students' ability to create social connections, decode the meaning of the local language, and become part of the daily life of the host country (Hofhuis et al., 2023).

Cross-cultural communication in higher education is the process of negotiating meaning among culturally diverse interactional situations. It does not only involve linguistic competence but also the ability to interpret implicit social norms, relational expectations, and communication norms that are embedded in cultures. Previous research has demonstrated that communication problems between cross-cultural groups are often due to differences in indirectness, hierarchy, and relational orientation rather than language proficiency alone (Chi & Gao, 2024). The literature on immigrant students' socio-cultural adaptation has mostly been conducted in the U.S. and shows mixed results on the relationship between acculturation and academic competencies, questioning the general superiority of integration (Thuerer et al., 2023). Since adaptation and its outcomes are strongly influenced by society, it is unclear how these findings can be applied to Chinese international students studying abroad, which can be considered broadly as acculturation (e.g., Zhao et al., 2023).

Cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation can be especially difficult to Chinese international students in this regard because of the variations in communication norms, relational expectations, and social etiquette in Malaysia, which is multicultural and multi-religious. According to the previous studies, miscommunication in communication norms and relationship-building practices can result in academic stress, social withdrawal, and integration problems (Zhao et al., 2023; Azmi et al., 2023). Nonetheless, most of the available literature has been devoted to Western higher education settings or general cross-cultural adaptation processes in Southeast Asia, and little has been dedicated to the specific way Chinese international students navigate communication norms and relationship-building at Malaysian universities (Hofhuis et al., 2023; Xue & Singh, 2025).

To examine these issues, the study draws on Kim's (2001) Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation, which views adaptation as an ongoing process shaped through interaction with the host environment. The study is guided by the following research questions:

(1) What cross-cultural communication challenges do Chinese international students face in Malaysian universities?

(2) How do Chinese international students experience relationship-building in Malaysian universities?

(3) What adaptive strategies do Chinese international students develop to navigate cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation in Malaysia?

The next section further discusses the theoretical framework of Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation that underpin this study.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Kim's (2001, 2017) Integrative Theory conceptualises cross-cultural adaptation as a dynamic process involving communication with the host environment. The theory foregrounds stress, adaptation, and growth rather than treating adaptation as a linear or completed state. In this study, the theory is used as a sensitising framework to interpret participants' accounts of communication, relationships, and adaptive practices. A key strength of this theory is that it treats stress, disorientation, and uncertainty not simply as signs of failure but as part of the adaptation process itself. From this perspective, adaptation is viewed as a dynamic stress–adaptation–growth process rather than a linear transition. First impressions of new communication styles, educational expectations, language use, and social norms lead to tension and confusion. Repetition of communication increases cultural understanding, confidence, and behavioural flexibility (Kim, 2001, 2017).

Kim's framework fits this study since international students adapt from ordinary communication (Kim, 2001, 2017). Interacting with local people, responding to commentaries, communicating, organising group work, and deciphering foreign social signs allow students to adapt beyond the classroom. Hence, communication is an adaptive mechanism that facilitates adjustment to different social and cultural surroundings. Prior studies have indicated that communication is involved in moulding people's attitudes and emotions and practices (Manan et al., 2022) and in promoting information and knowledge exchange and attitude formation (Tajuddin et al., 2023). In this context, Chinese international students in Malaysia can experience communication stress due to specific instructor expectations, speaking style, or cultural practice, which may further hinder or limit their cultural adaptation to Malaysia. In cross-cultural integration, experiential learning and continual interaction are crucial. Accordingly, Kim's notion provides a theoretical framework for studying how Chinese international students adapt to Malaysian academic and social contexts through communication, learning, and interpersonal involvement.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Cross-cultural Adaptation among International Students

In higher education research, cross-cultural adaptation is generally understood as a multidimensional process that includes academic adjustment, sociocultural learning, and psychological well-being (Zhao et al., 2023). Thus, cross-cultural

communication is at the heart of international student life because adaptation depends not only on what students know but also on how they interact across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Yuliani et al., 2026). Communication in intercultural settings involves much more than vocabulary or grammar. It is also shaped by locally embedded norms of politeness, directness, turn-taking, self-presentation, and non-verbal behaviour (Azmi et al., 2023). When these norms are unfamiliar, students may misread intentions, hesitate to participate, or avoid interaction altogether. It therefore extends beyond academic achievement and language ability to include the capacity to interact appropriately, build relationships, and participate meaningfully in the host environment.

Modern scholarship no longer views adaptation as a fixed endpoint. It is increasingly regarded as a progressive, context-sensitive process altered by interaction and reflection (Sabet & Chapman, 2023). This applies to international students, who adapt gradually to unfamiliar norms, habits, and expectations. In Malaysia, Chinese international students face interconnected academic, sociological, and psychological problems (Xue & Singh, 2025). Studies have found various elements that affect learner adaptation. Students' resources may depend on demographics and intercultural experience (Haskollar & Kohli Bagwe, 2023). Social support, especially from peers, mentors, or or roommates that can help students understand local expectations, improves adjustment outcomes and support the study (Yuliani et al., 2026). Students can also adapt and thrive by using social media to stay connected and learn new things (Hofhuis et al., 2023). Prior studies on social media exposure and people's behaviours offer an insight into how communication patterns are shaped by the broader media environment (Ahmad Tajuddin et al., 2024; Manan et al., 2022; Manan et al., 2026; Radzi et al., 2024; Suhaimi & Ahmad Tajuddin, 2024; Mohamad et al., 2025).

The literature also shows that adaptability is not entirely individual. To understand cultural norms, absorb cultural information, and develop intercultural competency, immigrants must communicate with host culture members (Kim, 2001, 2017). Accordingly, communication is the major way people negotiate meaning, eliminate uncertainty, and recreate their host community understanding. Students learn to function in the host society through daily engagement, exposure, and negotiation (Yuliani et al., 2026). Classroom discussion and group work, together with casual conversation and events in the campus community, allow students to interact with professors and classmates on a daily basis, evaluating unexpected behaviours, views, and communication skills. Communication and interpersonal skills not only allow international students to gain confidence and cultural competency at the academic level but eventually bloom at professional and societal level (Ahmad Tajuddin et al., 2022).

Despite these insights, existing studies remain more focused on broad outcomes than on the interactional processes through which adaptation develops. Systematic reviews on Chinese international students in Malaysia highlight recurring challenges, but they also show that the everyday communicative work of adaptation is still underexplored (Zhao et al., 2023). In particular, relatively little attention has been paid to how students themselves make sense of local norms, revise their own expectations, and gradually reposition themselves in the academic and social life of the host country (Xue & Singh, 2025). This gap points to the need for a more communication-centred account of cross-cultural adaptation in the Malaysian university context.

3.2 Cross-cultural Communication and Adaptation in the Malaysian Context

Malaysia has also become a significant international student destination in the world of higher education, with more than 200,000 students who have come to Malaysia from different countries across the globe (Da Wan & Lim, 2023). It provides a particularly valuable context for studying cross-cultural communication because its higher education system has actively pursued internationalisation while operating within a multilingual and multicultural society (Da Wan & Lim, 2023). International students use digital and social media to stay connected to home while studying abroad. Chinese platforms remain important for Chinese students' daily communication and socialisation. Weibo, one of China's most popular social media sites, combines entertainment, communication, information sharing, and online shopping (Manan et. al., 2025). Furthermore, the rise of social media has generated concerns about the quality and character of online content. These issues suggest that social media platforms should be seen as complex information environments that shape what users see, how they interpret information, and how they interact with people from different cultures and societies (Tajuddin et al., 2023).

In Malaysia, international students navigate a context characterised by substantial English-language instruction for higher education and the co-presence of Bahasa Melayu and other community languages in daily communication (Da Wan & Lim, 2023). Therefore, adaption in Malaysia is not just an academic change but also a transfer across several linguistic and cultural conventions (Da Wan & Lim, 2023). Malaysia represents a great case study in cross-cultural communication and adaptation, evidenced by Malays, Chinese, Indians, and numerous Indigenous groups living together, speaking different languages, engaging in different cultural practices and norms, and having different religious practices (Ahmad Tajuddin & Zulkepli, 2019). Bahasa Malaysia serves as the national language, however Malaysian institutions and daily life also employ English, Mandarin, Tamil, and other Chinese dialects and Indigenous languages. Diversity gives an

opportunity for intercultural learning but restricts communication due to continuous negotiations of languages and cultures.

Diversity is an opportunity and a source of uncertainty. In Malaysia, the diverse environment might facilitate more intercultural encounters than homogenous ones. However, diverse speaking styles, identities, and cultural expectations may disrupt discourse, particularly for newcomers still learning how meaning is negotiated in a local setting.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study was conducted using a qualitative case study approach in order to explore the experience of Chinese international students studying at Malaysian universities regarding cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation in their daily academic and social life. It was suitable to use a qualitative method since the research focused on the meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences of participants instead of quantifying predefined variables or testing causal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is ideal for studying lived experience, social meaning, and context-sensitive processes that cannot be quantified (Sonnenschein & Wiik, 2025). It's also useful for understanding how participants define define difficulties, power, and transformation (Liang, 2019). For a study on communication, adaptation, and everyday negotiation, qualitative depth is crucial. Thus, the processes of communication and adaptation are usually influenced by subtle context-specific mechanisms such as language use, classroom interaction, interpersonal expectations and informal social involvement, which cannot be easily measured using standardised instruments only.

4.2 Research Setting and Participants

The research was carried out on the Chinese international students who were enrolled in five Malaysian universities: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), University of Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and Taylor's University. The fact that both public and private institutions were included made it possible to make sure that the results would not be limited to a specific institutional culture and enabled the study to capture variation within the same national environment. Five universities were added to increase contextual and institutional variance and minimize single-site bias. This enabled the researchers to find patterns that repeated themselves across campuses in the common Malaysian higher education setting. Since the research did not aim at making institution-level comparison, it was not required to have equal participants in different universities.

The study was conducted on 15 Chinese international students. The number of people that were involved in the sample had not been determined by the principles of statistics but by the qualitative approach to depth, relevance, and information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Due to the limited research questions under the investigation and the relatively narrow scope of participants, it was possible to conduct a large number of interviews, 15 in-depth ones, which would have provided enough data to find patterns in the experiences of the communication and adaptation of the respondents. The sample comprised of business, engineering, and social science students who are either male or female, and studying at different universities and for different periods in Malaysia. Table 1 has the demographic details of the participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Major	University	Study Duration in Malaysia
P1	Female	22	Business	University of Malaya (UM)	1 year
P2	Male	27	Engineering	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	2 years
P3	Female	24	Social Sciences	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	1.5 years
P4	Male	28	Business	Taylor's University	3 years
P5	Female	32	Engineering	Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)	2 years
P6	Male	34	Social Sciences	University of Malaya (UM)	2.5 years
P7	Female	28	Business	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	4 years
P8	Male	23	Engineering	Taylor's University	1 year
P9	Female	25	Social Sciences	Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)	1.5 years
P10	Male	24	Business	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	2 years
P11	Female	26	Engineering	University of Malaya (UM)	3 years
P12	Male	27	Social Sciences	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	2.5 years
P13	Female	22	Business	Taylor's University	1 year
P14	Male	23	Engineering	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	1.5 years
P15	Female	26	Social Sciences	Taylor's University	2 years

4.3 Data Collection

The data was obtained using the semi-structured personal interviews. This was a suitable approach since it offered a sufficient framework to answer the questions of the study, and at the same time, the participants had an opportunity to provide additional details on their experiences that they felt important. Purposive sampling was employed to identify

participants who could offer informed and pertinent comments about communication and adaptation in Malaysian universities. Such a strategy is suitable when a study is looking for information-rich cases who have direct contact with the phenomenon under investigation and not a statistically representative sample (Patton, 2014). To get actual illustrations of misunderstanding, classroom activities, local expressions, nonverbal activity, friendship making, religious practices, food eating, and seeking assistance, follow-up probes were conducted.

Given that the research centred on the experiences of the participants, an in-depth interview was more appropriate since it would allow the researcher to dive into the nuances of these experiences as university students (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sapili & Tajuddin, 2024). The interviews took about 60 to 120 minutes. The participants were invited to talk not only about the overall impressions of studying in Malaysia but also about specific experiences concerning classroom participation, making friends, misunderstanding, adaptation, and support. The interview guide was organised around these topics, and each topic was explored through questions and the follow-up probes described above. This assisted in producing more detailed accounts on how communication and adaptation took place in daily university life.

All the interviews were done in Mandarin Chinese so that participants could express their views more completely and comfortably. After getting the consent of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis later. The researcher translated quotations presented in this article into English and checked them against original Mandarin transcripts to keep the meaning as close as possible. The translation was carried out by the researcher alone, working from the original Mandarin transcripts, and no separate back-translation was conducted. Where a Mandarin expression had no direct English equivalent, the meaning and pragmatic force of the original were prioritised over literal wording, and any doubtful rendering was resolved by returning to the surrounding context in the transcript. To preserve confidentiality, all participants got pseudonyms or participant codes (P1-P15), and identifying details were removed where necessary.

4.4 Data Analysis

The data of the interview were subjected to thematic analysis in accordance with the six-step process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The reason behind this choice is that it provides a systematic but flexible approach to pattern recognition of meaning across qualitative data and is particularly applicable to research that focuses on lived experience and social interpretation. Within this approach, thematic analysis offers a flexible and rigorous strategy for identifying patterned meanings across participant accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allows the researcher to move from individual narratives to shared themes while remaining sensitive to nuance and context. In interview-based studies of this kind, sample adequacy is also better judged by information power than by numbers alone, since a focused aim and a specific participant group can support meaningful analytical depth (Malterud et al., 2016). Guided by these considerations, the present study explores how Chinese international students in Malaysia interpret local communication norms, navigate interaction with lecturers and peers, build relationships, and experience institutional support.

The process started by reading the transcripts repeatedly in order to get familiar with the data. Segments were then coded initially based on the topic of interest of the study such as communication challenges, classroom interaction, friendship development, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of support. At the next step, similar codes were clustered into larger categories and compared across participants so as to determine patterns that occurred frequently and differences. These classifications were later evaluated and refined into broad themes that reflected major aspects of the experiences of the participants.

The analytic process was not strictly linear but an iterative one where the movement between transcripts, codes, and candidate themes occurred several times. In the initial stages, coding was mainly inductive, and interpretation in the subsequent stages was based on the theoretical framework of the study. Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation was applied to understand adaptation as a dynamic and continuous process associated with continuous learning, psychological adjustment, and intercultural progress. According to the notion, recurrent communication experiences help people negotiate new cultural meanings, social norms, values, and behaviours. These frameworks were employed as sensitising concepts instead of strict categories of coding.

4.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

There were a number of measures aimed at enhancing the credibility of the study. To begin with, in-depth semi-structured interviews provided rich and contextually grounded narratives on communication and adaptation. Second, having five universities and diverse academic backgrounds as participants broadened the perspectives that are represented in the dataset. Third, analysis was conducted through repeated interaction with transcripts, and continuous comparison between participants and themes was verified against original interview extracts during the analytic process. This assisted in making sure that the results were well anchored to the accounts of the participants instead of isolated examples or previous assumptions. Fourth, researcher positionality was considered reflexively. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, so the researcher shared a language with the participants, which may have supported rapport and open disclosure but may also have shaped how questions were asked and how responses were interpreted. For this reason, Kim's theory was used as a sensitising concept rather than as a coding frame, and interpretations were checked against the original transcripts

The research study raised several ethical considerations. The participants were aware that the interview was going to be conducted, and they were given informed consent. They were assured that participation would be voluntary and that their identities would remain confidential. Audio recordings and transcripts were only made in order to carry out research, and any information that could identify a participant was handled carefully to protect their privacy.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed three themes regarding Chinese international students experience in Malaysian universities, which are interrelated: cross-cultural communication issues, relationship-building issues, and adaptive strategies for cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation.

5.1 Theme 1: Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges: Communication Norm Mismatches

The participants were unanimous in their opinion that the Malaysian universities had a problem with cross-cultural communication, as they found it hard to communicate in Malaysia due to the fact that they did not know how to communicate locally. These language difficulties were not only linguistic. They included indirect responses, multilingualism, localisation of speech patterns, body language, and social aspects of everyday life. For most of them, adapting was not so much about learning to speak English or to understand others speaking Mandarin; adapting to the Malaysian university was about knowing how meaning is expressed, softened, negotiated, or not expressed.

One of the common issues, in this respect, was the indirectness of the academic feedback. Many recounted having received constructive criticism from professors, which was often given with respect, to the point where it was sometimes impossible to tell how serious a comment was. Instead of being told something is bad, students sometimes appeared to receive soft, timid, and even positive comments. One participant explained:

> "When I asked my Malay professor what he had done, he said that it can be improved, and I did not know until one of my friends in Malaysia informed me that the reason why he did not want to say so is because the work is actually bad." (P1, Female, Business)

This excerpt has demonstrated that it was not the issue of the language understanding that made communication difficult. The speaker could see the literal meaning of the remark by the lecturer, but she did not perceive the pragmatic strength of the statement as a criticism in its indirect form. What seemed to be minor advice was later interpreted, based on a local friend's explanation, as face-saving negative feedback. This is because it was an issue of interpretation and not vocabulary. Participants also had to learn what lecturers were saying and how they framed academic performance with politeness, indirection, and social sensitivity.

The uncertainty of the situation had a direct impact on the academic activities. The students might be unable to know if the feedback was mandatory, whether it is a serious one or an urgent one and thus delay their revision, not knowing what is expected of them or even being too hesitant to ask for clarification. Some of the participants expressed this kind of uncertainty when the lecturer seemed to have asked them to discuss something, refused to accept an idea in a certain way, or made them feel that they were not welcome. In these respects, communication norms influenced both the feelings of comfort among the students and their confidence towards taking action in the context of studying at the university.

These communication problems were further exacerbated by the multilingual nature of Malaysia. Movement between English, Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, and localised speech forms was a common experience among participants. They could often understand formal classroom English but not when their peers in the locality switched to colloquial English or used Malay words or mixed codes in informal talk. This created an atmosphere of partial understanding: students could hear sufficiently to stay in the interaction, but not always enough to be able to answer confidently. Consequently, some smiled, stayed silent, or gave short answers so as not to reveal uncertainty.

Another source of early misunderstanding were localised expressions. Certain participants at first took Malaysian colloquial English literally or gave unintended emotional connotations to common discourse markers. Repeated exposure over time, however, enabled them to identify these forms as normal aspects of local interaction. This gradual shift was described by one participant:

> "I was taught to say no worries, lah and how to say *Selamat pagi.* I am now able to order food without pointing." (P10, Male, Business)

Although the saying is simple and applies to everyday life, it reveals an interesting shift from communicative dependence to communicative involvement. Initially, the participant relied on pointing, which indicated a low level of interaction and mainly survival needs. He could then use local language expressions and pronunciation with more assurance. It is also important that not pointing means that the person is no longer being passive but rather active in terms of communication, as he or she does not need to point anymore. It was on such mundane activities like ordering food where the issues of confidence, shyness, and belonging were negotiated.

The participants also indicated that the norms of non-verbal and embodied communication, such as gestures, greeting, distance between people, hand contact, etc., were not easy to understand in a religious or cultural context. It was important since it made an impact on whether the interaction with others would be considered good or bad or just inappropriate. They had no idea that they did right even though nobody corrected them directly. This is to say that the act of communication was perceived as a social behavior within the culture, but not only verbal communication.

In general, Theme 1 demonstrates that communication norm mismatches provided a background of cross-cultural adaptation. It was not just about learning new words, but they were learning how to create meaning by means of indirectness, multilingual fluidity, localised speech, etiquette, and embodied behaviour. These results justify the opinion of Kim that adaptation is acquired as a result of multiple communicative interactions that cause stress and gradual learning.

5.2 Theme 2: Relationship-Building Challenges

The participants also mentioned major difficulties in establishing meaningful relationships with local peers. Even though a large number of them were able to make the first contact by means of classroom interaction, group assignments, greetings, or even short conversations, they often experienced challenges in getting past functional exchange into closer friendship. Their accounts indicate that relationship-building was not only influenced by willingness to socialise but also by uncertainty regarding etiquette, religious practices, food-related interaction, group communication, and unwritten rules according to which familiarity and trust are built.

It is also a common theme that the students in the local community were not very friendly, and they did not interact much with other students. The participants had the ability to question, do their assignments, or greet one another, but it was not necessarily social interactions that would result in long-term relationships. There were those who saw local peers as easy to approach on the surface and hard to understand more about them. Notably, this has never been called “exclusion” directly. Participants were often confused on what to do, whether to invite or not to invite, and whether to follow up. In simple terms, connection building depended not only on the opportunity for socialisation but also on the ability to read between the lines. It was a matter of interpersonal relations and interpretation. Participants were often confused on what to do, whether to invite or not to invite, and whether to follow up. In simple terms, connection building depended not only on the opportunity for socialisation but also on the ability to read between the lines. It was a matter of interpersonal relations and interpretation. One participant explained:

> “I was told to have a light breakfast, but I had no idea of the etiquette, what to use, or what to say. Because of my fear of making a mistake, I did not go.” (P5, Female, Engineering)

This passage is significant because the failure to build relationships stemmed not from refusal by locals but from anticipation of it. The guest had been invited, which means that there was a chance to interact with others. This is because she did not know what to do and thus did not engage in the interaction at all. This implies that even before one has established any contact with someone else, the risk of making a cultural mistake can be enough to stop the process of building a relationship. It was not only the lack of confidence but also the possibility of being considered rude or impolite if he made some small mistake, as an example. In the cross-cultural environment where the students are still trying to learn the local culture, this anxiety can play a huge role in their participation.

This also shows that adaptation is not simply a matter of joining society, but rather of being comfortable in it. The fact that one time an invitation to a party was not accepted can be considered a small incident; however, it will happen more than once, and students will find themselves less likely to attend such parties where they feel close and familiar with other people. It is possible that breakfasts, lunches, or visits at home might look like routine events, but they are social events in which the relations become informal and personal. Once these instances are left by the students, they can still be socially present, though relationally absent. It is worth noting that participants could draw on their Chinese friendship networks. Friends in co-national relationships were emotionally safe since they did not have to pay much attention to language, mannerisms, or misinterpretation of words.

Food is also played a significant role in social integration. The participants also tended to consider the food as not only a question of taste or change in diet but also a tool of communication and connection with people. The social life on the campus included eating together, inviting others to eat, and engaging in the daily meals. However, halal requirements, local dining customs, what could be eaten, and how spicy dishes were were not always familiar to students. One of the respondents mentioned:

> “I ate noodles and stir-fried vegetables during the first month since there is no other option for non-spicy food around here.” (P3, Female, Social Sciences)

On the one hand, this quote indicates a practical challenge in adapting to the local food environment. At another point, it shows how dietary uneasiness may indirectly limit social involvement. The act of eating is usually a low-stress situation where friendships are created, sustained, and enhanced. Students who do not go to local food places, who are unsure about

what they should eat, or who cannot comfortably join common meals also miss out on informal opportunities to talk and be included. Food was thus not only an adaptation problem at the personal level but also at the relational level. It determined where students went, with whom they spent their time and how easily they could accept invitations without anxiety, and thus connected to the sense of belonging.

Social contact and student interaction in the lecture room was also found during group work. Some of the participants stated that they were confused regarding hierarchy, dispute, and decision-making during a group assignment. They had doubt if they were to appear helpful, forceful, or in other ways rude or even disruptive. In other circumstances this uncertainty constrained classroom activities and relationships. That is because the tasks were group tasks, not only intellectual ones but students learnt to negotiate the difference, courtesy, the limit of how far one can go with friendship. There could be good communication that would lead to more communication, or there could be bad communication that would make people feel apart.

5.3 Theme 3: Adaptive Strategies for Cross-Cultural Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Despite these difficulties, participants also used a number of strategies to deal with the situation in terms of cross-cultural communication in Malaysian universities. These strategies were not formal or premeditated. Rather, they came slowly by observation, learning, trial and error, involvement in the culture, and the analysis of the past errors. The results indicate that students did not take passive roles in cultural difference; they learned to understand how to communicate with others in different ways. The students were in many cases observing what the local students would do when they greeted lecturers, asked questions, made jokes, responded to a request, or even disagreed with each other. It is an informal learning process, and in particular, it could be applied in situations where there are no direct instructions. The participants did not think that the rules were written down, but rather they learned the norms by the repeated observation of the daily interactions. This implies that inductive and practice-based learning was mostly adaptive.

Cautious participation was usually preceded by observation. The participants said that they tried to use local expressions, changed their tone, softened direct statements, or imitated interactional patterns that appeared to be suitable. It was a trial-and-error process. Initially some people were uncomfortable using local expressions or changing their style of speech, but with practice discomfort reduced. Adaptation thus did not only involve the cognitive process of learning about difference; it also entailed embodied rehearsal in actual communicative contexts.

Another important strategy was participation in cultural and social events. Whether university events, festive celebrations, or informal socialising, these events provided opportunities for learning through participation rather than didactic explanation. One participant recalled a Ramadan experience:

> "I learned that eating is not only about the food, but also it is about breaking fast after sharing the dates and biryani with a Malay family in Ramadan." (P6, Male, Social Sciences)

It is evident that the culture has changed its perception and focus from it as an object of observation to a subject of experience. Not only was the participant taught about Ramadan, but he also learned how the meal was perceived in terms of social and religious meaning by being involved in the process. The food did not have the same sense of eating anymore, but there was the community and spiritual action. These experiences enabled the participants to see that communication in Malaysia was not only verbalised in language but also in time, rituals, hospitality, and practice.

In the case of some participants, culturally structured activities also helped to reduce anxiety. In the presence of welcoming environments, students felt more empowered to ask questions, make mistakes, and learn by participating. This is in contrast to the withdrawal mentioned in Theme 2, where uncertainty sometimes hindered engagement. Supportive settings therefore served as bridges between uncertainty and participation. They also had to change their style of communication at the university. They were more conscious of what they said, how they spoke, who was going to speak and when, and so on. For instance, some of them learned to ask questions or make suggestions in a way that was not as direct.

> "I had to learn to start presentations with a thesis statement. Malaysians prefer structured arguments over stories." (P4, Male, Business)

This quote is an example of the adaptation in terms of academic writing practices. The participant also understood that, in addition to the information on the content, it was necessary to know how to present and structure the information in order to communicate well with the local scholars. It appears that he had been re-calibrating what constituted clarity and persuasion within the Malaysian university as he made a distinction between the structured arguments and the stories. Previous findings suggests that information quality is an essential component affecting the adoption of information, including accuracy, clarity, comprehensibility, and structured argument (He et al., 2026).

The learning of language was also said to be useful and contextual, as well. The participants were able to get better by the experience of ordering food in a restaurant, greeting people in a restaurant, talking to other students, paying bills, and so on. They had their own apps or books to study, but it was not always that they used them. It was all about repetition. This is because

when one practices with the actual communication, he or she gains confidence in the ability to communicate effectively.

All in all, Theme 3 has shown that the cross-cultural process was a step-by-step and practice-based one. The participants had to learn by doing, and then they would try again. Their adaptive strategies are consistent with the opinion of Kim, who believes that the adaptation is achieved through stress, communication, adaptation, and growth. However, it is also worth noting that the results were rather more complex since most of this knowledge was learned without being taught by anyone but by oneself.

6. Conclusion

The research paper explored the experiences of Chinese international students in Malaysian universities with regard to cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation, especially in terms of cross-cultural communication difficulties, relationship-building issues, and adaptive strategies in cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation. With emphasis on communication norm differences, relationship-building difficulties, and adaptive strategies, the study demonstrates that cross-cultural adaptation is better understood as an interactional rather than purely individual or linear process. The students were not only able to adjust to a new academic environment but also learn how to understand unfamiliar communicative expectations, negotiate social belongingness, and engage in multicultural and multilingual university life.

The results indicate that language proficiency is not the only factor that cannot be minimized in communication problems. Even though linguistic competence was still significant, a lot of challenges were pragmatic and relational. The participants were required to decode indirect feedback, localised multilingual communications, politeness conventions, non-verbal behaviour and culturally sensitive etiquette. Cross-cultural adaptation thus entailed not only learning how to speak correctly but also how meaning is created and handled within context.

The findings not only support Kim's paradigm but also indicate to several context-specific methods that can extend it. In this multilingual, Muslim-majority context, participants experienced communication issues that were not only about language proficiency but also about pragmatic indirectness, such as when softened academic feedback was understood as encouragement rather than criticism. This study is limited to fifteen Chinese international students from five universities in Malaysia. In addition, this study is based on self-reported interviews, which reveal the participants' perceptions and their retrospective constructions. The findings cannot be generalised to the population of the Chinese international students in Malaysia, considering that the sample was limited in size, purposively selected, and there was data collected at one point in time, and individual responses from the participants are unique. Future research could use longitudinal designs to investigate how communication norms and adaptation strategies evolve over time.

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Authors contributions

Fu Yajing conceptualised the study, carried out the literature search, performed data collection and analysis, analysed the interview data, and drafted the manuscript. Siti Nor Amalina Ahmad Tajuddin contributed to the study design, supervised the research, provided critical evaluation on the theoretical background, reviewed and edited the final version of the manuscript. Kamaruzzaman Abdul Manan contributed to this manuscript by offering critical input and evaluation. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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