

Motivation to Study Abroad and Intercultural Adaptation of Chinese Doctoral Students in Italy

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Abstract: The transitional and adaptive process of studying abroad for international students is challenging. This study explores the motivation to study abroad (MSA) and the intercultural adaptation (IA) of international Chinese doctoral students (ICDS) at an Italian university by conducting a narrative inquiry approach through semi-structured interviews. Findings included: firstly, MSA has seven selecting principles, including the cooperation policies; social support; personal goals, beliefs, and values; the attraction of Italy; the attraction of Italian university; the doctoral program; Chinese sociocultural and educational system. Secondly, ICDS spans two cultures and experiences cultural disequilibrium. IA's attitudes toward ICDS comprise ideal, involute, Buddhist, and lying flat. Last, this study summarizes a dynamic virtuous and vicious cycle model to explain the role of MSA on IA.

Keywords: motivation to study abroad, decision-making, intercultural adaptation, cultural disequilibrium, transition

Over the last two decades, research interest centered on the global education market (Buckner & Stein, 2020; Garwe & Thondhlana, 2021), which experienced phenomenal growth in demand for international education (Böhm et al., 2002). Moreover, a central component of international education is recruiting international students (IS) (Khorsandi, 2014). IS is growing relatively fast (Beine et al., 2014). In higher education, IS has grown dramatically from three-tenths of a million in 1963 to two million in 2000 to six million in 2019. However, this is just 2.6% of the world's student population (Sabzalieva et al., 2022).

The Global Student Mobility 2025 report (Böhm et al., 2002) predicted the demand for international education will increase to seven and two-tenths million in 2025. However, the annual report from the Italian Ministero dell' Istruzione [Ministry of Education] shows 876,801 students were not Italian citizens (10.3% of the total school-age population) in 2019/2020. Most importantly, in the 2010 to the 2020 decade, IS increased overall by 23.4% (+166,000 units) (Ministero dell' Istruzione, 2021, pp. 8-9). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023), in 2020, the enrollment of IS in Italy accounted for 2.9% of all territory students, whereas the OECD average stood at 10.1%, and in Europe, it was 8.2%. Therefore, the potential exists in the global market for the mobility of international students (MIS) in Europe, especially for non-English-dominant countries, such as Italy.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the international program between China and Italy, and the number of Chinese students studying in Italy dropped. However, more than 3,000 Chinese students enrolled in Italian higher education institutions in 2020/21. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019), China has the most significant number (1,061,511) of students studying abroad in any country worldwide. In the top five countries, Chinese students prefer

English-dominant countries over those where English is not dominant. Moreover, research shows that IS from Asian countries have more significant adjustment difficulties than non-Asian countries (Wu et al., 2015). IS from Asian countries encounter considerably more academic and social difficulties due to linguistic and cultural barriers (Leong, 2015; Wu et al.). Students from non-English-dominant countries who choose to study abroad in non-English-dominant countries face significant challenges. Graduate students are more motivated and mature than undergraduates (Hofinger & Feldmann, 2001) and have rich professional and personal experiences (Knowles, 1980). Thus, understanding international Chinese doctoral students' (ICDS) motivation to study abroad (MSA) and intercultural adaptation (IA) in Italy is crucial. This study aimed to explore the MSA and IA of ICDS in the Italian university and the role of MSA on IA. We conducted a narrative inquiry approach through semi-structured interviews to investigate ICDS' narratives of their transitional and intercultural learning experiences. Three questions led the research: What motivated ICDS to choose and decide to study abroad at an Italian university? How does ICDS adapt to the new environment in an Italian university? How do motivational dimensions affect the IA of ICDS?

Literature Review

Prior research found two primary motivations for studying abroad. One is learning motivation, which influences students' learning process and the motivational beliefs related to learning (Andrade, 2006). Some studies, for example, investigated the motivation effect on higher education's academic performance (Cho et al., 2021; Joe et al., 2017; Beachboard et al., 2011). Other studies showed intrinsic motivation is positively associated with academic success (Turner et al., 2009). Entrance motivation is another factor (Laueremann, 2012; Yan & Berliner, 2011); scholarship defines this motivation as any mechanism underlying the decision to pursue higher education abroad — that is, why students may choose to study abroad. Study abroad decisions are the first steps in students' educational transition to a new environment. We used the definition of entry motivation in this study to maintain consistency with research objectives and questions. Most publications explore the notions of college choice and decision-making (Mazzarol et al., 2001), but much less available literature explores these ideas in the context of IS seeking to study abroad (Pawlak et al., 2020). Li et al. (2013) observed that “minimal research on study abroad attention has been devoted to studying factors affecting students' intention and decision to study abroad” (p. 74). Thus, universities must understand IS's principles of choosing and making decisions by clarifying their MSA.

However, IS suffers from cultural disequilibrium, and transition and adaptation to university in the new environment challenges. Taylor (1994) pointed out that “cultural disequilibrium” is a “catalyst of the [intercultural] learning process,” which “consists of periods of incongruency” that “challenge the participants' meaning perspective, pushing them to learn new ways to bring balance back into their lives” (p. 169). Reported research indicates that IS has a tough time (Wu & Hammond, 2011) during the initial transition to university (Wu & Hammond) and adapting to the new intercultural environment (Luo & Zhang, 2021). Recent studies show that IS often encounter problems with sociocultural adaptation (Khaway & Stallman, 2011), psychological adaptation (Chalungsoth & Schneller, 2011), and academic adaptation (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a vast challenge to education systems (Daniel, 2020; Odriozola-González et al., 2020). The pandemic influenced teaching and learning in

universities and caused significant psychological stress and mental health to IS (Daniel, 2020). IS must adapt to the new challenges an unfamiliar environment presents to transition successfully (Parker et al., 2005) and adapt to university.

Findings related to the relationship between MSA and IA show congruent themes in existing literature. First, some empirical studies reported that IS are strongly motivated to adapt and make significant efforts to do so (Amiot et al., 2010; Sheridan, 2011). MSA is a crucial factor influencing students' IA during the intercultural experience (Borodina, 2022; Pedersen et al., 2014; Chirkov et al., 2007, 2008; Ganotice et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021). Second, there has been growing interest in exploring factors and complexities that impact IS adaptation (Gu et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015).

However, MSA has yet to be incorporated into study abroad research as a potential factor influencing intercultural development (Anderson & Lawton, 2015). The literature shows inattention to the significance of students' self-determination, goals, and motivation in dynamic interactions with the environment (Volet & Jones, 2012). The preceding discussion underscores the need for more research exploring the transition and intercultural learning process of MSA and IA of IS. Thus, our study analyzed what motivated IS to study abroad and what challenges IS faces in adapting to the new intercultural environment — furthermore, we sought the role of MSA on IA.

Methodology

A qualitative design helps to produce complex, rich descriptions of an individual's experience on a given research issue (Yin, 2011). To explore the research questions, we framed our study as a qualitative design with a narrative inquiry approach through semi-structured interviews. We aimed to produce a more nuanced understanding of the MSA principles and IA process by investigating ICDS' narratives of their intercultural learning experience in an Italian university. This study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007) to select a sample of IS from China, studying at a university in Northern Italy. Ten ICDS — seven males and three females (represented by the letters A to J) — participated in this study. They received different types of scholarships from the Chinese government (China Scholarship Council), Chinese universities (Joint-Cultivated Scholarship), and the Italian government or university scholarship. Regarding the way research data was collected and analyzed, this study conducted semi-structured interviews in Chinese with ten ICDS, either face-to-face or via Zoom, depending on the preferences and convenience of the participants. The interviews were carried out in Chinese, and the first author, who is a native Chinese speaker, transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews in Chinese. The first author, being fluent in both Chinese and English, personally translated the transcriptions from Chinese to English. During the translation process, the first author ensured accurate and faithful translation of the participants' responses while maintaining the original meaning. After the initial translation, the first author reviewed and cross-checked the translated content to ensure its accuracy and consistency. Any discrepancies or ambiguities in translation were resolved by the first author, drawing on their fluency in both languages and contextual understanding of the research. Additionally, the first author verified the accuracy of the interview content with the participants while coding. Moreover, the interview data was coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti.

Findings

Choice and Decision Principles

ICDS's choice and decision principles for study abroad institutions are, to some extent, random — though often based on reality and opportunity considerations. Seven selection principles convinced ICDS to study abroad. These were (listed in no order here) the cooperation policies between Italian and Chinese governments or universities; social support; personal goals, beliefs, and values; the attraction of Italy; the attraction of Italian universities; the doctoral program; Chinese sociocultural and educational system.

Cultural Disequilibrium

ICDS are caught between two cultures — Chinese and Italian — and experience cultural disequilibrium. Some ICDS feel alone, anxious, stressed, or unhappy. For ICDS who were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact was more evident. For instance, as Participant B stated, *Especially in the first year, the whole country was in lockdown, and you could only stay in the dormitory to have classes, which was a terrible experience. It was only after a year there were some in-person academic or non-academic activities, courses and lectures. I realized that, 'Oh, this may be my ideal life of studying abroad.*

Moreover, ICDS face more complicated challenges than expected (e.g., language barriers, racial discrimination, and personality barriers). However, language barriers are the most critical and fundamental cause of low adaptability inside and outside an Italian university. Furthermore, ICDS' attitudes toward ICDS university adaptation descriptions include ideal, involute, Buddhist, and lying flat.

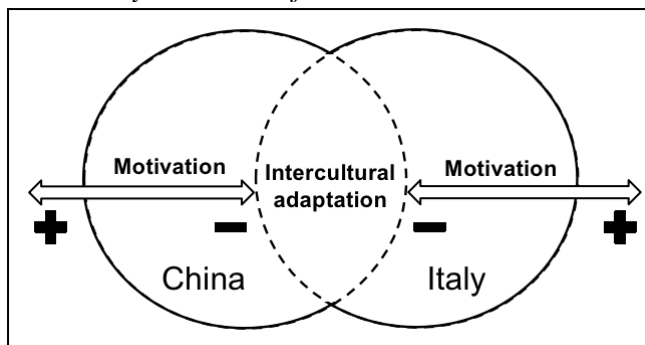
Cyclical Model

A single motivation can have positive or negative effects, and different types of motivation have different impacts on learning experiences and outcomes (Sze-Yeung Lai & Chi-leung Hui, 2021). Therefore, a dynamic virtuous, and vicious cycle model could explain the role of MSA on IA (see Figure 1). ICDS with personal goals, beliefs, and values, seems to adapt to the university more easily (positive effects). They know what they are doing and what they want after graduation. For instance, as Participant J clarified, *"I always had a voice inside of me that I wanted to be stronger and better, which drove me to study abroad in the first place. This is what kept me going despite the difficulties I encountered."*

However, ICDS face difficulties and challenges during the intercultural adaptation process. They have high expectations from inside or outside that bring them pressures or anxiety (negative effects). For instance, Participant E stated, *"I chose this university because of its academic research strength, but I was disappointed by the team's academic research capabilities and collaborative approach. I did not get a good experience and training."* Additionally, Participant A stated *"It is always better to have your goals for studying abroad. Because many international students are blind or purposeless and confused. Especially when they are wasting time without even knowing it. it is like 'headless flies cannot find the wall'. Just keep hitting the wall and not find a way out."* Therefore, a dynamic virtuous, and vicious cycle model of interaction between MSA and IA can help to explain this phenomenon.

Figure 1.

A dynamic virtuous and vicious cycle model of interaction between MSA and IA



Discussion

This section explores the findings based on the narrative experiences provided by the participants and the literature. This study mainly focused on the principles of selecting the study abroad program and the university in Italy, the difficulties and challenges for ICDS to react and adapt to the Italian university, and how MSA influences the IA of ICDS. In this study, we aimed to answer the following research questions: *Research question 1: What are the factors that motivate international students to study abroad? Research question 2: What are the challenges faced by international students in adapting to the new intercultural environment? Research question 3: What is the role of the MSA in IA?*

After conducting semi-structured interviews with ten ICDS, the first question was addressed by analyzing the participants' responses to identify the seven selection principles for studying abroad. As for the second question, this study analyzed the participants' experiences to identify the challenges and attitudes they encountered during their adaptation process. Furthermore, to address the third question, this study presented an explanation of the dynamic model that clarified the role of MSA on IA.

Seven Selection Principles To Study Abroad

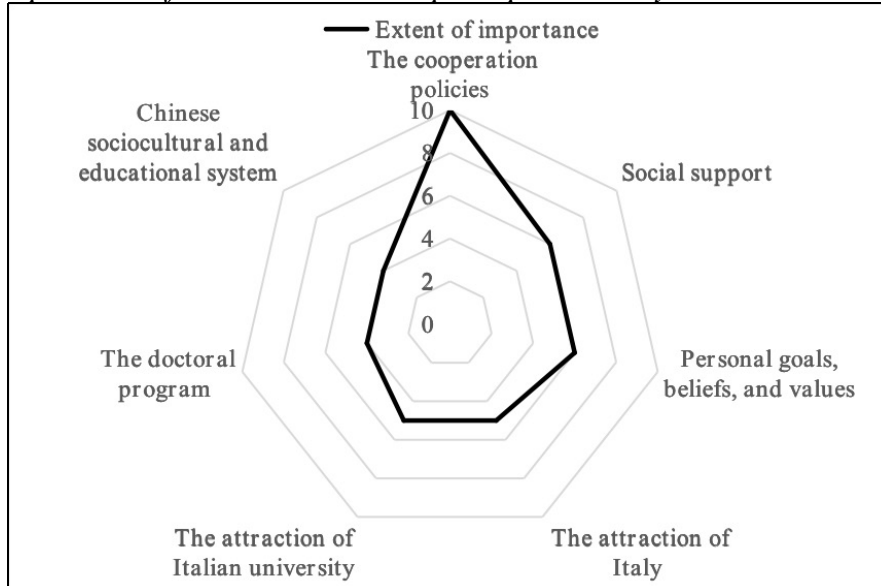
ICDS have more than one study abroad motivation related to multiple personal realities. ICDS' choice and decision-making principles for study abroad programs and universities in non-English-dominant Italy are based on considerations of reality and opportunity and, to some extent, unexpected. Based on themes discovered in the narratives, our study concludes with seven main chosen principles. Additionally, the semi-structured interview data revealed the extent of importance of the selection principles, as depicted in Figure 2.

Principle One

The highest-regarded principle is the cooperation policies of the Italian and Chinese governments and universities (i.e., the joint-cultivate program between Italian and Chinese universities, the international program between the Italian university and the Chinese government, and scholarship from China and Italy). There were ten participants who mentioned this principle, and some ICDS believed it was a good chance, considering themselves fortunate.

Figure 2.

The extent of importance of the seven selection principles to study abroad



Principle Two

The second regarded principle is social support mentioned by six participants, which includes factors such as influence or encouragement by families, partners, or friends; and inspiration from Italian professors, master's supervisors, or other professors doing a similar research area.

Principle Three

The third principle comprises personal goals, beliefs, and values, as mentioned by six participants. ICDS wants to study abroad and experience the international multicultural environment to enlarge their worldview. They have enthusiasm for academic research, believe a doctoral degree or foreign diploma makes future job searches easier, and anticipate a higher salary. Specifically, they consider the principle's three components based on personal experiences and reality.

Principle Four

The fourth principle is Italian attraction, as mentioned by five participants. For instance, ICDS viewed Italy favorably as compared to the US's unsafety and Canada's cold weather. Italy has an excellent natural environment and climate, and the university's location city is small but quiet and comfortable for studying. Italy has a different culture and social structure than China, including a rich historical and cultural heritage.

Principle Five

The fifth principle is the attraction of an Italian university, as mentioned by five participants. In Italy, a three-year doctoral program typically lasts three years; in China, at least doctoral programs generally require four years. Italian high education quality, with enriched education resources, has a long history and high university and discipline ranking, multicultural learning environment, and academic freedom.

Principle Six

The sixth principle is the doctoral program. Italian doctoral programs have fewer requirements to apply and fewer challenges to gain entrance compared with universities from Northern European countries, the United Kingdom, the United States, or Canada. Most importantly, there is no requirement for an Italian language level.

Principle Seven

The seventh principle is deficiencies in the Chinese sociocultural and educational system, which is a direction-driving factor. With the rapid development of China's economy and technology, a competitive culture arose in society, and Chinese residents faced much pressure to survive. Moreover, because of the low cultural diversity and inclusiveness in the higher education system and society, there is less chance to study abroad, leading to a narrow field of view. Students face limited sharing and gaining global resources and a lack of academic resources in China.

Caught Between Two Cultures: Adaptation Challenges and Attitudes

Surprisingly, more than half of ICDS have not encountered short-term or long-term exchange or study abroad experiences, nor have they traveled abroad. ICDS is directly influenced by Chinese culture, including the ways of living, thinking, and learning approaches (Li et al, 2022). While analyzing the narratives, we observed some ICDS feel alone, anxious, stressed, or unhappy. The work of Chayinska & Mari (2014) supports our discovery. Indeed, ICDS participants struggled between the Italian and Chinese cultures and suffered from cultural disequilibrium.

ICDS face more complicated challenges than they expected—for instance, language barriers, racial discrimination, and personality barriers. Language barriers are the most critical and fundamental cause of low adaptability inside (e.g., courses held in Italian, difficulties of misunderstanding and communicating with colleagues and supervisors; not feeling involved or belonging in Italian-language activities) and outside (e.g., hard to integrate into the local community, feel excluded) the Italian university. Most importantly, more than five ICDS have anxiety, mainly in academic research: their difficulty communicating and interacting with supervisors is an important reason. However, ICDS believed supervisors play a virtual role in their doctoral program and adaptation to the university. Furthermore, the coping of COVID-19 pandemic represented a crucial influence on satisfaction with studying abroad. As Participant B mentioned, *“The overall feeling of the program was not as good as I expected. A big reason for that was the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it so different from what I thought.”*

In addition, according to the narrative, the attitudes of ICDS toward adaptation challenges can be concluded as four aspects. First, *ideal*: some ICDS are optimistic about the intercultural learning experience and believe it is a basis for achieving life goals. For instance, participant B mentioned *“I believe that the current learning process is just a part of life's journey, and eventually, we need to move towards a more advanced stage. Yes, that's right.”* Second, *Buddhists*: some ICDS have a no-desire attitude to life and enjoy their comfort zone. For instance, as Participant B mentioned, *“I am used to being in my comfort zone. It was like my own space, and I did not want to participate in activities, even after the COVID-19 pandemic.”* Third, *involute*: some ICDS realized that social or academic resources could not be satisfied, and all people must compete, either in a vicious competition or be competed. For instance, as Participant C mentioned, *“Just*

like sitting in front of a bar, basking in the afternoon sun, drinking Spritz, and chatting..... I really want to enjoy this feeling, but I was tied up in research.”

In the field of academic research, the ability to adapt and survive is closely tied to the quality and quantity of research results. This concept finds validation among numerous PhD students. Last, *lying flat*: some ICDS are frustrated with the social environment and mentioned that it is better to maintain a minimum survival standard rather than actively struggle. For instance, Participant H pointed out *“I am still not adjusting well to college. I am the calm water which is pretty but too calm..... You can choose to be very relaxed and calm, and nervous. I prefer relaxed and calm.”*

The Role of MSA on IA: A Dynamic Explained Model

ICDS are caught between Chinese and Italian cultural circles. The MSA plays a vital role in IA, including positive and negative effects. A dynamic virtuous and vicious cycle model as mentioned above can provide an explanation for the role of motivation to study abroad in intercultural adaptation. This model highlights the reciprocal relationship between motivation and intercultural adaptation, suggesting that they reinforce or weaken each other in a continuous cycle (see Figure 1).

The dynamic virtuous and vicious cycle model offers a framework to understand the influence of MSA on IA. This model suggests that MSA and IA are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. A strong motivation drives individuals to actively engage in intercultural experiences, leading to positive adaptation outcomes. Successful adaptation experiences, in turn, enhance individuals' motivation, creating a positive cycle of continuous growth and development. Conversely, challenges or reduced motivation can lead to a negative cycle, hindering IA. Understanding this dynamic cycle can assist researchers and practitioners in identifying strategies to enhance motivation and support the IA process for individuals studying abroad.

Implications and Future Research

This study provides implications for theory and practice and informs future research. In theory, the narrative inquiry approach helped us understand ICDS with specific cultural backgrounds. Based on the narrative inquiry data captured from ICDS, this study proposed the dynamic virtuous, and vicious cycle model of interaction between MSA and IA. The dynamic virtuous and vicious cycle model can aid in understanding and explaining the intercultural transition and adaptation of ICDS. Thus, narrative inquiry is appropriate for this study and other international adult education research.

In practice, our study's results help ICDS better adapt to a new environment and help Italian universities optimize international education. We present some recommendations for IS and Italian universities based on our findings:

For IS

Learning a language (Italian or English) could help improve communication competencies; being open-minded, trying to accept Italian culture and active social networks, and balancing work (e.g., academic research, courses) and life.

For the Italian University

Increasing frequency of English use as an intermediary language by students, faculty, and administrators to improve inclusion and sustainability; setting up a dedicated office or position that allows students to gain help directly or indirectly; for some doctoral programs, setting specific joint-cultivate plans; reforming curriculum to contain more English courses for IS; establishing the international community, organizing regular academic and non-academic activities.

For Future International Adult Education Research

More research is necessary to help universities organize international programs in this particular period and attract and maintain more IS. Suggestions for improved research perspectives include (1) further exploring the themes of transition and acculturation of ICDS; (2) enlarging the population to bachelor, master, and doctoral students from different countries; (3) comparing ICDS studying in other Italian universities or other English and non-English-dominant countries; conducting a mixed-method design — a longitudinal research design is ideal for exploring dynamic changes of intercultural adaptation.

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