

The Relationship of Cultural Identity, Perceived Cultural Distance and Socio-Cultural Adaptation

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Abstract

While multiple studies have been conducted on cultural adaptation of international students or foreign teachers' volunteers, there has been a dearth of research on how northern students adapt to southern culture. Therefore, under the background of Chinese domestic culture, this study focuses on the relationship of perceived cultural distance, cultural identity and socio-cultural adaptation of northern students. Taking northern students as research objects, this study adopts questionnaire survey method to investigate 110 northern students studying in southern universities. By using SPSS 22.0 and Excel 2012 to conduct statistics and analysis of data, this study explores the relationship of the perceived cultural distance, cultural identity and socio-cultural adaptation and tests that northern cultural identity plays a mediating role between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation. Meanwhile, some suggestions are given for northern students and managements in southern universities.

Keywords

Perceived cultural distance; Socio-cultural adaptation; Cultural identity; Northern students.

1. Introduction

In ancient times, in terms of geographical and cultural differences, China was divided into northern and southern regions by the Qinling-Huaihe River. Currently, more and more northern students choose to leave their hometowns to study in southern universities. How to adapt to the new cultural environment as soon as possible has become a critical problem that every cultural adaptation individual needs to pay more attention to. However, there are relatively few studies on the relationship between perceived cultural distance, cultural identity and socio-cultural adaptation of students studying in different places under the background of local regional culture in China.

In order to make up for this research gap, this study, being based on the differences in local regional culture of China, aims to explore the relationship among cultural identity, perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation of northern students studying in the southern universities. Therefore, this study is of great theoretical significance to enrich the research on cultural adaptation under the background of China's regional culture. Meanwhile, based on the present analysis of northern students' socio-cultural adaptation status, this study discusses the moderating role of cultural identity in perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation, and further gives relevant suggestions which have some practical significance to help northern students to improve the adaptability socio-cultural adaptation, better adapt to different environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies Abroad

The research on cultural adaptation began in the United States in the early 20th century. Since the 1980s, the research methods have been constantly enriched, and the research scope, research level and perspective have been continuously expanded, resulting in different models and theories (Wang, 2011).

Taking international students and immigrants as objectives, most scholars in foreign countries have studied the influence of cultural identity on cultural adaptation. Searle and Ward (1990) put forward that socio-cultural adjustment was generally affected by social difficulty factors including cultural identity. Along with the variables determined by Searle and Ward (1990), many scholars began to pay attention to the relationship between cultural identity and cultural adaptation. Dolby (2005) examined the influence of cultural identity of American and Australian undergraduates on cultural adaptation in an exchange program. He had found that students with a strong sense of their own cultural identity had a more difficult time adjusting to life in host culture. Consistent with Dolby's study, Fugita and O'Brien (1985) also found that individuals have a more positive social adjustment experience when they identify more strongly with the host culture than with their own. Currently, under the background of postcolonial context, Lou (2021) studied language, identity, cultural adaptation, and academic achievement of Macao students in Mainland China. Researches on the relationship between cultural identity and cultural adaptation have laid a good foundation for this study.

Meanwhile, there are some studies on the relationship between cultural adaptation and perceived cultural distance. Perceived cultural distance has been regarded as an important factor in adjustment to cultural change in that the transition between more distant cultures may entail greater life changes and engender more distress (Searle & Ward, 1990). Galchenko and Van de Vijver (2007) studied the effect of perceived cultural distance on the cultural adaptation of Russian exchange students, and the research results showed that perceived cultural distance and personality were strongly correlated with students' socio-cultural adaptation. Many researchers also found that the low perceived cultural distance were associated with better adjustment for psychological adjustment among international students (Taušová et al, 2019).

There were also some scholars who studied the mediating role of cultural identity. For example, with one hundred and seventy-five Chinese across from the United States participating in study, Hsu studied the mediating role of cultural identity in acculturation time and communication traits (Hsu, 2010). FEDOTOVA studied the relationship between acculturation strategies, socio-cultural adaptation, ethnic identity, and cultural distance among students from Arabic countries including Morocco, Syria and Egypt, which found that cultural distance was interconnected with sociocultural adaptation (FEDOTOVA, 2021). However, few studies focus on the moderating role of cultural identity between cultural distance and cultural adaptation.

2.2. Previous Studies in China

The research of domestic scholars on cultural adaptation mainly focuses on the influence of perceived cultural distance on cultural adaptation, few studies on the relationship among perceived cultural distance, cultural identity and cultural adaptation.

Many scholars in China focus on the influence of perceived cultural distance on cultural adaptation. In the process of sojourners' adaptation, perceived cultural distance may be a better predictor of adaptation assessment than acculturation strategies (Chen, 2016). Through a review of domestic and foreign studies on cultural adaptation, Liu Lu and Zhao Weiguo (2016) found that perceived cultural distance were important factors affecting cultural adaptation, but their research showed that perceived cultural distance had no significant negative correlation

with life satisfaction and socio-cultural adaptation of international students. Some scholars discussed the relationship between perceived cultural distance and cultural identity. Based on the analysis of the socio-cultural adaptation and psychological adaptation of overseas students in China, Chen Xi (2016) explored the influence of perceived cultural distance on cultural identity of international students in China from the perspective of cognition.

Few scholars studied the relationship among perceived cultural distance, cultural identity and cultural adaptation. Taking minority college students in Han district as the research object, Cai Yudi (2018) discussed the influence of mainstream cultural identity on mainstream cultural adaptation. Through investigation, Cai Yudi (2018) found that mainstream cultural identity is part of the mediating variable between perceived cultural distance and mainstream cultural adaptation of minority college students in Han district. Perceived cultural distance not only directly affects mainstream cultural adaptation, but also indirectly affects mainstream cultural adaptation through mainstream cultural identity.

2.3. Summary

Based on reviewing researches at home and abroad, there are some findings, which provide theoretical basis and reference for this study.

- (1) Cultural identity has some influence on cultural adaptation.
- (2) Cultural adaptation has a relationship with perceived cultural distance.
- (3) Cultural identity plays a mediating role in cultural adaptation.

However, some gaps are discussed in the following parts.

Firstly, most studies have pioneered to examine the relationships among perceived cultural distance, cultural identity and cultural adaptation separately, which laid the foundation for this study. However, very few studies comprehensively paid attention to the relationship among the three. Whether there is a relationship between perceived cultural distance, cultural identity and socio-cultural adaptation? Whether cultural identity plays a moderating role in cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation?

Secondly, there have been a large number of researches on cultural adaptation at home and abroad, involving the cultural adaptation of international students, immigrants, ethnic minorities, special groups (such as the disabled and transfer students), especially the cultural adaptation of international students in other countries (Wan, 2008). However, studies taking northern students as the research objects are scarce. Whether the socio-cultural adaptation of students in the north also need to be paid attention to?

Thirdly, with countries more closely being connected, more and more scholars study cultural adaptation against the background of international environment. As the rapid advancement of globalization, whether studying socio-cultural adaptation of local regional culture in China still makes sense?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms include northern students, perceived cultural distance, cultural identity and socio-cultural adaptation.

The recognized boundary between north and south regions in China is the Qinling-Huai River line. Northern students refers to students from these provinces: Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi (excluding Shangluo, Ankang, Hanzhong), Henan (excluding Nanyang, Xinyang), northern Jiangsu (including Xuzhou, Lianyungang, Suqian), Shandong, northern Anhui (Bozhou, Huaibei, Suzhou, Fuyang), Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning.

Babiker et al. (1980) referred to perceived cultural distance as the concept to account for the distress experienced by sojourners during the process of cultural adaptation and developed a cultural distance index to measure an individual difference of the perceived discrepancies between social and physical aspects of home and host culture environments. Sousa and Bradley (2006) defined psycho-cultural distance as the perceived difference between the host culture and the foreign culture. As perceived cultural distance is at the individual level, it is assessed by the individual's perceived differences.

Cultural identity refers to one's sense of self as a member of a cultural (or ethnic) group (Phinney, 2003). It consists of two components: identification with the ethnic (or original) culture and identification with the host (or new) culture. Cultural identity is defined as "the emotional significance we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture" (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Currently, most researchers agree that cultural adaptation is classified in the way Ward (Ward & Kennedy, 1992) and his colleagues agreed. They believe that cultural adaptation can be divided into two dimensions: psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. This study mainly focuses on socio-cultural adaptation, which refers to the ability to adapt to the local socio-cultural environment, whether it can effectively contact people with local culture (Wang, 2011).

3.2. Research Model of the Study

Based on previous studies at home and abroad, this study aims to find out the relationship among cultural identity, cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation and figure out whether cultural identity plays a moderating role between cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation.

Taking above researches into consideration, several hypotheses are put forward and will be examined and tested in chapter five.

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between perceived cultural distance and cultural identity.

Hypothesis 1a: Perceived cultural distance is negatively correlated with southern cultural identity of northern students.

Hypothesis 1b: Perceived cultural distance is positively correlated with northern cultural identity of northern students.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived cultural distance is negatively correlated with socio-cultural adaptation.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between cultural identity and socio-cultural adaptation.

Hypothesis 3a: Southern cultural identity of northern students has a positive effect on their socio-cultural adaptation.

Hypothesis 3b: Northern cultural identity of northern students has a negative effect on their socio-cultural adaptation.

Hypothesis 4: Cultural identity plays a mediating role between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation.

Hypothesis 4a: Northern cultural identity plays a mediating role between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation.

Hypothesis 4b: Southern cultural identity plays a mediating role between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation.

As a prerequisite to above hypothesis, the theoretical model of the paper is constructed and is shown in Figure 1.

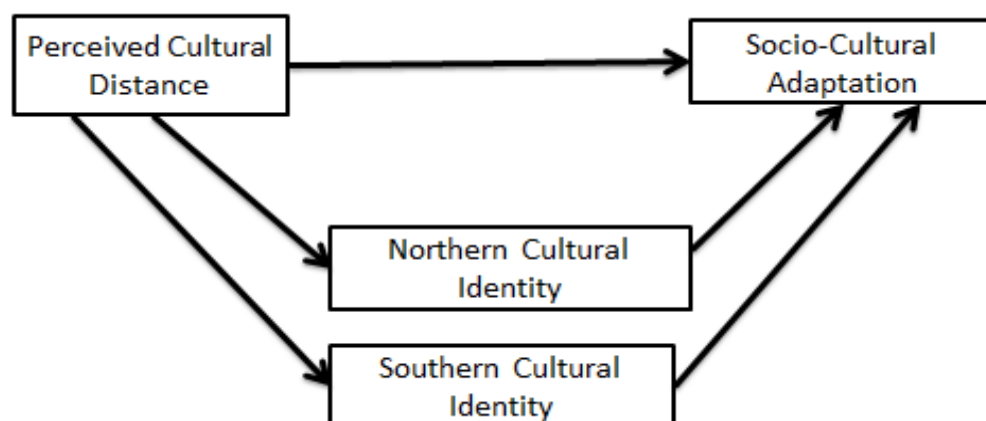


Figure 1. Theoretical Model

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

Questionnaire survey was adopted in this study with northern students as the objects under the background of China's domestic culture. The questionnaire is distributed on the network survey platform. A total of 110 northern students studying in the southern universities participated in the socio-cultural adaptation survey, of which 92 northern students answered the survey effectively. This study mainly uses correlation analysis and regression analysis to explore the mediating role of cultural identity. In this study, SPSS 22.0 and Excel are used to carry out statistical analysis.

4.2. Research Instruments

Prior questionnaires are mainly aimed at cultural adaptation in the context of international culture, while the study is based on China's domestic culture, so the scale needs to be revised. All the revised scales are tested for reliability ($\alpha > 0.7$), indicating good reliability.

According to Ward and Kennedy's scale (1992), the questionnaire of cultural identity was revised. There are six items in the scale, each of which contains two questions that represent two dimensions: keep your northern culture or accept and integrate into the southern culture. As for each question, participants were asked to evaluate how similar their cognition and behavior were to those of the north or south. The higher the score, the stronger the cultural identity of they were to northern or southern culture. Through the reliability test, the Cronbach's Alpha of northern cultural identity is 0.721 and the Cronbach's Alpha of southern cultural identity is 0.770. By revised Demes and Geeraert's scale (2014), this scale is applied to measure perceived cultural distance under the context of domestic culture in China. There are totally eight items. The higher the score, the greater the perceived cultural distance will be. After reliability statistics, Cronbach's Alpha is 0.769. The socio-cultural adaptation scale including thirteen items is used to evaluate international students' difficulties in communication and life, according to Ward and Kennedy's scale (1999). After reliability statistics, Cronbach's Alpha is 0.829.

After being revised, the questionnaire mainly includes four parts: The first part is about demographic variables, a total of five questions. The second part is the socio-cultural adaptation questionnaire with thirteen questions. Part three is the revised perceived cultural distance questionnaire with eight questions. The fourth part is the cultural identity questionnaire with twelve questions. Thirty-three items in the scale is evaluated with the Likert-scale. After reliability statistics of the whole questionnaire, the Cronbach's Alpha is 0.817.

5. Results Analysis and Suggestions

5.1. Results Analysis

5.1.1. Demographic Statistical Analysis

The first part of questionnaire is demographic variables. Main variables are shown in Table 1. Among the participants, the ratio of male to female was 1:4, and the highest educational level was mostly post-graduate. Before coming to the southern universities, most participants have never been to the south.

Table 1. Participants' conditions (N=92)

variables	Type	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gender	Male	19	20.7
	Female	73	79.3
Education Background	Bachelor degree	25	27.2
	Master degree	65	70.7
	PhD degree	2	2.2
Before coming to southern universities	Never been to the South	54	58.7
	Had been in the South for more than three months	8	8.7
	Had been in the South for less than three months	24	26.1
	Never left his birthplace	6	6.5

5.1.2. Analysis of Relationship of Perceived Cultural Distance, Cultural Identity and Socio-Cultural Adaptation

According to the results of correlation analysis in Table 2, socio-cultural adaptation and perceived cultural distance have a significantly negative correlation (Pearson $r=-.316$, $p=.002$). Socio-cultural adaptation and northern cultural identity have a significantly negative correlation (Pearson $r=-.333$, $p=.001$). Perceived cultural distance and northern cultural identity also have a significantly positive correlation (Pearson $r=.328$, $p=.001$).

Table 2. Correlations of socio-cultural adaptation, perceived cultural distance and northern cultural identity

		PCD	SCA	NCI
PCD	Pearson Correlation	1	-.316**	.328**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002	.001
	N	92	92	92
SCA	Pearson Correlation	-.316**	1	-.333**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002		.001
	N	92	92	92
NCI	Pearson Correlation	.328**	-.333**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001	
	N	92	92	92

a. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

b. PCD (Perceived Cultural Distance); SCA (Socio-cultural Adaptation); NCI (Northern Cultural Identity)

After analyzing in Table 3, socio-culture adaptation and southern cultural identity have weak or unrelated relationships (Pearson $r=.205$, $p>.05$). Perceived cultural distance and southern cultural identity have a negative correlation (Pearson $r=-.282$, $p=.006$).

Table 3. Correlations of socio-cultural adaptation, perceived cultural distance and southern cultural identity

		PCD	SCA	SCI
PCD	Pearson Correlation	1	-.316**	-.282**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002	.006
	N	92	92	92
SCA	Pearson Correlation	-.316**	1	.205
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002		.051
	N	92	92	92
SCI	Pearson Correlation	-.282**	.205	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.051	
	N	92	92	92

a. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

b. PCD (Perceived Cultural Distance); SCA (Socio-cultural Adaptation); SCI (Southern Cultural Identity)

5.1.3. Test of Mediating Role of Northern Cultural Identity

In order to test the mediating role of northern cultural identity in socio-cultural adaptation and perceived cultural distance, this study is based on the testing method summarized by Wen Zhonglin (et al., 2004) and proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). There are three-step mediation effecting testing programs, including estimating direct effect, indirect effect and the corresponding value to judge whether there is a mediation effect (Guo, 2013). According to the research purpose and hypothesis, this study wants to discuss the mediating role of northern cultural identity in socio-cultural adaptation and perceived culture distance. Combined with the results of correlation analysis, this study can carry out a mediating test under these conditions. For one thing, socio-cultural adaptation and perceived cultural distance have a significant positive correlation (Pearson $r=-0.316$, $p=0.002$). For another thing, socio-cultural adaptation and northern cultural identity also have a very significant positive correlation (Pearson $r=-0.333$, $p=0.001$).

With perceived cultural distance as independent variable (X_1) and socio-cultural adaptation as dependent variable (Y_1), regression analysis was conducted and the result is shown in Table 4 ($\beta=-0.306$, $p=0.002$).

Table 4. The regression analysis of perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation

(X_1)	(Y_1)	Beta	T**
perceived cultural distance	socio-cultural adaptation	-.306	.002

* $p\leq 0.05$, ** $p\leq 0.01$, *** $p\leq 0.001$

With perceived cultural distance as independent variable (X_2) and northern cultural identity as dependent variable (Y_2), regression analysis is conducted and the result is shown in Table 5.5 ($\beta=0.270$, $p=0.001$).

Table 5. The regression analysis of perceived cultural distance and northern cultural identity

(X ₂)	(Y ₂)	Beta	T***
perceived cultural distance	northern cultural identity	.270	.001

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 6. The regression analysis of perceived cultural distance and northern cultural identity

(X)	(Y)	Beta	T
perceived cultural distance (X ₃)	socio-cultural adaptation	-.285	.003**
northern cultural identity (X ₄)		-.590	.001***

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 7. Intermediate analysis test

	Normalized regression equation	Beta	T
The first step	Y ₁ =-0.306X ₁	-.306	.002**
The second step	Y ₂ =0.270X ₂	.270	.001***
The third step	Y=-0.285X ₁ -0.590X ₂	-.285	.003**
		-.590	.001***

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

With perceived cultural distance as independent variable (X₃), northern cultural identity independent variable (X₄), socio-cultural adaptation as dependent variable (Y), regression analysis is conducted and the result is shown in the following table. After introducing the northern cultural identity (X₄) into the regression equation, the influence of perceived cultural distance on socio-cultural adaptation changes from -0.306 to -0.285, and the regression coefficient reached the significant level (p<0.01). At the same time, northern cultural identity also has a very significant impact on socio-cultural adaptation (β=-0.590, p=0.001). The mediating effect model is shown in figure 2.

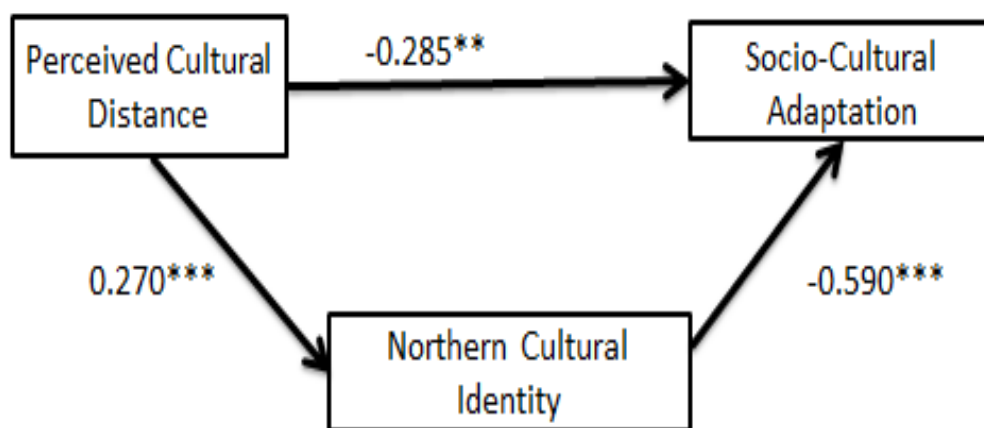


Figure 2. The mediating effect model

The regression analysis shows that socio-cultural adaptation has a very significant regression to the perceived cultural distance, and northern cultural identity has a very significant regression to the perceived cultural distance. In the mediation model, the influence of perceived cultural distance on socio-cultural adaptation decreased from |-0.306| to |-0.285| but the correlation is still significant (p<0.01). Meanwhile, northern cultural identity has a very significant regression effect on socio-cultural adaptation. Therefore, the northern cultural

identity has a partial mediating effect between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation. In other words, perceived cultural distance not only affects socio-cultural adaptation through northern cultural identity, but also has a direct effect on socio-cultural adaptation.

5.1.4. Summary

The conclusion is that hypothesis 1, hypothesis 2, hypothesis 3b and hypothesis 4a are tenable, while hypothesis 3a and hypothesis 4b are failing.

This study discusses the relationship among cultural identity, perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation and tests the partial mediating role of northern cultural identity. However, this study finds that there is weakness even no correlation between southern cultural identity and socio-cultural adaptation. It is found that identification with northern cultural partially mediates between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation. According to Ward's ABC (2001) model of cultural conflict, cultural identity is a result of cognition in the process of cultural adaptation of individuals (Guo, 2013). Cultural identity is also constantly developing and changing, and will also be affected by various external perceptual factors. Perceived cultural distance may change with the passage of time, and cultural identity will change after the change of perceived distance, thus affecting the social and cultural adaptation level of northern students in the south.

5.2. Suggestions

By viewing of the partial mediate role of northern cultural identity between cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation, there are some suggestions put forward in this study.

On the one hand, as for northern students, they perhaps reduce perceived cultural distance and northern cultural identity during southern universities. On the other hand, as for leaders in southern universities, they may take some efforts to help northern students adapt southern culture as much as possible, such as encouraging teachers' using Putonghua rather than southern dialect in class, setting window to sell northern cuisine in the school cafeteria and offering help platform and so on.

6. Conclusion

By reviewing domestic and foreign researches on the cultural adaptation, the innovation of this paper lies in taking northern students as objects to study the moderating role of cultural identity between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation under the background of local culture in China.

Although this study has studied the relationship of cultural identity, perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation, and proved the partial mediate role of northern cultural identity between perceived cultural distance and socio-cultural adaptation, this study has some limitations. On the one hand, as the research objects are northern students, there are some restrictions on the selection of samples. Owing to the study objects mainly coming from Guilin University of Technology, both coverage and quantity of samples need to be improved. Therefore, future studies can expand the sampling range and increase the coverage of samples to ensure the quality of the questionnaire survey. On the other hand, there is a limitation in research design. Due to limited time, it is difficult to conduct a longitudinal study of northern students to explore the trend of socio-cultural adaptation and perceived cultural distance over time in the southern universities. Therefore, qualitative research can be carried out in the future to further explore the nature of cultural adaptation and changes of perceived cultural distance.

In a nutshell, future study can explore the moderating role of cultural identity between cultural distance and cultural adaptation taking psychological adaptation into consideration in a more comprehensive and in-depth way from different aspects.

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