

Factors Affecting the Intercultural Adaptation Process of International Students: A Case Study of Vietnamese Postgraduate Students at a Tertiary Institution in Taiwan

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Abstract: The study was conducted to explore challenges Vietnamese postgraduate students were confronted with during their intercultural adaptation process in Taiwan. The participants (N = 28) were administered an open-ended questionnaire, probing into different aspects of their intercultural adjustment, namely academic, psychological and sociocultural issues. Findings indicated regarding academic life, the sojourn students encountered language barriers (both in English and Chinese), new pedagogical approach, examination and publication pressure. Other adjustment problems involved daily communication with the local, unfamiliar diet, homesickness, perceived discrimination, and few activities for international students. Implications for relevant stakeholders were discussed.

Keywords: Intercultural Adaptation; Academic Affairs; Sociocultural Issues; International Students; Vietnamese Students in Taiwan.

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1. Introduction

Taiwan is emerging as a popular destination for studying abroad in Asia, attracting outbound students coming from all around the world. In 2016, the number of international students in Taiwan was reported at around 28,000, and Taiwan's Ministry of Education has released its plan to double this figure to 58,000 by 2019 (ICEF 2016). The number of international students is growing rapidly thanks to the Taiwanese government's policy, making the

country an attractive destination for studying abroad.

Studying in another country, international students are commonly faced with various types of mental, academic and socio-cultural problems (Andrade 2006; Bradley 2000; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong 2006). Brisset et al. (2010) noticed that Vietnamese students were underexplored concerning the cross-cultural adjustment process. Most studies related to intercultural adjustment were carried out in Western countries (Grainger and Nankervis 2001; Selmer 2004), leaving the cross-cultural adjustment of outbound students in Asian context relatively unknown. Although Vietnamese students constituted one of the main sources of international students in

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Taiwan (Chih-chung and Wu 2016), there have been few studies addressing their intercultural adaptation in the country.

The current study was conducted, in response, to examine challenges, Vietnamese postgraduates confront during their intercultural transition in terms of academic, psychological and sociocultural aspects. Findings in this study are also expected to shed more light on an intercultural context where the sojourn students have to deal with two foreign languages, one for their study (i.e., English) and another in their daily life (i.e., Chinese). Such a context has not been adequately explored in prior research.

2. Literature Review

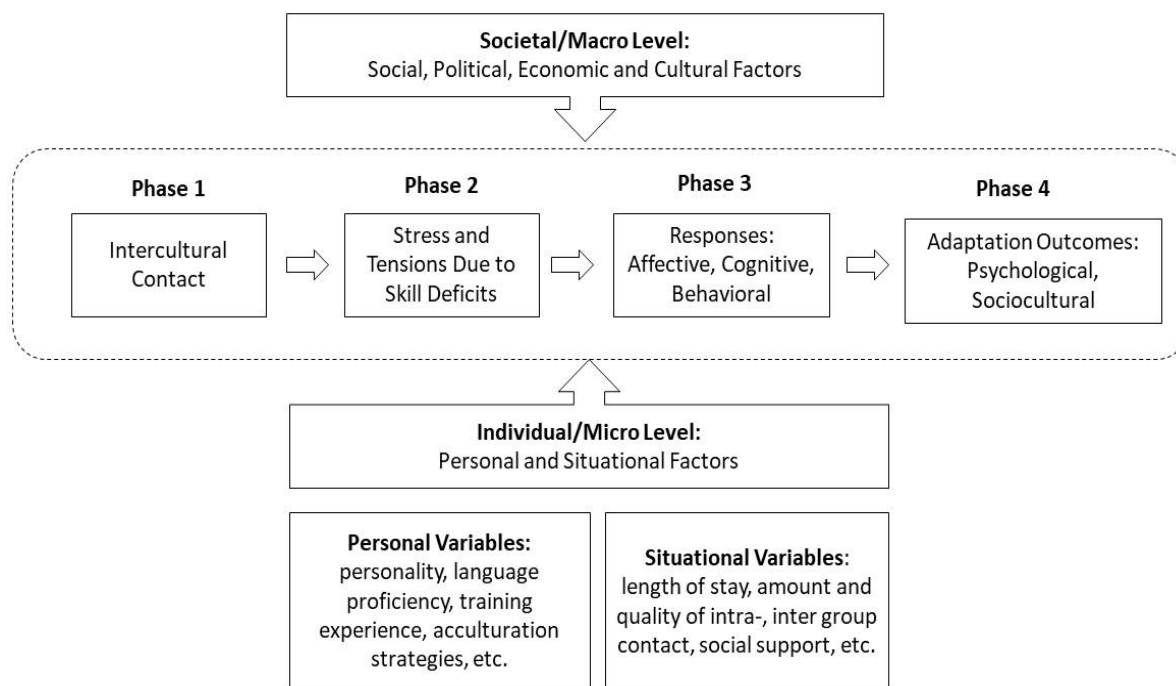
In this section, first, a popular model of acculturation process by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) is discussed. The foregoing conceptual model is commonly employed to illustrate various factors that influence sojourners' cross-cultural adaptation. Subsequently, empirical findings in previous studies regarding international students' adjustment problems are presented.

2.1. Acculturation, Intercultural Adaptation, and the Acculturation Model

Acculturation and intercultural adaptation are closely related constructs. While early approaches consider acculturation as a state (Zhou et al. 2008), which involves integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization (e.g., Berry 1994; Berry 1997), contemporary approaches view it as a process of intercultural adaptation or adjustment (Mumford 1998; Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2005; Zhou et al. 2008). This research resonates the latter viewpoint, considering acculturation as a dynamic process during which international students confront and resolve emerging conflicts. More specifically, intercultural adaptation/adjustment can be divided into two components, namely psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Searle and Ward 1990; Ward and Kennedy 1992).

An interactive acculturation model was proposed by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) to describe the process of intercultural adaptation, the outcomes of which are influenced by various individual and societal factors (see Figure 1). Factors at the personal level can involve characteristics of the individuals (e.g., personality, language proficiency, values) and the living situation (e.g., length of cultural contact, cultural distance, amount of social support). Societal variables include social, political, economic and cultural factors.

Figure 1: A model of the acculturation process adapted from Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001)



As depicted in Figure 1, the concerned adaptation process progresses through four stages. In the first phase, the sojourners have to deal with stress and lack of necessary skills due to new life changes and conflicting intercultural contact. These individuals then gradually develop stress-coping strategies and culture-specific skills, thereby enabling them to have appropriate responses in Phase 3 regarding affect, behaviors and cognitive reactions. The final stage features the outcomes of their cross-cultural adaptation concerning both psychological and sociocultural aspects.

Based on the acculturation model by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001), intercultural issues examined in this study normally belong to the first and the second stages when participants still have to deal with disadvantages in a new environment.

2.2. Problems in Intercultural Adaptation

International students are faced with a great number of challenges when studying abroad. Common cross-cultural adjustment challenges involve language barrier (e.g., insufficient language proficiency), unfamiliar educational culture, communication with faculty and peer, academic stress, financial problems, living arrangement, cultural shock, loneliness and isolation (Wu, Garza and Norma 2015). For instance, Vietnamese students were found to struggle with language skills, new academic assessment and learning and teaching approaches at an Australian institution (Wearing et al. 2015).

The language barrier is often reported as the most challenging hurdle, hindering the intercultural transition process of international students (Galloway and Jenkins 2009; Ozer 2015; Wenhua and Zhe 2013; Young et al. 2013). Acquiring an adequate level of the language of the host

country is particularly crucial. For example, it has been found that international students can encounter disengagement and alienation from their host-country classmates if being inadequate in communication (Bertram et al. 2014).

Academic affairs are another major source of intercultural-adjustment challenge student sojourners confront in a new scholastic environment (Bertram et al. 2014; Mustaffa and Ilias 2013; Wenhua and Zhe 2013; Young et al. 2013). Academic-related problems can occur when international students are unfamiliar with the educational system of the host country (Wenhua and Zhe 2013). Also, other problems involve interaction with professors, alienation from classmates and achievement pressure (Wu, Garza and Norma 2015). Differential scholastic styles in the host country can make international students confused, for instance, whether to interrupt the professor to raise questions (Wu, Garza and Norma 2015). Isolation and failing to form new friendships with classmates additionally hinder the international students' process of adapting to the new academic environment (Wu, Garza and Norma 2015). High expectations from parents often exacerbates outbound learners' adaptation stress (Wu, Garza and Norma 2015).

Other sociocultural factors contributing to outbound learners' adaptation stress may include accommodation arrangement, bank account procedure, and transportation services (Wu, Garza and Norma 2015). Thus, receiving adequate social support is crucial for the initial adjustment period of international students before their later confrontation with a culture shock (Liu 2017; Ozer 2015). Furthermore, the financial burden has also been reported as a major cause for international students' distress (Bertram et al. 2014; Wenhua and

Zhe 2013) since studying in another country normally necessitates considerable expense.

The international students' psychological well-being can be further affected by the level of perceived discrimination (Bertram et al. 2014; Moscato et al. 2014; Ozer 2015) and homesickness (Thurber and Walton 2012; Wenhua and Zhe 2013). As for the former, Neto and Wilks (2017) found in their study that perceived discrimination significantly accounted for international students' loneliness. Likewise, Schmitt et al. (2014) indicated in their meta-analysis study that perceived discrimination was found to be associated with other psychological states, e.g., depression, anxiety, distress, and life satisfaction. Regarding homesickness, Chinese participants in the study by Chen and Yang (2015) were reported to be yearning for emotional support and a sense of belonging to cope with their homesickness after they moved to Singapore for study.

While there have been numerous studies about international students' cross-cultural adaptation problems, more research is needed to address the issue in different educational contexts (Wu, Garza and Norma 2015), particularly Vietnamese student sojourners (Brisset et al. 2010), an underrepresented population in previous studies. Regarding the research setting, this study examines Vietnamese postgraduate students who pursued English-taught degrees in Taiwan, a Chinese-speaking country. Such a context has not been adequately investigated in previous studies.

Specifically, the current study was conducted to address the following research questions:

What academic-related problems Vietnamese graduate students have to

confront during their process of intercultural adaptation in Taiwan?

What other psychological and socio-cultural problems are Vietnamese graduate students facing during their process of intercultural adaptation in Taiwan?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 28 Vietnamese postgraduate students (14 males) who were pursuing master's and doctoral degrees at a large technical university in Taipei City, Taiwan. They came from various regions in Vietnam and varied in their duration of living in Taiwan, i.e., from one semester to twelve semesters. Participation in this study was based voluntarily.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

3.2.1. The intercultural adjustment questionnaire

An open-ended questionnaire was developed by the researcher, guided by previous literature (e.g., Novera 2004; Wu, Garza and Norma 2015). It encompassed two main components, the first of which consisted of four open-ended questions, probing into challenges related to participants' academic life, i.e., class communication with their professors, classmates, learning styles and academic pressure. The second component, comprising five open-ended questions, targeted at participants' psychological and socio-cultural issues, namely daily social interaction, diet, perceived discrimination, homesickness and activities for international

students. The open-ended questionnaire has also been employed as an instrument to collect data on students' intercultural adaptation in previous studies (e.g., Novera 2004; Robertson et al. 2000).

The instrument was further checked by a professor who specialized in intercultural communication. It was then translated into Vietnamese so as for the participants to understand the questions with ease. Responses were allowed to be written in both English and Vietnamese, which was to help participants to express their ideas most easily and comfortably.

3.2.2. Semi-structured interview

To gain more insights into the cross-cultural issues, semi-structured interviews were then conducted voluntarily with two randomly-chosen participants: a male master's student and a female Ph.D. student. They were asked to elaborate on their answers from the questionnaire and follow-up questions, e.g., asking them to provide real-life examples. The interviews were audio-recorded, lasting from 20 – 30 minutes, and then transcribed for content analysis.

3.3 Data analysis

A content analysis was adopted for data analysis in this study. First, the responses from the questionnaire were gathered and the interview audios transcribed. The analysis was conducted both intuitively and deductively with emerging themes grouped together. Findings from previous studies were also taken into consideration during the analysis process to facilitate the systematic classification of the intercultural difficulties as well as their interpretation.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Problems Relating to Academic Life

4.1.1. Communication with instructors and advisors

The language barrier with instructors and supervisors/advisors was reported as a major cause for breakdowns in class communication. A participant commented: *“Knowledge taught at Taiwanese universities is a bit different from what I learned in Vietnam and the communication-related problems make it even harder for me to grasp those new ideas. Moreover, I had to read more books to know about it.”* Miscommunication also occurs between the advisor/supervisor and advisee: *“Sometimes me and my advisor have misunderstandings when communicating in English and she may get very much irritated.”*

The fact that both the instructors and outbound students are EFL (English as a Foreign Language) speakers further complicates the language barrier issue. While the majority of the participants attributed the comprehension difficulties to their own limited English proficiency, others suggested it was the speaking accents that led to ineffective communication between them and their professors. It should be noted that the instructors are content-knowledge teachers rather than professional language teachers. They were required to speak English in class as a requirement of the EMI (English as a medium of instruction) programs at the concerned institution.

This finding particularly adds to the overall picture of the language barrier international students have to deal with when studying EMI courses in a non-English speaking country. Linguistic proficiency tends to be the learner-related issue only, which is comprehensible as

previous studies are commonly conducted in English-speaking countries where the lecturers are native English speakers (e.g., Novera 2004; Robertson et al. 2000; Wu, Garza and Norma 2015). The current study addresses the linguistic obstacle in a new context, where both the host-country teachers and international students are non-native English speakers. To put it another way, problematic language use can stem from both the instructors and the learners.

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is increasingly popular in Taiwan, which is part of the government’s effort to internationalize the country’s education system. Nevertheless, as previous researchers have pointed out, a challenging task in implementing EMI programs is to provide sufficient instructors who are competent in both the content knowledge and foreign language competence (Vu and Burns 2014). Communication problems found in this study certainly reflect this issue.

Overall, the language barrier appears to be the primary cause of the participants’ difficulties in lesson comprehension or communication with their academic supervisors. Indeed, Andrade (2006:135) contended that “academic adjustment problems for international students tend to focus on language issues.”

4.1.2. Communicating and socializing with host students

While the respondents appreciated the friendliness and helpfulness from their host-country classmates, they also pointed out that the host students can be shy or reserved in communicating with them:

“Most of Taiwanese [classmates] are friendly, but it is not easy to make friends

with them. You know, we have different hobbies and languages. They are reluctant to communicate in English so we cannot go out together.”

“In my lab [where graduate students conducted their experiment or come to do research], most are Taiwanese and me, the only Vietnamese student. They often talked together in Chinese and only talked with me once in a while.”

Difficulty in befriending or socializing with the host country classmates has been documented in previous research (e.g., Mak, Brown and Wadey 2014; Williams and Johnson 2011), which can be attributed to a discrepancy in the primary language, norms and cultural values (Mak, Brown and Wadey 2014). International students are, however, encouraged to form new friendships with the host students for as it can enhance both their psychological well-being and educational achievements (Kashima and Loh 2006; Williams and Johnson 2011). In this case, more support from the host institution should be provided, for example, organizing intercultural extra-curricular activities, to promote students’ cultural exchange and communication.

4.1.3. Pedagogical approach and content knowledge

The study’s participants reported on their troubling adaptation to a new scholastic environment which featured a differential pedagogical approach as well as a higher demand for specialized knowledge compared to their home-country education. A respondent wrote, “In Vietnam, I learned more about basic [fundamental] knowledge, yet in Taiwan, you need to focus on case studies [specialized knowledge] and more practical knowledge.”

While various factors influence international students' academic adjustment,

instructors’ pedagogical approach and course assessment tend to be the most direct and critical ones. Prospective students are thus advised to equip themselves with relevant knowledge of the host-country education, e.g., the type of learning tasks and assessment required. Moreover, sojourn students should also be proactive in their learning as well as improving their own specialized knowledge to enjoy a smoother academic transition.

The abovementioned process can be further enhanced with social support from peers and teachers. Group working, for example, provides international students with opportunities to learn more from their host-country classmates about the local education. On the other hand, the study finding also implies a need for teachers to be equipped with intercultural knowledge to support international students’ learning. For instance, rather than expecting sojourn students to achieve a high academic performance immediately after their enrolment in the academic program, instructors should allow those learners some time to become familiarized with the education system before they could function smoothly in the new learning context.

4.1.4. Workload and publication pressure

The majority of the participants expressed concern for high academic pressure in their new academic environment. For example, a participant elaborated:

“There is a great deal of new knowledge to study with lots of technical terms, so I had to spend much more time reading to catch up with the lesson.”

“Here [at the concerned institution in Taiwan], the score for your course is not only [based] on your final examination as commonly being true in Vietnam but also

[based on] projects, assignments or the mid-term exam. This is different compared to when I studied in Vietnam, I normally have to pass the final examination only."

Postgraduate learners at different levels, i.e., master's or doctoral programs, seem to have differential academic pressure. Specifically, as for doctoral students, their anxiety came from the pressure of doing research and obtaining enough research publications, which was a benchmark requirement for graduation. To elaborate, most of the participants came to Taiwan for studying on a scholarship basis which covered their study for three years only. The amount of time required for a publication is, nevertheless, varied depending on both subjective and objective factors, for example, the delivery of review results. If failing to graduate within three years, the participants would have to pay for all expense in the following years, which would considerably increase their financial burden. Another factor that further drives these doctoral students' academic distress is the fact that the majorities of them were lecturers and were allowed to leave their job for higher education in only a limited period of time. Being unable to comply with the graduation timeline would threaten their employment status.

In the case of master's students, they were confronted with examination-related stress, from course assignments, midterm, and end-of-term exams. Indeed, the major component of master's programs at the concerned university involves coursework, which normally entails a significantly higher workload compared to that in Vietnam. Additionally, these learners need to maintain a high academic performance to be eligible for scholarship renewal for the second year of their master's study. The potentiality of

losing their scholarship status further heightens their stress level.

In summary, various adaptation difficulties were reported with respect to the participants' academic affairs, involving language barrier, socialization with the host-country students, heavier workload, examination and publication pressure. This indicates significant challenges the study participants had to confront in their academic transition. Social support from peers and instructors is conceivably crucial for helping international students' academic-related stress as well as improving their academic adaptation overall. Prospective students for doctoral programs should be well-equipped with knowledge and skills in conducting scientific research before starting their enrolment.

4.2. Psychological and Sociocultural Issues

4.2.1. Daily life communication

The fact that the local citizens speak Chinese and normally possess limited English proficiency makes it struggling for participants in their daily life communication. Two respondents stated:

"Many [staffs] in the dormitory manage center cannot communicate in English, so it is almost impossible for international students to communicate [their needs] to them [the staffs]. So, we have to find the people from the same country [Taiwanese friends] to help us."

"If the conversation is in English, it is fine with me. However, when I go out to buy daily necessities, I have to use Chinese and sometimes it is difficult for me to make the shop assistant understand what I want to buy."

Compared to previous studies, international students in this study needed to deal with two foreign languages, one is English in their study, and another is Chinese in their daily life. It is thus conceivable that the language barrier can be more severe for international students in this case. This is one of the few studies that address such an issue. Being unable to communicate effectively in daily activities in the host country could worsen students' psychological well-being and thus negatively affect their academic adjustment. Incoming students are thus advised to acquire basic communication in the host country language, i.e., Chinese in this case, to facilitate their sociocultural adaptation.

4.2.2. Dietary problem

The difference in diet habits is an additional cross-cultural hurdle that the participants in this study needed to overcome. A participant wrote:

"In Vietnam, we like to use fish sauce in our meal. But here they don't have it, and we [foreign students] are not allowed to cook in our rooms".

"One of my friends lost 3-4 kg after one month coming to Taiwan because she couldn't eat Taiwanese foods."

"Taiwanese foods [are cooked with] more oil and they seldom use sauce. [which stands in contrast to Vietnamese cuisine]."

Dietary problems should be paid due attention for their significance to the learners' physical health. Findings from previous research also indicate that international students commonly show an attachment to their home country food, which offers them emotional and physical support (Brown, Edwards and Hartwell 2010).

4.2.3. Perceived discrimination

A significant aspect of intercultural adjustment that has gained attention from previous researchers is perceived discrimination. The majority of participants, approximately 75 percent, reported that they did not perceive any discrimination, whereas six respondents believed that they experienced some of such situations. When asked to describe one of such situations, a respondent from the interview responded:

"I am the only Vietnamese student in my lab [where students carry out experiments]. They [the host country students] usually chat and work together only. Also, I tend to be the one to be blamed when something unexpected happens in my lab."

Although no official data obtained, informal interviews suggest that those who were unaware of discrimination-related affairs rarely interacted with the host-country students and mainly associated with their co-national friends only. The negative impact of perceived discrimination has been documented in previous studies. Moscato et al. (2014) indicated that an increased sense of perceived discrimination would lower international students' sense of community and life satisfaction. Likewise, in their meta-analysis review, Schmitt et al. (2014) demonstrated a significantly negative association between perceived discrimination and students' psychological well-being.

4.2.4. Homesickness

Homesickness is another psychological obstacle that the participants had to resolve when studying abroad in Taiwan. A graduate who was pursuing her doctoral degree said:

“I am married and have a daughter. I missed her all the time. I had to spend time calling home to meet my husband and my daughter. And this took away [some of] my studying time.”

“My friend even came back to Vietnam [dropped out of school] and gave up pursuing her degree because she missed her family.”

Homesickness should not be underestimated as it has a direct impact on the outbound students’ psychological well-being as well as educational outcomes. Sun and Hagedorn (2016) found that homesickness significantly explained variance in freshmen college students’ GPA as well as the retention rate. Prolonged homesickness can also lead to serious distress, absentminded or withdrawal from activities (Thurber and Walton 2012).

4.2.5. Activities for international students

Regarding extracurricular activities for international students, a participant indicated: *“I don’t know much information about clubs for international students, but I felt that there aren’t enough”*. Other respondents also commented on the situation, pointing out that the language commonly used in these extra-curricular events was Chinese, thus making it difficult for them to join. Previous researchers have promoted the advantages of participating in out-of-class activities for international students since such opportunities can foster international students’ social adjustment and networks (Bamford 2008), a favorable condition for a successful intercultural adaptation.

On the whole, in addition to academic-related obstacles, the participants also confronted other sociocultural conflicts relating to daily communication, unfamiliar

diet, perceived discrimination, homesickness, and extra-curricular activities. The results of this study bear significant implications for host-country policy makers and future students who plan to come to Taiwan to study, particularly Vietnamese students.

4.2.6. Suggestions for relevant stakeholders

First, in order to provide high-quality EMI courses, host institutions should ensure a sufficient number of instructors competent in content knowledge as well as the English language. Furthermore, the university can help its students, particularly international students, benefit from campus diversity by creating opportunities for the host-country and outbound students to work together, for example, by offering more culture-exchange activities. Making new friends is significant for international students, i.e., as a way of seeking intimacy, the failure of which can contribute to the overall adaptation stress (Brisset et al. 2010). Host institutions should play an active role in supporting international students’ socialization with the host students since “intercultural interaction, in and outside the classroom, is not developing naturally” (De Vita 2005:75). Additionally, international students’ cross-cultural adjustment can be further smoothed when receiving adequate social support from their instructors and other students.

Prospective Vietnamese students are advised to develop not only the breadth but also the depth of their specialized knowledge to better cope with academic demand in the host country. They should also be equipped with relevant cross-cultural knowledge and have proper preparation for their future intercultural challenges. For example, this study found that Taiwanese friends, though being friendly and helpful,

can be reluctant to speak English and sometimes difficult to befriend, which can make an uninformed student feel disappointed. Acquiring an adequate level of the primary language of the host country (i.e., Chinese in this case) could help their daily communication and thus their sociocultural adaptation.

5. Conclusion

The study was conducted to investigate the challenges Vietnamese graduate students are facing during their intercultural-adaptation process in Taiwan. Various issues were identified, namely language barrier, differential pedagogical approaches, academic pressure, unfamiliar diet, perceived discrimination, homesickness and a lack of extra-curricular activities for international students. While there have been numerous studies about intercultural adaptation of international students, this research contributes to the research literature by addressing the issue in an educational context where they had to deal with two different foreign languages in their study and daily life. As Taiwan has become a popular destination for international students, particularly Vietnamese and students of nearby countries, this research helps shed more light on the intercultural adaptation of international students in the country.

Regarding the limitations of this study, due to being a case study with a limited number of participants, caution should be taken when generalizing the study findings. The author is also well aware that many other intercultural issues exist without having been reported in this paper. Findings in this study should be considered to be preliminary rather than comprehensive.

Future research is encouraged to explore the intercultural issues in an in-depth manner with student population recruited from different universities across Taiwan to obtain more comprehensive insights. Other societal factors (i.e., social, economic, political and cultural factors) should also be considered in future studies to refine further our understanding of how these macro-level variables influence foreign learners' intercultural adjustment.

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