

# Habitus and Cultural Capital in Higher Education: Chinese Students' Academic and Cultural Adaptation at UK Universities

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the challenges faced by Chinese students studying in UK universities, drawing on Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital, and field. It highlights the difficulties encountered due to language and academic culture shocks. Despite these challenges, the paper argues that with agency and resourcefulness, Chinese students can successfully adapt to the academic and cultural environment. The paper concludes that educational institutions have a responsibility to support international students, enabling them to overcome these difficulties and achieve academic success. Future considerations should focus on enhancing cross-cultural understanding and support mechanisms to further facilitate the integration of international students.

**Keywords:** Academic and Cultural Adaptation; Bourdieu's Theories; International Students; Habitus and Cultural Capital.

## 1. Introduction

More than 700,000 Chinese students are currently pursuing higher education at universities around the world (Chu, 2022). Of the many international study destinations, the UK is particularly favoured by many Chinese students. The report reveals that UK educational institutions are hugely attractive to Chinese students, outperforming other markets around the world, thus making China a major source of international students in the UK (HESA, 2023). The official report further reveals that Chinese student enrolments at UK universities have increased significantly over the past decade, reaching 151,690 for the 2020-2021 academic year. However, studying and living in the UK poses unique challenges for Chinese students, both in terms of academic and social adjustment, and Cheng (2023) argues that it is important to explore in depth the reasons for their difficulties and the specific challenges they face when confronted with an education system with a different pedagogical logic. This exploration is essential to help them overcome the obstacles they encounter and to improve the quality of their educational experience. In addition, after a literature review, we found that a large number of empirical studies have been conducted to explore in depth the challenges and shocks faced by Chinese students pursuing higher education degrees in UK universities. The existing literature mainly explores the difficulties encountered by Chinese students, including language ability, academic expectations, economic constraints, and social integration (Cheng, 2023). There is a gap in academia that focuses on Chinese students' adjustment at UK universities from a capital transformation perspective. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory emphasizes the concepts of "field", "habitus" and "cultural capital".

In summary, based on the above social and academic reasons, it is necessary to explore the academic and cultural adaptation of Chinese university students staying in the UK from the perspectives of habitus and cultural capital with the help of Bourdieu's theory. This paper is divided into four main parts. Firstly, a brief introduction to this study is given, pointing out the background of the study, the applied theories, the research methodology, the research object, the research methodology and the findings.. In the second part, the paper will present a more detailed background from the perspective of the author's personal experience. The paper will also discuss the cross-cultural applicability of Bourdieu's theories to illustrate the feasibility of using these concepts and applying them to the transnational educational context of Chinese international students in this paper. The third section will critically discuss Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital (focusing primarily on cultural capital) and field as a theoretical framework for situating these theories in the specific contexts that follow in

this paper. In the next section, this paper will apply the previously mentioned theories to analyze Chinese students at UK higher education institutions (HEIs), with a focus on academics and acculturation. Finally, the paper draws conclusions and considers some of the issues identified when exploring themes that merit further research.

## **2. Description of the Context**

### **2.1. The Author's Experience as a Chinese Student at a UK University**

As Chinese students pursuing a postgraduate degree in the UK, they have occasionally felt "like a fish out of water" and overwhelmed during the initial period of their study (basically the very first month). As for the potential reasons for this initial feeling of disorientation, the author believes that it is because UK universities are faced with the onslaught of two different education systems - the Chinese higher education sector and the UK higher education sector. Whilst there are different fields of higher education within the global higher education sector, there are potential differences between these education systems that may be both valuable and difficult for students to adapt to (Dai et al., 2020). Potential influencing factors include language barriers and differences in teaching methods amongst others (Cheng, 2023). The authors argue that the shocks faced by these international students from China can reflect the habit-based conflicts students face in coping with adaptive challenges, which are driven by the inherent ideas and practices formed in the Chinese education system. At the same time, the family values, educational backgrounds and social networks that these students from China brought with them exemplified Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, influencing their initial attitudes towards the unfamiliar field of UK higher education. The academic and cultural background of British universities constitutes a unique field that Chinese students enjoy.

Introducing new rules, expectations, and power dynamics. According to Bourdieu, the field shapes and is shaped by the habits and cultural capital of the students. It is worth noting that there are differences in the way Chinese students adapt to the unfamiliar UK education system (Wu, 2015). For example, by talking to Chinese postgraduate students in the UK, the author found that those who had attended international schools did not find it difficult to adapt to a different academic system and culture at a UK university, whereas this process of adapting to a new field can be more challenging for those who had been educated exclusively in the Chinese higher education system. Therefore, to study the academic and acculturation of Chinese students in British institutions of higher learning, more in-depth analysis of the cross-cultural experiences of individual Chinese students is needed to draw more comprehensive conclusions. Given the word limit, this paper chooses to focus on the latter, namely Chinese students who have been educated in the Chinese higher education system and then come to the UK higher education system, and analyzes their adaptation process.

### **2.2. The Cross-cultural Applicability of Bourdieu's Theories**

Consider the applicability of Bourdieu's concepts to different cultures (cross-cultural applicability). From a theoretical perspective, Bourdieu's sociological theories arose during a particular period in an advanced capitalist society in the West - France. Jenkins (2002) points out that Bourdieu's views are considered to lack adequate consideration of historical context. In other words, it is argued that his views do not sufficiently take into account the changes and developments that have taken place in the field of education over time, which are non-historical and not sufficient to accommodate the significant differences that exist between different cultures and different historical periods. Similar criticisms have been made by other scholars on this point. Calhoun (1993) also criticizes the claim that Bourdieu's conceptual framework is historically static, and argues that empirical evidence from diverse backgrounds should be considered, rather than applying Bourdieu's conceptual framework in a rigorous and general way. Dai et al. (2020) further point out that Bourdieu emphasizes the interweaving of theory and data, so that his concepts can be reformulated in different time periods and cultural contexts. In addition, in terms of empirical research, some scholars have also used Bourdieu's sociological theories to critically explore topics related to intercultural education, which

suggests that it is feasible to situate Bourdieu's relevant theories in the context of cross-border research.

Therefore, based on the above discussion of Bourdieu's ideas from both theoretical and empirical research perspectives, it is appropriate to situate Bourdieu's relevant theories in a transnational context to discuss the transition of Chinese students in UK higher education institutions. In addition, this paper realises the need for a 'reflexive redistribution' of Bourdieu's theories, as suggested by Mu et al. (2018), to delve deeper into the study of globally mobile Chinese HEI students, and more specifically, the process of these students' adaptation in UK HEIs.

### **3. Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu's Concepts of Habitus, Capital and Field**

The field, as defined by Bourdieu (1984a), is a space of social forces that shape the structure of society. Within this space, there are dominant and dominated actors, and unequal and enduring relationships persist. At the same time, the field becomes an arena in which actors struggle to change or maintain it (Bourdieu, 1998). Society is divided into different 'fields' which function within different normative and capitalisation structure (Bourdieu and Johnson, 1993).

In addition, habitus refers to ingrained physical and conduct acquired by an individual in a particular environment, which are developed over a long period of nurturing (Cheng, 2023). It is common sense that guides an individual's actions or reactions (Johnson, 1993). According to Bourdieu, the human body can be viewed as a memory aid (Jenkins, 2002) and habitus can demonstrate adaptability to an objective environment (Bourdieu, 1984a). The concept of habitus emphasises the role of acquired habits in shaping an individual's conduct, influencing an individual's adaptation to societal expectations, and contributing to the reproduction of social structures. Reay (2004) further emphasises that habitus works primarily at an unconscious level unless an individual encounters an event that triggers self-questioning. Bourdieu (2000) argues that habits are malleable and mutable to fit domains with different logics, emphasising the convergence of constancy and mutability of habits. Empirical research is needed to determine whether these habitus changes are transformative or gradual, but Bourdieu argues that they tend to be gradual (Dai et al., 2000).

According to Bourdieu (1977), social practices are the result of the interaction between the relative position of social actors in a given social domain (field) and their dispositions (habits) which are determined by the possession of different forms of capital (Yu, 2021). According to Bourdieu (1986), capital consists of tangible material values and intangible cultural attributes. The accumulation and distribution of one's capital has the potential to influence one's position in a given social space (Cheng, 2023). In the same work, the present researcher explains capital as a determinant of access to privilege and power in society or, in an academic context, of positioning oneself appropriately in what is often a hierarchical social structure. Bourdieu (1984a) considers economic, cultural and social capital as the three forms of capital, which have a transformative effect on each other. He places particular emphasis on cultural capital. Cultural Capital I can be accumulated and exchanged, and various forms of cultural capital are status symbols that provide people with more power (Bourdieu, 1984a). (Bourdieu, 1984b). Embodied, objectified and institutionalised are the three forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984a). The knowledge and skills that people learn from their family and social environments through the process of adapting to specific cultural norms are considered embodied cultural capital (Zhang, 2023). The second type of cultural capital (materialisation) occurs when people accumulate embodied cultural capital and use it to purchase cultural goods that are consistent with their intrinsic inclinations (Bourdieu, 1984b). Formal recognition of an individual's cultural capital by an institution, such as an academic degree or professional accreditation, is referred to as institutionalised cultural capital, which is the third form (Bourdieu, 1997). Furthermore, the phrase 'cultural capital' captures the idea that culture both creates and is a product of class relations (Yu, 2021). Thus, the structure of the distribution of cultural capital between social classes is largely reproduced through education. The mystery lies in the 'habitus' of education, the convertible, durable

system of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990). Academic success depends on cultural capital and educational habitus.

In addition, Bourdieu's concepts are applied to the field of education. It can be argued that culture is a resource in the field of education. Bourdieu often compares the field to a game (Bourdieu, 2002). Researchers who refer to Bourdieu's ideas often interpret the pursuit of international education as a "capital endeavour" (Balaz & Williams, 2004). This perspective emphasises Bourdieu's concept of institutionalised cultural capital, whereby educational qualifications as 'certificates of cultural competence' confer a recognised and legally guaranteed value of power on their holders (Bourdieu, 1986). In the field of education, possession of these credentials increases the opportunities for social reproduction for the upper classes (Bourdieu, 1986). It can be seen that the decision of the middle class to study abroad is motivated by the consolidation of their social status.

#### **4. Why and What are the Difficulties and Shocks Faced by Chinese Students At UK Universities**

When international students enter a new educational environment, they usually experience culture shock and academic adjustment (Bai & Wang, 2022). Each educational institution has its unique customs, which can lead to social class or cultural groups influencing one's behaviour (Reay, 1998). These can cause cognitive dissonance or confusion in students. Academic and cultural challenges are often interrelated as unhappiness (both psychological and physical) can prevent people from achieving greater goals related to self-actualisation (Neto, 2015). Through the analysis of theoretical frameworks and the author's personal experiences, this paper finds that Chinese students in UK higher education institutions struggle with unequal power dynamics between their teachers and themselves, which makes it difficult for them to transform the capital they have into the capital they want. In the academic environment (UK universities), there is a conflict between long-time residents (educators) and newcomers (Chinese students). Barton and Tusting (2005) suggest that whilst community of practice theory is often used in academic settings, it does not specifically address power dynamics involving new and old communities. If unequal power dynamics between long-time residents and newcomers prevent learners from moving from legitimate marginal participation to full participation, they will remain at the margins of the community (Cheng, 2023). In this section, the paper elucidates the reasons and causes of the difficulties and shocks faced by Chinese students at UK universities from the perspectives of habitus and the concept of cultural capital.

##### **4.1. Language Shock**

One study suggests that the strongest psychological state initially felt by Chinese international students is the language shock felt when using language skills (Bai & Wang, 2022). In the same study, these two scholars suggested that it is worthwhile to pay attention to Chinese students' English academic writing challenges. This is because Chinese overseas students perceive writing challenges as related not only to word use and structural issues at the sentence, paragraph, and discourse levels, but also to academic writing conventions. William (2017) argues that the difficulty stems from the fact that they are unfamiliar with conventions such as reference systems. This is due to the fact that the Chinese academic discourse style is not straightforward enough compared to the English academic discourse style. In this case, it is difficult for some students to achieve a high level of English academic writing. We can consider students' English proficiency as a kind of cultural capital which contributes to the development of communication and interpersonal relationships (Brooks & Water, 2011). According to Smith and Khawaja (2011), language barriers, a different education system, and unsatisfactory academic performance compared to other students make academic stress one of the stressors in the lives of Chinese students studying abroad. After this unpleasant experience, they feel fearful and frustrated. The mismatch between academic aspirations and reality undermines students' confidence in their new environment and adversely affects their academic performance, thus increasing the stress of this experience.

Another related situation of language shock faced by Chinese students in UK universities is that they usually remain silent in the classroom. This can be explained by the fact that these students are still influenced by the habits they have developed in the Chinese educational field when facing the new field of higher education. Bai and Wang's (2022) investigation of Chinese international students' participation in intercultural educational adaptation confirms that the failure of Chinese students to ask questions and participate in classroom discussions can be regarded as a common phenomenon. The findings suggest that these Chinese students' behaviours are not only due to their reluctance to express themselves in English, but also to cultural factors, i.e., caring about what their peers think and the tendency to avoid making mistakes in order to avoid losing face (Bai & Wang, 2022). This empirical study also shows that Chinese students also care about others. Some students said that in group discussions, even if they had different opinions, they would choose not to express them directly in front of others. This was because they wanted to avoid embarrassing others and wanted to care about others' feelings and give them enough respect. This is in line with Jackson's (2002) view that, influenced by Confucianism and in order to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships, Chinese people tend to avoid embarrassing situations due to differences in opinions. As a result, sometimes Chinese students choose to remain silent in group discussions, which may be an autonomous 'choice' rather than a reluctant behaviour. The discussion in this case illustrates that Chinese students are influenced by their old cultural habits in a new educational field, and that they are able to make the habits work on a conscious level.

## **4.2. Academic Culture Shock**

When Chinese students travel to the UK to enter new teaching and learning areas, they often tend to maintain their own indigenous framework of learning, even though it is quite different from the UK system. As Jin and Cortazzi (2006) emphasise, developing false expectations of UK higher education institutions can be a consequence of this tendency and can affect the overall learning experience of students. The mismatch between the way Chinese students study in China and the academic practices of the host university was cited as a contributing factor to their initial academic culture shock. (Bai & Wang, 2022). Academic culture shock reveals a conflict between the assumptions about knowledge and skills in UK universities and the lack of knowledge and skills among Chinese students. More specifically, students experience culture shock when they realise that they lack the academic competencies required by the university. Bai and Wang (2022) found in their empirical study that when Chinese students enter a new field of teaching, they may find that there is a gap between their actual competencies and the university's expectations, e.g. they are unfamiliar with the various assessment tasks that are used in UK universities, especially in China which are usually only examined in the field of higher education. Whereas, in the field of higher education in China, only one type of assessment, examinations, is usually carried out. In addition, the learning styles that these students acquire in China do not match the academic practices of the UK education sector they are currently enrolled in. Lacking the academic and cultural knowledge and skills required in these new fields, Chinese students are not only initially overwhelmed, but may even experience unsatisfactory learning outcomes.

In addition, these international students will also experience pedagogical shock due to the differences in classroom discipline between China and the UK (Zhu & Sullivan, 2022). For Chinese students, studying in the UK means being exposed to a new way of learning as well as adapting to a different model of classroom management. In a Chinese classroom, adopting an opposite or different viewpoint to that of the lecturer may be considered very impolite, and lecturers usually expect students to remain quiet and pay attention during the teaching and learning process. In this teacher-led context, Chinese students may be seen as passive recipients of knowledge points and avoid discussion and debate (McMahon, 2011). However, Chinese students' habit of remaining silent in class may be misinterpreted by UK educators as Chinese students' unwillingness to participate in classroom activities, and may even be seen as a sign of a poor attitude. Miscommunication may occur with these students attending UK universities because teachers and students have different learning styles and cultural backgrounds, which makes it difficult for them to understand each other's expectations.

British lecturers may not be aware of the cultural practice of Chinese students remaining silent in the classroom, and Chinese students may not be aware that British educators expect them to actively participate in classroom activities.

## **5. How Chinese Students at UK Universities Can Succeed in Academic and Cultural Adaptation**

In the face of linguistic and academic-cultural challenges, Chinese international students are able to adapt to a new educational field by exercising their agency and utilising the cultural capital they possess (Bai & Wang, 2022). Agency in this context refers to the ability of international students to "consciously influence their own functioning and living environments" while studying abroad (Bandura, 2006). Although there is an inconsistency between the culture these students are accustomed to in China and the expectations they have in a Western academic environment (Bai & Wang, 2020), it was found that they were able to develop an ability to develop a "cosmopolitan habitus in-between," which helped them to be flexible in navigating their unique learning journeys in both systems (Dai et al.)

Chinese undergraduates studying in the UK need to discover their own cultural capital in order to help them transform it to improve their learning experience. The role of educators cannot be ignored in this process. Educators need to make learners aware of their neglected cultural capital and optimise teaching and learning by understanding students' needs. Morita (2004) argues that teachers need to realise that the cultural capital possessed by overseas learners is a valuable cultural and intellectual resource during education. Cheng (2023) further points out that when the various kinds of cultural capital brought by students to the learning process are appropriately utilised when they are utilised appropriately, learners can experience their identity being recognised as a legitimate and valuable capital. The important role of educators in helping students to better transform their capital to successfully adapt to the academics and culture of a new field of education is further emphasised. Specifically, teachers can help students to better transform their capital if they are aware of the international student's original educational environment and provide an environment where students are welcome to provide feedback on course content. In this case, it is about advocating for educators to understand the unique needs of students from different cultural and educational backgrounds in order to provide appropriate guidance, rather than simply treating international students (Chinese students) as a homogenous group with their native counterparts (British students). As Heng (2018) argues, even if these students are able to exercise their own agency and resourcefulness, these host educational institutions should continue to fulfil their responsibility to provide services to international students.

## **6. Conclusion and Further Consideration**

In conclusion, this paper uses Bourdieu's theory to explore the academic and cultural adaptation of Chinese university students in the UK from the perspectives of habitus and cultural capital. It starts from a personal experience as a Chinese postgraduate student studying in a UK university and is based on the literature review. The paper critically explores Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital, and analyses the cross-cultural applicability of Bourdieu's sociological theory in terms of its feasibility to be applied to this study. Chinese university students facing both the Chinese higher education system and the UK higher education field are chosen as the main subjects of discussion in this paper, and it is found that they usually experience culture shock and academic adaptation, including language challenges and academic culture shock, when they enter a new educational environment. These students entered the new field of UK higher education with habits acquired in the Chinese higher education system and national culture. In order to better adapt to the shocks associated with entering a new educational field, Chinese students can utilise their agency and the cultural capital they possess, and even develop an ability to "sit between cosmopolitan idioms" to help them navigate flexibly between the two fields. Furthermore, the identity and role of educators

cannot be ignored in the process of Chinese students discovering their own cultural capital and transforming the cultural capital they possess. The academic and cultural context of UK universities is a unique field for Chinese students, involving new rules, expectations and power dynamics that shape and are influenced by Chinese students' habits and cultural capital.

Furthermore, in exploring this theme, this paper may have some research limitations and identified two issues that deserve further research in the future. Firstly, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that research subjects are individually diverse. As mentioned above, this paper focuses on a critical discussion of one group of Chinese students in UK universities, and there is a need to delve deeper into the cross-cultural experiences of individual Chinese students in order to obtain more comprehensive findings. For example, students studying for an undergraduate degree in the UK may find it easier to study for a master's degree, whereas students studying at an international school in China may find it easier to study for an undergraduate degree. Secondly, this article only focuses on habits and the positive outcomes that can occur when cultures clash - transformation and adaptation. However, the author notes that some researchers have suggested that Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" can be considered as a possible negative outcome (Yu, 2021). How to better study the experiences of Chinese overseas students and the development of Bourdieu's related theories in a new historical period and context is a direction worth studying in the future.

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