Article

Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 11 (2026), pp. 1-22
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
https://doi.org/10.32674/c105j621

"I love China, but…": The Imbalanced Interplay of Demand, Control, and Support in the Adaptation of Ethiopian Students in China

Demei Yang
School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University, China

Xiangmin Zeng*
School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University, China

ABSTRACT: *International academia has shown a growing interest in African student migration to China. However, comprehensive investigations grounded in the specific cultural contexts of these students, rather than treating "Africa" as a monolith, remain notably scarce. To advance research on African student migration, this study examines the adaptation of Ethiopian students dispatched by the government in China. Grounded in the demand-control-support (DCS) model, this qualitative study employs an ethnographic case study design. The findings reveal an unbalanced adaptation process characterized by high demands (language, religion, academics), structurally low control, and a consequent reliance on support as the primary buffering mechanism. The study concludes that achieving balanced adaptation requires enhancing student control through the development of global competence and strengthening proactive institutional support, offering a novel application of the DCS model to student mobility.*

Keywords: Adaptation, China, DCS model, Ethiopian student, Global competence

Received: Oct 21, 2025 | **Revised**: Feb 26, 2026 | **Accepted:** March 6, 2026

Academic Editors: Hak-Seon Kim, PhD, Professor and Dean of Global College, Kyungsung University | Feyissa Israel Fisseha, PhD, Assistant Professor and Director of the Global Migration and Integration Research Center, Global College Kyungsung University

How to Cite (APA): Yang, D., & Zeng, X. (2026). "I love China, but…": The Imbalanced Interplay of Demand, Control, and Support in the Adaptation of Ethiopian Students in China. *Journal of International Students*, *16* (11), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.32674/c105j621.

*Corresponding author: Xiangmin Zeng, School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University, No.999, Xi'an Road, Chengdu 611756, China.

INTRODUCTION

The continued expansion of globalization and international cooperation fuels educational exchanges between countries and regions. Since the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2000, China has deepened its engagement with Africa, becoming an influential partner on the continent (Kumie, 2020). Consequently, education has emerged as a pivotal component of Sino-African relations (Ferdjani, 2012).

With the growing influx of African students to China, their cross-cultural adaptation experiences have become a subject of increasing concern for scholars and educational practitioners. Successful adaptation is a significant challenge, and many students experience acculturative stress. For instance, early research indicated that students from African countries demonstrated a lower ability to cope with stress compared to their Western counterparts (Hashim, 2003). More recent studies have corroborated these findings, noting higher levels of acculturative stress among African student populations (Yu et al., 2014) and identifying specific stressors related to learning styles and host language acquisition (Sun, 2020). A comparative study by Ngwira et al. (2024) found that while overall stress levels were not high, African students in China reported significantly higher stress related to perceived discrimination than their Asian peers.

Given that acculturative stress among African students in China is a persistent issue, the investigation of stress and coping mechanisms remains a continuing academic concern (Jiang et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2019; Zou & Fu, 2025). However, a notable limitation of existing research is the tendency to treat students from Africa as a monolithic group, leading to generalized conclusions. Africa comprises 54 distinct countries, each with a unique culture and context, and should be approached as 54 independent partners to China. While some recent studies have focused on students from specific nations such as Kenya (Owaki et al., 2019), Cameroon (Yue et al., 2019), and Nigeria (Chidiebere & Wang, 2018), little attention has been given to the adaptation process of students from other specific African countries, particularly those dispatched as a unified cohort by their home government, such as Ethiopia.

Ethiopia, the largest and most populous country in the Horn of Africa, is a leading cooperative partner with China and has augmented its educational exchanges (Weldegebriel, 2018). An emerging trend in this partnership is the governmental dispatch of Ethiopian college students to China for specialized

training. These students differ from previously researched African student populations in that they originate from the same cultural context and study together in independent classes with customized curricula at the same Chinese university. Their primary objective is the acquisition of technological knowledge and skills essential for their home country's economic growth, rather than language and cultural immersion.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate a unique and particularly relevant cohort: Ethiopian students dispatched by their government for specialized technological training in China. The particularity of this group – studying together in customized classes with a focus on skill acquisition rather than cultural immersion – distinguishes their experience from that of individually sponsored students and makes them a critical case for understanding complex adaptation processes. To explore their adaptation, this study will examine their stresses, coping strategies, and support systems by employing the demand-control-support (DCS) model. This framework, traditionally used in occupational health, has been validated for academic settings (Kim et al., 2021) and will be used to construct a three-way interaction of demand, control, and support to provide an in-depth understanding of this specific student experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-cultural adaptation is a complex process involving psychological, sociocultural, and academic domains (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). For international students, this transition is often accompanied by acculturative stress, which stems from navigating a new cultural and educational environment (Berry, 2005). For many international students, achieving a true sense of belonging remains an elusive "luxury" amidst systemic and social barriers (Paik & Braxton, 2026). Key stressors identified in the literature include language difficulties, perceived cultural distance, social integration challenges, and perceived discrimination (Maryam et al., 2025).

Recent studies focusing on African students in China confirm that while overall stress levels may not always be high, specific factors such as perceived discrimination are significantly more pronounced for them compared to students from other regions such as Asia (Ngwira et al., 2024). Homesickness and culture shock are also common stressors across all international student populations in China (Ngwira et al., 2024).

Beyond general sociocultural and psychological adaptation, academic adaptation has emerged as a critical and distinct domain of inquiry. International students often face academic difficulties arising from different educational systems, teaching styles, and classroom cultures (He et al., 2023; Hussain & Shen, 2019; Sheng et al., 2022). In China, specific challenges include adapting to teacher-centered instruction and the widespread use of Mandarin, even in English-medium programs (Holliman et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Yuan, 2011). Furthermore, the quality of academic interactions with faculty and peers has been identified as a critical determinant of the overall learning experience for African graduates (Agyenim-Boateng, 2022). Underpinning these interactive

challenges, language proficiency consistently appears to be a primary barrier to academic integration (Hou & Abu, 2024).

Social support is widely recognized as a crucial coping mechanism that mediates acculturative stress (Hafiza, 2026). Recent research has begun to differentiate the effects of support networks. A distinction is made between "close support" from networks in the host country and "distant support" from home-country networks, which is now easily accessible via online communication (Zheng & Ishii, 2023). While distant support can alleviate loneliness, studies suggest that close support from host nationals is more strongly associated with positive psychological adaptation (Chu et al., 2010; Song & Fan, 2013). In the Chinese context, social media platforms such as WeChat have been shown to be vital tools for building these support networks and fostering the social self-efficacy that facilitates adaptation (Zhang & Ting, 2024). However, despite the importance of these networks, students often report a lack of sufficient institutional support from faculty and administrators (Wu et al., 2025). In particular, the quality of faculty mentorship during the initial transition phase has been identified as a critical but often underdeveloped resource for African graduate students (Ngbabare, 2025).

In summary, the literature establishes that international students, particularly African students in China, face a distinct set of stressors related to discrimination, academic norms, and social integration. While social support is a known mediator, its effectiveness varies by source, and institutional support is often perceived as lacking. This highlights a complex interplay of environmental challenges and available resources. However, existing research often examines these factors in isolation. A more integrated framework is needed to understand how these elements dynamically interact to shape the overall adaptation experience, which justifies the application of a holistic model in the subsequent section.

APPROACHING CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION THROUGH THE DCS MODEL

This study adopts the demand-control-support (DCS) model as its theoretical framework. Originally developed by Karasek (1979) and later expanded by Johnson and Hall (1988) to analyze workplace stress, the model is based on the interplay of three core psychosocial characteristics: psychological demands, decision latitude (control), and social support. The model posits that the highest risk of psychological strain occurs in environments characterized by high demands, low control, and low support.

The application of this model to academic settings is increasingly recognized, as students' academic tasks and requirements can be conceptualized as work demands (Kim et al., 2021). A meta-analysis confirmed that study-related demands, control, and support are significantly associated with student burnout, validating the DCS model's use in educational contexts (Kim et al., 2021).

Demand refers to aspects of the environment requiring sustained psychological or physical effort. For international students, these include academic pressures, navigating unfamiliar social norms, and acculturative stress

from cultural shocks (Bhowmik et al., 2018; Jiang & Xiao, 2024; Zhou et al., 2018).

Control, or decision latitude, is the extent to which an individual can influence their activities. It can buffer the negative effects of high demands. International students' control may be restricted by language barriers and unfamiliarity with the host country's academic system (Hou & Abu, 2024).

Support refers to the experience of being part of a social network of mutual assistance (Cobb, 1976). The model's "buffer hypothesis" suggests that perceived control and support can mediate the negative relationship between high demands and adverse psychological outcomes (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

By applying this framework, this study will explore how the dynamic interplay of demand, control, and support shapes the cross-cultural adaptation process for Ethiopian students in China.

STUDY DESIGN

Research Questions

This study explores the cross-cultural adaptation of international students from Ethiopia (ISEs) through the lens of the demand-control-support (DCS) model. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

Q1: What specific demands, controls, and supports were manifested in the cross-cultural adaptation process of ISEs at a Chinese university?

Q2: How did the elements of demand, control, and support interrelate to shape the ISEs' overall adaptation experience?

Participants

The participants were a cohort of 30 Ethiopian international students (19 males, 63%; 11 females, 37%) enrolled in a single class at Southwest Jiaotong University (SWJTU) in Chengdu, China. As a key university renowned for transportation engineering, SWJTU attracts students from nations seeking specializing in technical expertise. These participants, selected by the Ethiopian government during their first year of college, were pursuing technology-focused bachelor's degrees (e.g., electronic and civil engineering). At the time of the study, the participants were aged between 19 and 23. Regarding their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the group included Orthodox Christians (72%), Protestants (20%), Muslims (6%), native Amharic speakers (53%), Oromoo speakers (17%) and Tigrinya speakers (13%). While English served as the primary medium of instruction for their program, the students' individual English proficiency levels varied.

The research was conducted during the students' second semester, approximately six months after their arrival. This timeframe was chosen because the initial phase of culture shock has typically subsided by this stage, allowing for a more stable assessment of adaptation patterns (Ruben & Kealey, 1979). Contemporary research confirms that acculturative stress levels often decrease as

the length of stay increases, making this period suitable for observing established coping mechanisms rather than transient initial reactions (Ngwira et al., 2024).

Methods

To address the research questions, this study employed a qualitative research design, combining several methods to gather rich, in-depth data. This approach was chosen because qualitative inquiry allows for a nuanced exploration of the subjective, lived experiences and sociocultural adaptations of international students, which are often too complex to be captured by quantitative measures alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approach included an open-ended questionnaire, participant observation, and semistructured interview.

An open-ended questionnaire was administered to the entire cohort to gather initial narrative data on their cross-cultural experiences. A key component of this questionnaire was the "river of life" drawing, a visual narrative technique where participants map significant life events along a river's path (Cabaroglu & Denicolo, 2008). This innovative method was used to elicit personally important events, perceptions, and changes related to their adaptation at SWJTU. Its strength lies in accessing participant perspectives that might not emerge through traditional questioning (Cabaroglu & Denicolo, 2008).

Participant observation was conducted to understand the students' experiences in their natural academic setting. The first author observed the ISEs' "Intercultural Communication" course for one semester (16 weeks), recording classroom interactions and reviewing written assignments. This ethnographic method provided deep contextual understanding and informed the selection of informants for interviews (Lee & Kartika, 2014).

Finally, semistructured interviews were conducted with selected informants. This method allowed for in-depth exploration of themes that emerged from the questionnaire and observations, providing a space for participants to elaborate on their personal experiences and perceptions.

By integrating these diverse data sources, the study achieves methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and holistic understanding of the participants' cross-cultural journeys.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The open-ended questionnaire was administered to the entire class (n=30) during a regular 45-minute class session, with the instructor's permission, to ensure a high response rate and a consistent environment. From the initial cohort, four informants (three female, one male) – Mary, Kelly, Sophia, and Albert (all pseudonyms) – were purposively selected for in-depth interviews. Selection was based on the questionnaire responses, classroom observations, and recommendations from their course instructor to ensure a range of representative experiences.

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze all information collected in this study. The researcher utilized an inductive coding process,

manually identifying initial patterns within the data. These patterns were then subjected to multiple cycles of review and refinement to develop robust themes.

Ethical Considerations

This study did not undergo formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) review, as the relevant conversations arose from natural faculty collaborations rather than a formal research design. Even so, the process strictly adhered to ethical guidelines. Participants provided verbal or written consent after being informed that their insights might be used for scholarly publication. All participants explicitly granted permission for their views to be quoted anonymously. The entire research process was consistent with the ethical standards and policies of the researcher's home institution and aligned with professional guidelines for qualitative research in education. All identifying information has been anonymized, and pseudonyms are used throughout.

RESULTS

Demands in the ISEs' Adaptation Process

In the DCS model, demands are stressors requiring sustained physical or psychological effort (Karasek, 1979). The findings indicate that the primary demands negatively affecting ISEs' cross-cultural adaptation were the language barrier (D1), religious inconvenience (D2), and academic pressure (D3). These factors were consistently identified as significant sources of anxiety and stress.

D1: Language Barriers

The language barrier was a pervasive challenge. Mary's experience was typical; her limited English proficiency and lack of Mandarin skills created frustration in both academic and social contexts. Classroom observation showed her to be a passive listener, and her written English was weak. Her own words illustrate the practical consequences of this barrier:

> *"The university does not require TOEFL or HSK when to come here. My English not so good. By the way, Chinese is more difficult to learn, it's quite different from our language, Amharic"* (IRM-M-1).

This lack of language requirements, while facilitating entry, created significant downstream challenges. Mary recounted a specific incident where communication failure led to abandoning a simple task:

> *"One day when I was a freshman, I was going to Tianfu square with my friends to buy winter clothes, we know where we go, but how to communicate with the sellers is hard challenge, so after we see everything we have to go back our dormitory"* (SWM-M-1).

This experience highlights how language proficiency is a critical barrier not only to academic integration but also to daily sociocultural functioning. Even Kelly, a more confident and proactive student, acknowledged the difficulty of mastering Chinese for her technical major, stating,

> *"I learn some Chinese, I can write the basic Chinese characters such as my Chinese name, 我很爱中国 [I love China so much] and so on. However, I think Chinese is difficult, because I am here not only to learn Chinese language but also to learn my major"* (SWM-K-1).

Her comment underscores the dual linguistic demand of navigating daily life in Mandarin while mastering specialized academic terminology in English. With over 90% of participants reporting the language barrier as a hindrance, it stands out as a high-demand stressor.

D2: Religious Inconvenience

Ethiopia is a deeply religious country, with over 96% of the population adhering to a faith (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2012). The largely secular environment of Chengdu presented a stark contrast, creating significant demands related to religious practice and diet. Sophia, an Orthodox Christian, expressed this cultural distance: "*In my home country, religion is needed, but there is no worship place for my religion in the whole China"* (SWM-S-1).

This demand was compounded by dietary restrictions rooted in religious doctrine, which were not easily accommodated. Sophia explained:

> *"Almost all religions in Ethiopia have a similar idea about the prohibition of foods like pork, sea foods except fish... There are so many days that I haven't eaten food, since most foods violate my religious doctrines"* (IRM-S-1).

The lack of familiar and religiously compliant food options became a persistent cross-cultural stressor, reflecting a mismatch between the students' cultural needs and the host environment's provisions.

D3: Academic Pressure

Academic pressure manifested as a conflict between a heavy workload and high expectations for success. Albert's case is illustrative. He held his host institution in high regard and had clear career goals: *"I want to apply my knowledge which I got from China to my country, I want to serve my country"* (SWM-A-1).

However, this strong motivation, coupled with the academic environment, intensified his stress. He noted the heavy course load – *"we have 9 courses this semester. We are busy every time"* – and the pressure of performing in a different educational system:

> *"We are not Chinese students, the final exam always makes me nervous, you know, the result has a great value for us when we go to our home country. I tried hard, but the course is difficult. I'm not very satisfied my result"* (IRM-A-3).

This experience reflects a common challenge for international students adapting to new academic norms, teaching styles, and evaluation systems. For ISEs, whose future careers were directly tied to their academic performance in China, this pressure was a significant and constant demand.

Control in the ISEs' Adaptation Process

Control, the capacity to influence one's tasks and environment, acts as a buffer against stress. The findings show that the ISEs had consistently low control over the demands they faced, exacerbating their strain.

Their ability to mitigate the language barrier was minimal. The medium of instruction (MoI) was English, a lingua franca that was nonnegotiable. As nonnative speakers, the ISEs struggled with specialized academic English but had no authority to alter the MoI. Outside the classroom, communication required Mandarin, a language few locals could bypass by speaking English. This left the students with little agency in their daily interactions.

Attempts to control religious inconveniences were similarly ineffective. Sophia's effort to manage her dietary needs by cooking in her dormitory was a direct attempt to exert control. However, this action was quickly nullified by university regulations:

> *"However, it didn't last long, we are told not allowed cook in the dormitory…because it's dangerous. We have no choice"* (IRM-S-2).

This incident highlights a conflict between a personal coping strategy and institutional rules, leaving the students with limited options and reinforcing their low sense of control.

Likewise, students had little control over academic pressure. The curriculum, workload, and evaluation methods were fixed. Albert's unsuccessful attempt to negotiate a reduced assignment load with a teacher exemplifies this lack of decision-making authority. The teacher's response of encouragement without accommodation left him feeling powerless, illustrating the ISEs' limited ability to influence their academic environment.

Support in the ISEs' Adaptation Process

Given the context of high demands and low control, social support emerged as an indispensable buffer. This study identified four primary sources of support: (1) self-support (S1), (2) peer support (S2), (3) faculty support (S3), and (4) new technology support (S4).

S1: Self-Support

Self-support refers to the internal resources, such as motivation, initiative, and mindset, that students draw upon to cope with stressors. This differs from "control" in that it involves internal adjustment rather than changing external conditions. Strong academic and career motivation was a key driver.

Table 1: Ranking of the ISEs' Motivations for Studying in China

	Motivation	Frequency	Percentage
No.1	For better education.	17	60.7%
No.2	To find a good job.	11	42.3%
No.3	I like China.	10	36.0%

Note. N=28, two students did not give their answers.

Given the research focus, the study here only presents the first three highly agreed motivations shown by the survey in Table 1; it may not come as a surprise that ISEs have a strong desire to pursue a better education and finally find a good job. As Albert stated, his ambition to become an engineer for his country helped him persevere through academic difficulties:

> *"Whenever I feel things difficult... I told myself, don't give up, you are great engineer in the future"* (IRM-A-4).

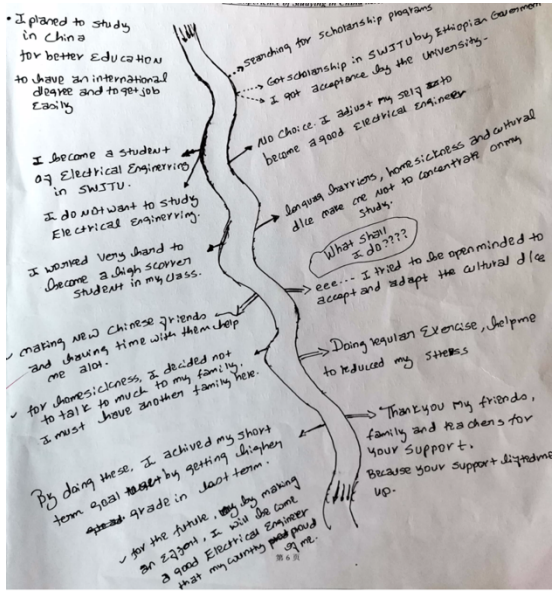

Figure 1: River-of-Life Drawing by Sophia

While intrinsic motivation is a critical factor in academic adaptation, an open and tolerant mindset is another crucial form of self-support. As Sophia expressed

in the drawing of River-of-life, ss shown in Figure 1, after her failed attempt to cook, she asked *"what shall I do?"*. Then, she adjusted by finding a campus-based Muslim canteen and rationalized the need for flexibility: *"We should be open-minded"* (SWM-S-2). This attitude aligns with findings that openness is a key predictor of successful adjustment (Yakunina et al., 2012). Kelly's proactive efforts to travel and participate in festivals further demonstrate how personal initiative facilitated her cultural understanding and adaptation.

S2: Peer Support

Consistent with other research, family support was less significant due to distance and the students' desire to avoid worrying their parents (Shu et al., 2020). Consequently, peer support became more immediate and practical. For the ISEs, this support came from both conationals and host-country friends. The shared experience of being a unified cohort fostered strong bonds, as Albert described: *"Now we are good friends because we have class together, eat together, live together, we are brothers and sisters"* (IRM-A-5).

At the same time, students such as Sophia and Kelly actively sought connections with Chinese peers to overcome homesickness and language barriers. Kelly formed a language-exchange partnership, noting, *"I think I improved my language more and more"* (SWM-K-3). However, because the ISEs had separate classes from Chinese students, opportunities for interaction were limited, suggesting that host-peer support, while valuable, was constrained by institutional structures. The students' collectivist orientation likely facilitated the formation of these strong peer networks, both within their own group and with Chinese students from a similarly collectivist culture.

S3: Faculty Support

Faculty support included both extracurricular care and proactive teaching interventions. According to the informants, informal interactions such as teachers sharing mooncakes and cultural stories during the Mid-Autumn Festival were perceived as a vital bridge that narrowed the psychological and cultural distance from the host country.

More formally, teaching interventions in courses such as "Intercultural Communication" and "Introduction to Chinese Culture" were cited as a powerful form of support. These courses provided explicit knowledge that reshaped the students' perceptions. Sophia noted:

> *"From the course, I know much of our culture is similar. It makes me more like China, this helps me better adapt"* (IRM-S-3).

By highlighting cultural similarities, such as collectivism and respect for elders, these courses effectively reduced the perceived psychic distance, a key factor in easing adaptation. This finding underscores the significant role of a targeted, culturally relevant curriculum as a form of institutional support.

S4: New Technology Support

Modern communication technologies provide a critical layer of support. After her initial frustrating shopping experience, Mary learned to use translation apps and e-commerce platforms such as Tao Bao to overcome the language barrier (IRM-M-3). Albert used online resources to learn about Chinese culture and social media such as WeChat to connect with Chinese friends (IRM-A-6). The use of WeChat, in particular, has been identified as a key tool for international students to build social networks and facilitate adaptation in China (Cao et al., 2024; Kuang & Wu, 2019). These digital tools empowered students, offering practical solutions to daily challenges and enhancing their ability to form social connections.

Summary

Analyzed through the DCS model, the ISEs' adaptation process is characterized by high demands, low control, and a strong reliance on support, as summarized in Figure 2.

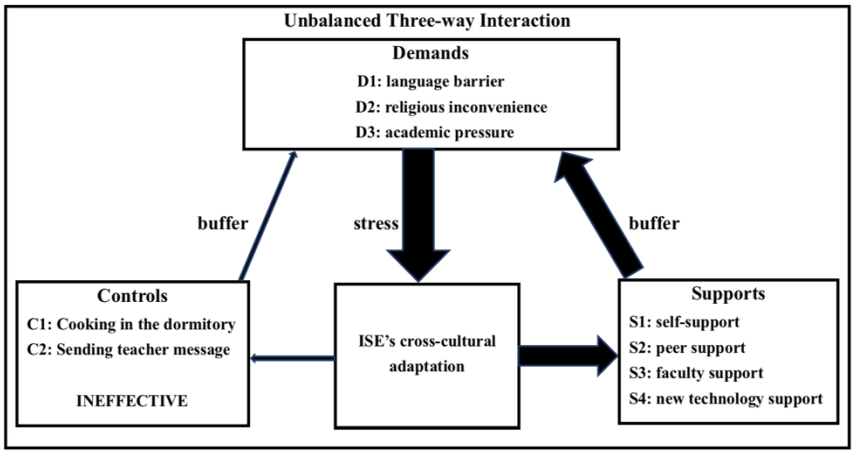

Figure 2: The ISEs' Cross-Cultural Adaptation in the DCS Model

The primary demands – language barriers, religious inconvenience, and academic pressure – were stressors over which the students had little direct control. This high-strain situation was mitigated not by exercising personal control over the environment but by activating various forms of support. Self-support (motivation and mindset), peer support (conational and host-national), faculty support (especially through teaching interventions), and technological support all functioned as crucial buffers. The findings illustrate a clear dynamic: while the ISEs' ability to control external demands was limited, their capacity to leverage internal and external support systems was essential to their adaptation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, summarized in the unbalanced interaction model (Figure 2), reveal that the cross-cultural adaptation of this specific cohort of Ethiopian students is characterized by high demands, low control, and a strong reliance on various forms of support. This dynamic offers a detailed perspective on the adaptation process, highlighting a reactive rather than proactive coping structure. This section will discuss these findings in relation to the literature, explore the implications for creating a more balanced adaptation experience (as depicted in Figure 3), and suggest pathways for future research and practice.

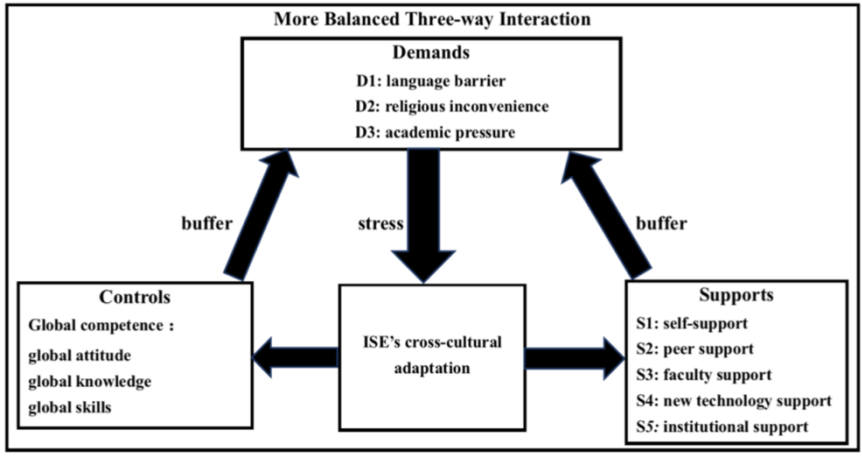

Figure 3: An Expected DCS Model of ISEs' Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Interpreting the Unbalanced Interaction: Demands, Control, and Support in Context

The demands identified in this study – language barriers, religious inconvenience, and academic pressure – are largely consistent with the broader literature on international student adaptation in China and globally. Language proficiency, in particular, is repeatedly cited as one of the most significant barriers to both academic and social integration for international students in China. Similarly, academic pressure arising from different educational systems, unfamiliar teaching styles, and rigorous evaluation methods is a well-documented stressor. This study's contribution is its focus on how these demands manifest for a specific, underresearched national group. For instance, the finding on religious inconvenience highlights a demand that may be particularly acute for students from deeply religious societies such as Ethiopia transitioning to a largely secular host environment such as urban China, a point also noted in recent analyses of African students' experiences.

A particularly salient finding of this study is the students' remarkably low level of control over these demands. Their attempts to exercise agency – such as cooking in the dormitory or requesting a reduced workload – were ineffective against institutional regulations and established academic norms. This experience of powerlessness aligns with the "iso-strain" hypothesis of the DCS model, where the combination of high demands and low control creates the highest risk of psychological strain (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). This lack of control is not merely a personal deficit but is structurally imposed. For example, the institutional segregation of international students into separate classes, a common practice in China, inherently limits their control over their social environment and restricts opportunities for interaction with host nationals. As Paik and Braxton (2026) observe, such environments often relegate international students to a state of "fragmented belonging", where institutional efforts are perceived as "performative" rather than providing the genuine symbolic and physical space needed for effective agency. This structural constraint helps explain why the students' attempts at control were largely futile.

Consequently, support mechanisms became the primary and most critical buffer against stress. The findings align with and add nuance to recent literature that distinguishes between different sources of support. The ISEs' reliance on their conational peer group is a classic example of forming a "close support" network to navigate an unfamiliar environment, a phenomenon well documented among sojourners.

Interestingly, while much of the literature points to a perceived lack of faculty and institutional support for international students in China, this study found that faculty support, specifically through targeted teaching interventions in culture-related courses, was highly effective. This suggests that a formal curriculum, when designed with intercultural sensitivity, can be a powerful, yet perhaps underutilized, form of institutional support. Notably, our findings contrast with those of Agyenim-Boateng (2022), who identified limited interaction with lecturers and a deficiency in academic support as primary barriers for African graduates in Beijing. In the present study, however, the proactive engagement of faculty functioned as a crucial buffer, suggesting that when academic support is responsively provided, it can significantly mitigate the structural constraints inherent in the host environment. In addition to these relational supports, the prominent role of technology, particularly WeChat, as a support tool also confirms recent findings on its importance for social integration and building social self-efficacy among international students in China (Zhang & Ting, 2024).

Implications for Practice: Moving toward a Balanced Model

The unbalanced nature of the ISEs' experience (Figure 2) indicates a clear and urgent need for intervention. Since the demands of studying abroad are inherent to the experience and not easily reduced, the most feasible solution is to create a more balanced system by enhancing students' control and strengthening support, as envisioned in the expected model (Figure 3).

Enhancing Control by Developing Global Competence

The students' low control is partly a function of their underdeveloped global skills. Global competence is broadly defined as the capacity to examine global and intercultural issues, engage in appropriate and effective interaction with people from different cultures, and act for collective well-being and sustainable development (Chaliawala et al., 2025; Luo & Chan, 2022; Rudd et al., 2021). It is a multidimensional construct comprising attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Silva et al., 2026). While the ISEs in this study demonstrated a positive global attitude (openness and tolerance), their global skills – particularly in language and intercultural communication – were lacking. The teacher's feedback on their passive classroom behavior, rooted in different pedagogical traditions, is a clear example of a skill deficit that limits their ability to control their academic environment.

Therefore, a primary implication is the need for predeparture and ongoing training focused on developing these specific global skills. This goes beyond basic language instruction to include explicit training on academic norms, classroom interaction styles, critical thinking, and practical communication strategies for a high-context culture such as China's. Equipping students with this "cultural capital" would directly increase their capacity to navigate academic and social demands, thereby raising their level of perceived and actual control and fostering a more agentic approach to their adaptation.

Strengthening Proactive Institutional Support

While ISEs benefit from several forms of support, the findings reveal a critical gap in proactive, systemic institutional support. The university's failure to provide simple information about dietary options or to facilitate meaningful social integration between the ISEs and domestic students are clear examples of a reactive rather than proactive support structure. This aligns with broader research indicating that institutional support for international students in China often lags behind recruitment efforts and is frequently inadequate. A 2021 survey, for instance, found that international students in China reported low satisfaction with the administrative and support services of their host institutions (Yasmin et al., 2021).

To create the balanced model shown in Figure 3, institutions must move beyond a passive role and cultivate a "service culture" of engagement among professional staff. Practical measures could include the following:

Systematic Integration Initiatives: The institutional segregation of ISEs limits their interaction with Chinese peers, a known barrier to adaptation (Raja et al., 2021; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). Implementing "buddy systems" with local students, creating integrated cross-cultural coursework, and organizing joint cultural and sporting events are evidence-based strategies to foster host-national connections and a sense of belonging.

Culturally Informed Services: The issue of religious dietary needs highlights a lack of cultural awareness at the administrative level. Institutions

should conduct needs assessments for incoming international cohorts to identify specific cultural, religious, and social requirements and ensure that support services (e.g., campus life handbooks, orientation sessions) are tailored to address them proactively. This includes providing clear, accessible information that bridges the gap between student expectations and institutional realities.

Flexible and Inclusive Pedagogy: Given students' academic pressure and difficulties with unfamiliar evaluation systems, institutions could benefit from faculty development programs focused on inclusive pedagogy. This would involve training faculty to be more aware of different learning styles and to implement more flexible and varied assessment methods, which would not only alleviate stress but also provide students with a greater sense of control over their academic outcomes.

By strengthening institutional support, universities can directly reduce the intensity of demands (e.g., by providing better information) and indirectly bolster students' control by creating a more navigable and accommodating environment.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study's limitations must be acknowledged. As a qualitative case study focused on a small, specific cohort at a single institution, the findings are not generalizable. However, the depth of insight gained provides a rich foundation for future, larger-scale quantitative or mixed-methods research to test the relationships proposed in the DCS model.

Future research could apply this model to other international student populations to test the generalizability of the "high demand, low control, high support" pattern. A comparative study between government-dispatched cohorts and self-funded students, for example, could provide valuable insights into how the nature of the mobility program shapes the DCS dynamic. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to track how the balance between demand, control, and support shifts over the entire duration of the students' sojourn, as adaptation is an evolving process.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study applied the demand-control-support (DCS) model to the cross-cultural adaptation of government-dispatched Ethiopian students in China. The findings revealed an unbalanced "iso-strain" condition: high demands (e.g., language, religion, and academics) coupled with low structural control forced students to depend heavily on support (from self, peers, faculty, and technology) as a primary, rather than complementary, coping strategy.

The study's primary contribution is its use of the DCS model to provide an integrated understanding of the adaptation process, moving beyond a simple inventory of stressors. The findings carry clear practical implications: fostering successful adaptation requires a strategic shift from reacting to stress to proactively rebalancing the DCS interaction. Given that demands are often inherent, the most effective interventions will be those that enhance students'

sense of control (such as developing global competence) and strengthen proactive, culturally informed institutional support. This underscores the need for institutions to move beyond passive services toward creating an empowering ecosystem that actively facilitates student integration.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge the use of an artificial intelligence (AI) language model to assist in brainstorming potential titles and identifying suitable journals for this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, final content, and conclusions of this paper. In addition, the authors would like to thank the informants in the research for their cooperation and wish to thank the editors and reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

REFERENCES

Agyenim-Boateng, R. (2022). Exploring the impact of the academic interactions and social relations of graduate Black African students on their learning experiences in Beijing. *Journal of International Students*, *12*(4), 973–994. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i4.2563

Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *29*(6), 697–712. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013

Bhowmik, M. K., Cheung, R. Y. M., & Hue, M. T. (2018). Acculturative stress and coping strategies among Mainland Chinese university students in Hong Kong: A qualitative inquiry. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 88*(5), 550–562. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000338

Cabaroglu, N., & Denicolo, P. M. (2008). Exploring student teacher belief development: An alternative constructivist technique, snake interviews, exemplified and evaluated. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, *5*, 28–40. http://www.pcpnet.org/journal/pctp08/cabaroglu08.pdf

Cao, C., Meng, Q., & Zhang, H. (2024). A longitudinal examination of WeChat usage intensity, behavioral engagement, and cross-cultural adjustment among international students in China. *Higher Education*, *87*(3), 661–683. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01029-5

Chaliawala, K. S., Vidourek, R. V., King, K. A., & Merianos, A. L. (2025). Investigating psychological well-being and resilience among international college students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, *15*(8), 77–94. https://doi.org/10.32674/jkv65t83

Chidiebere, E. E., Hui, W., & Chidiebere, E. E. (2019). *China Nigeria Cooperation in education and training: A comparative analysis*. LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing.

Chu, P. S., Saucier, D. A., & Hafner, E. (2010). Meta-analysis of the relationships between social support and well-being in children and adolescents. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *29*(6), 624–645. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2010.29.6.624

Cobb, S. (1976). Social support as a moderator of life stress. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 38*, 300–314. https://doi.org/10.1097/00006842-197609000-00003

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Ferdjani, H. (2012). African students in China: An exploration of increasing numbers and their motivations in Beijing. Centre for Chinese studies, Stellenbosch University. http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/70764

Hafiza Aqsa. (2026). Resilience and social support as pathways to academic achievement and adjustment among international students at a Pakistani university. *Journal of International Students*, *16*(3), 173-190. https://doi.org/10.32674/gvxrc696

Hashim, I. H. (2003). Cultural and gender differences in perceptions of stressors and coping skills: A study of Western and African college students in China. *School Psychology International, 24*(2), 182–203. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034303024002004

He, X., Baharom, S., & Liao, S. (2023). A systematic literature review of the relationship between cultural intelligence and academic adaptation of international students. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *8*(1), Article 100622. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100622

Holliman, A. J., Bastaman, A. S., Wu, H. S., Xu, S., & Waldeck, D. (2024). Exploring the experiences of international Chinese students at a UK university: A qualitative inquiry. *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*, *19*(1), 7–22. https://doi.org/10.1515/mlt-2022-0020

Hou, X., & Abu, B. (2024). Factors influencing cross-cultural adaptation among international students in China: An empirical investigation. *Environment and Social Psychology, 9*(8), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i8.2944

Hussain, M., & Shen, H. (2019). A Study on academic adaptation of international students in China. *Higher Education Studies*, *9*(4), 80–91. https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v9n4p80

Jiang, Q., Horta, H., & Yuen, M. (2022). International medical students' perspectives on factors affecting their academic success in China: a qualitative study. *BMC Medical Education*, *22*, Article 574. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-022-03597-z

Jiang, Q., Yuen, M., & Horta, H. (2020). Factors influencing life satisfaction of international students in mainland China. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, 42*, 393–413. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-020-09409-7

Jiang, X., & Xiao, Z. (2024). "Struggling like fish out of water": A qualitative case study of Chinese international students' acculturative stress in the UK. *Frontiers in Education*, *9*, Article 1398937. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1398937

Jin, X., Khan, R., & Feng, W. (2019). An investigation and countermeasures on the cultural adaptation of African students in China. *International Journal of Learning and Development, 9*(4), 109–137. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijld.v9i4.16082

Johnson, J. V., & Hall, E. M. (1988). Job strain, work place social support, and cardiovascular disease: A cross-sectional study of a random sample of the Swedish working population. *American Journal of Public Health, 78*(10)*,* 1336–1342. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.78.10.1336

Karasek, R. A. (1979). Job demands, job decision latitude and mental strain: Implications for job redesign. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 24*(2), 285–308. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392498

Kim, S., Kim, H., Park, E. H., Kim, B., Lee, S. M., & Kim, B. (2021). Applying the demand–control–support model on burnout in students: A meta-analysis. *Psychology in the Schools*, *58*(11), 2130–2147. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22581

Kuang, W., & Wu, X. (2019). An analysis of overseas students' behavior of using WeChat in China: An empirical study from the perspective of intercultural communication. *Wuhan University Journal (Philosophy & Social Sciences), 72*(1), 115–126.

Kumie, A. G. (2020). An assessment of Ethio-China political economic relations since 1991. *Vestnik Rossiiskogo Universiteta Druzhby Narodov. Seriya: Vseobshchaya Istoriya* [*RUDN Journal of World History*], *12*(3), 261–273. https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/an-assessment-of-ethio-China-political-economic-relations-since-1991

Lee, L., & Kartika, N. (2014). The influence of individual, family, and social capital factors on expatriate adjustment and performance: The moderating effect of psychology contract and organizational support. *Expert Systems with Applications, 41*(11), 5483–5494. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2014.02.030

Liu, Y., et al. (2022). Problems and countermeasures associated with intercultural adaptation in international education according to the communication action theory model. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, Article 942914. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.942914

Luo, J., & Chan, C. K. Y. (2022). Qualitative methods to assess intercultural competence in higher education research: A systematic review with practical implications. *Educational Research Review*, *37*, Article 100476. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100476

Maryam, Z., Rehman, A. U., Nawal, A., Shoaib, M., & Ullah, I. (2025). Examining the relationship between IELTS preparation and English language proficiency skills of international students. *Journal of International Students*, *15*(8), 95–120. https://doi.org/10.32674/rv7pqq16

Ngbabare, S. M. J. (2025). Mentoring that matters: African graduate students' perceptions of faculty mentorship during transition. *Journal of International Students*, *15*(10), 115–136. https://doi.org/10.32674/dvhrcm67

Ngwira, F., Adam-Seged, H. Y., & Kondowe, W. (2024). Acculturative stress and sociodemographic influences: A comparative study of Asian and African international students in China. *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 24*(4), 191–199. https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v24i4.990

Owaki, M. F., Kathina, M. M., Khayeka-Wandabwa, C., Gichuru, F. M., & Amimo, E. (2019). Chinese language teaching and learning in Kenya in the prospects of China's Reform and Opening-Up. *Educational Process: International Journal*, *8*(3), 170–184. http://dx.doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2019.83.2

Paik, E. J., & Braxton, M. (2026). "Belonging is a luxury to us": International graduate students' sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution in the U.S. *Journal of International Students*, *16*(3), 191–210. https://doi.org/10.32674/df9sjd07

Raja, R., Zhou, W., Li, X. Y., Ullah, A., & Ma, J. (2021). Social identity change as an integration strategy of international students in China. *International Migration*, *59*(5), 230–247. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12827

Ruben, B. D., & Kealey, D. J. (1979). Behavioral assessment of communication competency and the prediction of cross-cultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 3,* (1), 15–47. https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(79)90045-2

Rudd, G., Meissel, K., & Meyer, F. (2021). Measuring academic resilience in quantitative research: A systematic review of the literature. *Educational Research Review*, *34,* Article 100402. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100402

Sheng, L., Dai, J., & Lei, J. (2022). The impacts of academic adaptation on psychological and sociocultural adaptation among international students in China: The moderating role of friendship. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *89*, 79–89. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.06.001

Shu, F., Ahmed, S. F., Pickett, M. L., Ayman, R., & McAbee, S. T. (2020). Social support perceptions, network characteristics, and international student adjustment. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 74*, 136–148. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.11.002

Silva, G., Oliveira, M., Correia, A., & Brito, M. J. (2026). Analyzing intercultural competence among Erasmus students. *Journal of International Students, 16*(3), 211-232. https://doi.org/10.32674/jqwtk312

Song, J., & Fan, H. (2013). A meta-analysis of the relationship between social support and subjective well-being. *Advances in Psychological Science*, *21*(8), 1357. https://doi.org/10.3724/SP.J.1042.2013.01357

Spencer-Oatey, H., Dauber, D., Jing, J. (2017). Chinese students' social integration into the university community: Hearing the students' voices. *Higher Education, 74*, 739–756. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0074-0

Sun, Y. (2020). Educational mobility in the global south – A study of African students in China. In U. Gaulee, S. Sharma & K. Bista (Eds.), *Rethinking education across borders*: *Emerging issues and critical insights on globally mobile students* (pp. 113–140). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2399-1_7

Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1999). The measurement of sociocultural adaptation. *International journal of intercultural relations*, *23*(4), 659–677. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(99)00014-0

Weldegebriel, T. (2018). The contribution of Chinese foreign direct investment on the economic growth of Ethiopia [Doctoral dissertation, St. Mary's University]. http://repository.smuc.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/4628/1/fdi%20III.pdf

Wu, W., Ali, F., & Yupeng, L. (2025). The impact of life satisfaction on acculturation and institutional recommendation among international students in China: does acculturative stress matter? *Frontiers in Psychology, 16,* Article 1584210. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1584210

Yasmin, F., Li, S., Zhang, Y., Poulova, P., & Akbar, A. (2021). Unveiling the international students' perspective of service quality in Chinese higher education institutions. *Sustainability, 13*(11), 6008. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116008

Yu, B., Chen, X., Li, S., Liu, Y., Jacques-Tiura, A. J., & Yan, H. (2014). Acculturative stress and influential factors among international students in China: A structural dynamic perspective. *PLoS ONE, 9*(4), Article e96322. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0096322

Yuan, W. (2011). Academic and cultural experiences of Chinese students at an American university: A qualitative study. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, *20*(1), 1–16. https://media.sciltp.com/articles/sciltp/ics/2011/11WenliYuan.pdf

Yue, Q., Deng, D., & Christian, T. K. (2019). Cross-cultural adaptation issues and strategies for Cameroonian students in China. *Journal of African Media Studies, 11*(3), 395–414. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00007_1

Zhang, K., & Ting, S.-H. (2024). WeChat use and cross-cultural adaptation of international students in China: The mediating role of social self-efficacy. *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 24*(4), 56–67. https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v24i4.967

Zheng, S., & Ishii, K. (2023). Cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students: Effects of distant and close support-seeking. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, Article 1133487. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1133487

Zhou, Y., Zhang, H., & Stodolska, M. (2018). Acculturative stress and leisure among Chinese international graduate students. *Leisure Sciences, 40*(6), 557–577. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2017.1306466

Zou, Y., & Fu, S. (2025). Navigating academic acculturation among international students: Peer network, advising, and field-specific challenges in STEM and non-STEM fields. *Journal of International Students*, *15*(8), 161–184. https://doi.org/10.32674/72tbze06

Author bios

Demei Yang is a PhD student at Sun Yat-sen University. She obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees from Southwest Jiaotong University. Her research interests include cross-cultural communication, second- and third-language acquisition, and multicultural education.
Email: yangdm5@mail2.sysu.edu.cn

Xiangmin Zeng is a professor and MA & PhD supervisor at the Department of English, School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University, China. His academic interests include second language acquisition, cross-cultural communication, and European cultural studies. Email: xiangmincd@163.com