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Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 21 (2026), pp. 1-21
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32674/r0tnfk45

International Students and Cross-Cultural Adaptation in China: A Latent Growth Model of Positive Affectivity and Relationship-Building

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ABSTRACT: *Drawing on integrative communication theory and broaden-and-build theory, this study examined how international students' positive affectivity (PA) was associated with cross-cultural adaptation trajectories through proactive relationship-building behaviors, namely general socializing and networking. In a four-wave longitudinal study of 168 international undergraduate students at a Chinese university, PA was positively associated with psychological adaptation, negatively associated with sociocultural adaptation difficulty, and related to more favorable trajectories in both outcomes. General socializing was associated with faster increases in psychological adaptation, whereas networking was associated with faster decreases in sociocultural adaptation difficulty. By showing how PA encourages proactive relationship-building and supports resource accumulation over time, this study extends integrative communication theory by offering a broaden-and-build account of adaptation trajectories. The findings offer practical implications for universities seeking to support international students' adaptation to new environments.*

Keywords: cross-cultural adaptation, longitudinal design, positive affectivity, relationship-building, latent growth modeling.

INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural adaptation is the dynamic process of establishing and maintaining a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with a new environment (Kim, 2001). International students—individuals who leave their country of origin to study (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023)—commonly face challenges related to connectedness, mental well-being, and identity construction (Kaya, 2020; Weller, 2024). Integrative communication theory explains this process as an unfolding stress-adaptation-growth cycle in which communication serves as the key interface between sojourners and the environment (Kim, 2001). This emphasis on communication is also reflected in studies showing that host-environment communication plays a central role in sojourners' adaptation (Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013; Szabó et al., 2020).

Despite these advances, several important gaps remain. Beyond identifying predictors of adaptation, it is important to examine how adaptation unfolds and accumulates over time. Integrative communication theory conceptualizes cross-cultural adaptation as a dynamic process (Kim, 2001), but it offers a limited account of why some students adapt more quickly than others. Broaden-and-build theory helps explain this dynamic process: positive emotional experiences broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires, encourage exploratory and socially engaged behaviors, and build enduring psychological and social resources over time (Fredrickson, 2001). Yet many prior studies have not captured this resource-accumulation process, as most have employed cross-sectional or simple lagged designs that fail to model intra-individual growth trajectories (Hirai et al., 2015).

Relatedly, prior research has also paid insufficient attention to the positive dispositional factors that may fuel this broaden-and-build process. Environmental conditions and personal predispositions shape communication patterns and adaptive change, with personality predisposition serving as a core antecedent (Kim, 2001). More specifically, people with more positive traits tend to experience positive emotions across situations (Watson et al., 1988). Positive affectivity (PA), for example, reflects social engagement and orients individuals toward positive stimuli while helping them build inner resources (Fredrickson, 2001; Watson et al., 1988). PA may therefore promote engagement with the host environment, yet its adaptation mechanism remains underexamined.

In addition, much prior research has approached cross-cultural adaptation through a stress-reduction lens, resulting in a focus on passive regulation (Brance et al., 2024; Kim, 2001; Sun & Nolan, 2021). Yet sojourners also actively seek informational and interpersonal resources that help them achieve a better person-environment fit (Chen et al., 2010). Accordingly, recent studies have called for a more proactive understanding of adaptation (Hua et al., 2019; Mohamad & Manning, 2023). Building on this shift, this study adopts a proactive perspective by examining relationship-building behaviors, a prototypical proactive person-environment fit behavior (Ashford & Black, 1996; Deng & Yao, 2020).

Finally, the Chinese context remains underexamined in research on international students' cross-cultural adaptation. Although much of the literature

has focused on Western settings (Cao & Meng, 2022; Hirai et al., 2015), less is known about how international students interact with host-community members and adapt in China.

To address the above conceptual, methodological, and contextual limitations, this study investigates the trajectories of international students' adaptation in China. Drawing on integrative communication theory and the broaden-and-build perspective, this study examines how trait positive affectivity (PA) shapes adaptation through proactive relationship-building behaviors.

Theoretical Framework

Baseline Confirmations of Adaptation Trajectories

Cross-cultural adaptation involves responding to a new cultural environment and learning to function effectively in it (Kim, 2001). Two key dimensions are commonly distinguished: psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990). Psychological adaptation refers to subjective well-being and emotional satisfaction, whereas sociocultural adaptation refers to the ability to acquire social skills, negotiate social interactions, and fit into the host culture. Both dimensions are expected to change over time as international students gain experience in the host environment. Psychological adaptation, in particular, is expected to increase during the first semester. According to integrative communication theory, students gradually become more familiar with the host environment and better able to function within it (Kim, 2001), and their subjective well-being should improve as successful cross-cultural experiences accumulate. Broaden-and-build theory similarly suggests that positive emotions build enduring psychological and social resources, which should support greater psychological adaptation over time (Fredrickson, 2001).

A similar developmental pattern is expected for sociocultural adaptation, although in the opposite direction: sociocultural difficulties should decline as students gain host-culture knowledge and interaction competence during the first semester (Ward et al., 1998). These initial difficulties reflect the "stress" component of the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic and may motivate students to acquire culture-specific knowledge and skills through repeated communication (Kim, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Consistent with this reasoning, longitudinal studies show that sociocultural difficulties are highest shortly after arrival and tend to decrease over the first six months (Ward et al., 1998; Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

Before examining antecedents and mechanisms, this study first establishes that students exhibit the expected first-semester adaptation trajectories. Accordingly, the following baseline hypotheses are proposed as preliminary checks of the expected adaptation trajectories:

Hypothesis 1*: International students will show increasing psychological adaptation over time.*

Hypothesis 2*: International students will show decreasing sociocultural adaptation difficulty over time.*

PA in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Positive affectivity, conceptualized as a relatively stable affective trait (Watson & Tellegen, 1985), reflects an individual's tendency to experience positive emotions such as enthusiasm and energy (Watson et al., 1988). In integrative communication theory, adaptive personality traits provide internal resources for managing stress and new learning (Kim, 2001). As a positive dispositional factor associated with approach-oriented tendencies (Gable & Dreisbach, 2021), PA energizes individuals to pursue constructive actions when facing challenges (Elliot & Thrash, 2002) and helps them develop social and psychological resources for coping with stressors (Gilchrist et al., 2023; Turban et al., 2013). Therefore, PA should predispose individuals to adopt approach-oriented responses and thereby increase the likelihood of engaging in adaptive behaviors (Fredrickson, 2001; Turban et al., 2013).

When applied to cross-cultural adaptation, this perspective suggests that international students inevitably encounter stressors such as language barriers and cultural differences (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, students with higher PA may interpret these stressors as challenges rather than threats and adopt constructive coping strategies. Such approach-oriented responses have been associated with more favorable outcomes (Hoyt et al., 2024; Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010).

Fredrickson and Joiner's (2002) upward-spiral account suggests that PA may initiate a self-sustaining cycle in which positive experiences build enduring resources, which in turn increase the likelihood of later positive encounters. Positive emotions also broaden coping and accelerate psychological resource accumulation over time (Cohn et al., 2009; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018; Gloria et al., 2013). Thus, PA should shape not only initial adaptation but also subsequent change. International students with higher PA are therefore expected to show faster increases in psychological adaptation and faster decreases in sociocultural adaptation difficulty. Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 3*: PA will be positively associated with the (3a) initial level (intercept) and (3b) rate of change (slope) of psychological adaptation.*

Hypothesis 4*: PA will be negatively associated with the (4a) initial level (intercept) and (4b) rate of change (slope) of sociocultural adaptation difficulty.*

From PA to Relationship-Building Behaviors

Relationship-building behaviors are a prototypical form of proactive behavior and refer to individuals' efforts to initiate social interactions with other members of their environment (Bindl & Parker, 2011). This construct comprises three subdimensions: general socializing with coworkers in the same unit, networking with colleagues across different units, and building relationships with supervisors (Ashford & Black, 1996). Prior research has shown that relationship-building behaviors facilitate newcomers' adjustment and fit within organizations (Li et al., 2019). By analogy, international students can be viewed as newcomers

to the host culture who face the challenge of fitting into a new environment. Relationship-building behaviors should therefore facilitate their adaptation, as similar behaviors have been shown to promote expatriates' cultural adaptation and embeddedness (Ren et al., 2014). Because our study focuses on peer-based relationship-building behaviors, we followed existing practice by examining general socializing and networking only (Ren et al., 2014).

PA may help explain why some students are more likely than others to engage in relationship-building, as it directs individuals toward constructive goals and proactive actions (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). This view is consistent with the broaden-and-build theory, which suggests that positive affectivity broadens individuals' thought-action repertoires and facilitates the development of social and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). In line with this reasoning, researchers have emphasized that PA energizes individuals to engage in proactive behaviors (Parker et al., 2010), with empirical evidence showing that it positively predicts newcomers' relationship-building behaviors in organizational settings (Li et al., 2019).

In the context of cross-cultural adaptation, PA may similarly encourage international students to approach adaptation as a challenge rather than a threat, thereby making them more willing to initiate and sustain relationship-building efforts. Because peer relationship-building requires effort and may involve rejection or a lack of reciprocity, students with higher PA may be more likely to anticipate successful outcomes, view these attempts as opportunities rather than threats (Elliot & Church, 1997), and persist after setbacks (Fredrickson, 2001). Accordingly, international students with higher PA are expected to engage more frequently in relationship-building behaviors. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5*: PA will be positively associated with (5a) general socializing and (5b) networking.*

The Mediating Role of Relationship-Building Behaviors

According to integrative communication theory, adaptive personality traits provide internal resources that help sojourners manage stress and engage in new learning (Kim, 2001). Because relationship-building behaviors reflect individuals' proactive efforts to seek communication opportunities (Ashford & Black, 1996) and have been shown to promote expatriates' adaptation and embeddedness (Ren et al., 2014), they are expected to facilitate both the psychological and sociocultural adaptation of international students.

In addition to psychological stressors, international students also face challenges stemming from cultural differences in language, conventions, communication patterns, norms, and values, which may hinder their ability to manage daily life (Ward et al., 2001). To address these challenges, building relationships with peers provides opportunities to learn culture-specific knowledge and skills through observation, practice, and feedback, thereby enhancing their sociocultural adaptation (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Relationship-building behaviors should facilitate students' adaptation trajectories because they help students establish support systems and access culture-specific information during the early phase of the sojourn. Integrative communication theory conceptualizes adaptation as a communication-driven process of learning and growth (Kim, 2001). Consistent with this view, recent research suggests that cross-cultural adaptation may unfold through sequential behavioral and psychological pathways, with students' engagement shaping later adaptation through intermediate processes (Xin et al., 2025). Accordingly, by proactively seeking interaction opportunities, international students may become more embedded in the host context early in the semester and may progressively rebuild social support, buffer ongoing stress, and enhance psychological well-being. They may also acquire culture-specific knowledge and interaction skills through repeated exposure, practice, and feedback, thereby improving sociocultural functioning over time (Ashford & Black, 1996; Lu & Sun, 2025; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Because PA is a trait-like tendency to experience positive emotions and is associated with approach orientation and proactive engagement, students with higher PA should engage more consistently in relationship-building behaviors (Li et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2010). In turn, those who engage more consistently in relationship-building behaviors should be better positioned to adapt psychologically and socioculturally during the early phase of the semester and, more importantly, to show steeper increases in psychological adaptation and steeper decreases in sociocultural adaptation difficulty across the sojourn, reflecting cumulative gains in embeddedness, coping resources, and intercultural competence (Bender et al., 2019; Brunsting et al., 2018; Shu et al., 2020). Taken together, relationship-building behaviors are expected to mediate the effect of PA on international students' trajectories of psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation difficulty. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 6*: Relationship-building behaviors will be positively associated with psychological adaptation. Specifically, general socializing will be positively associated with the (6a) initial level (intercept) and (6b) rate of change (slope) of psychological adaptation, and networking will be positively associated with the (6c) initial level and (6d) rate of change of psychological adaptation.*

Hypothesis 7*: Relationship-building behaviors will be negatively associated with sociocultural adaptation difficulty. Specifically, general socializing will be negatively associated with the (7a) initial level (intercept) and (7b) rate of change (slope) of sociocultural adaptation difficulty, and networking will be negatively associated with the (7c) initial level and (7d) rate of change of sociocultural adaptation difficulty.*

Hypothesis 8*: Relationship-building behaviors will mediate the association between PA and psychological adaptation. Specifically, general socializing will mediate the association between PA and the (8a) initial level and (8b) rate of change of psychological adaptation, and networking will mediate the association between PA and the (8c) initial level and (8d) rate of change of psychological adaptation.*

Hypothesis 9*: Relationship-building behaviors will mediate the association between PA and sociocultural adaptation difficulty. Specifically, general socializing will mediate the association between PA and the (9a) initial level and (9b) rate of change of sociocultural adaptation difficulty, and networking will mediate the association between PA and the (9c) initial level and (9d) rate of change of sociocultural adaptation difficulty.*

DATA AND METHOD

Study Overview

We administered a four-wave longitudinal survey to examine trajectories of psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation difficulty among international undergraduate students in China. We also examined whether PA was associated with adaptation trajectories through proactive relationship-building behaviors. As shown in Figure 1, unconditional univariate latent growth models were specified for psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation difficulty. A time-invariant covariate latent growth model was then specified to examine the relationships among positive affectivity, relationship-building behaviors, and the intercepts and slopes of psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation difficulty.

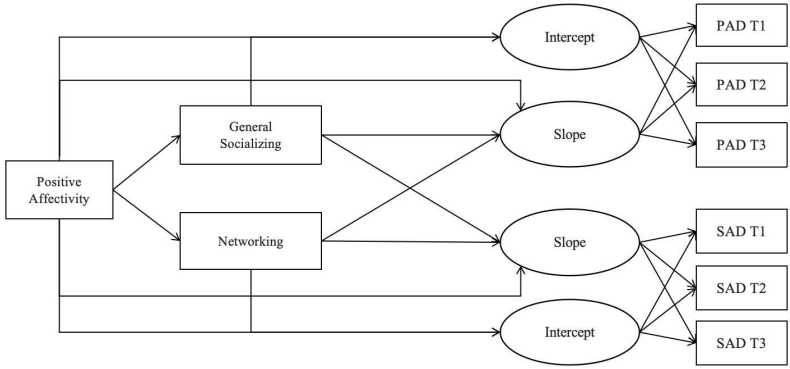


Figure 1: Proposed Time-Invariant Latent Growth Model

Note. PAD = psychological adaptation; SAD = sociocultural adaptation difficulty.

Participants and Procedure

International undergraduate students attending the fall semester orientation programs of a university in China were invited to participate in the study. Students who had been in China for more than twelve months were excluded because prior work identifies the first year as a critical period for cross-cultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The final sample comprised 168 newly enrolled

international undergraduate students at a university in northern China (M = 21.33, SD = 2.37, 60% female). Approximately 56% of participants were from Asian regions (e.g., South Korea, Japan, and Malaysia), whereas the remaining participants were from non-Asian regions (e.g., Europe, North America, and South America).

At T0, 168 students provided demographic and PA data. At T1, 163 students provided relationship-building and adaptation data; at T2 and T3, 156 and 140 students, respectively, provided adaptation data. Following the sequential follow-up protocol, students who missed a wave were not invited to participate in subsequent waves. The overall attrition from T0 to T3 was 16.7%. Welch's t tests showed no significant differences between retained and attrited participants in age (p = .365), Chinese proficiency (p = .885), months in China (p = .286), or positive affectivity (p = .422), and Fisher's exact tests showed no significant differences in gender (p = .834) or region of origin (p = .212).

Missing values were coded as -999 and handled with full information maximum likelihood (FIML). FIML estimates longitudinal models with incomplete data by using all available information and generally outperforms deletion-based approaches under ignorable missingness (Enders & Bandalos, 2001; Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022).

Measures

Questionnaires were administered in English or Chinese according to participants' preferences. Following Brislin's (1993) translation model, one bilingual student translated the scales into Chinese and another one back-translated them into English. A comparison of the two versions supported the accuracy of the Chinese version.

Positive Affectivity. Positive affectivity was measured with the 10-item positive affect subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988). Participants rated the extent to which they generally experienced emotions such as "interested" and "proud" on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*. The Cronbach's α was .83.

Relationship-Building Behaviors. Relationship-building behaviors were measured with six items adapted from the general socializing and networking subscales of Ashford and Black (1996). Three items assessed general socializing with schoolmates (e.g., "I attended social gatherings to meet new people") and three items assessed networking with students from other programs or academic units (e.g., "I started conversations with students from academic majors different from my own"). Items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*.

The boss/faculty subscale was excluded because its underlying interactional assumptions did not fit the present research context. The original boss dimension assumes sustained, role-based relationship-building with supervisors during organizational entry (Ashford & Black, 1996), whereas first-semester undergraduates' interactions with instructors in China are typically course-bound and formal. In Confucian-heritage learning contexts, students may also approach

instructors cautiously and rely more on peers for everyday support (Zhang, 2013; Shi, 2026). Because the present model focuses on peer relationships through which students develop everyday social, informational, and culture-specific resources, the general socializing and networking subscales were better aligned with the proposed mechanism and were therefore retained. Cronbach's α values were .79 for socializing and .91 for networking.

Psychological Adaptation. Following Searle and Ward (1990), psychological adaptation was conceptualized as international students' subjective well-being in the host country; that is, their satisfaction with life in the host culture. In the acculturation literature, this "feeling well" dimension is commonly operationalized as life satisfaction (Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2017; Diener et al., 1985). Participants therefore completed the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (e.g., "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal"). Items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Cronbach's α values were .88, .87, and .89 at T1, T2, and T3, respectively.

Sociocultural Adaptation Difficulty. Sociocultural adaptation difficulty was measured with the 22-item Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (Ward & Kennedy, 1999), which assesses behavioral difficulties likely to be encountered by international sojourners (e.g., making friends or understanding the local language). Items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *no difficulty* to 5 = *extreme difficulty*. Cronbach's α values were .91, .92, and .92 at T1, T2, and T3, respectively.

Control Variables. Age, gender, months in China, region of origin (Asia vs. non-Asia), and Chinese proficiency were included as control variables. These variables were included because prior cross-cultural exposure, language proficiency, and regional background may shape students' adaptation (Zhang & Ting, 2025).

ANALYSIS

Analyses were conducted in Mplus 8.8 using latent growth modeling (LGM). We first estimated unconditional LGMs for psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation difficulty, with intercepts representing adaptation at T1 and slopes representing linear change from T1 to T3. We then estimated time-invariant covariate LGMs in which PA at T0 predicted the intercepts and slopes, and T1 general socializing and networking were included as predictors of both the intercepts and slopes. Because relationship-building behaviors were assessed at T1, the same wave at which the growth intercept was defined, their associations with the intercepts were interpreted as same-wave associations, whereas their associations with the slopes were interpreted as associations with subsequent change.

RESULTS

Measurement Model

Before testing the growth models, we conducted a CFA for the five focal constructs: positive affectivity, general socializing, networking, psychological adaptation (T1), and sociocultural adaptation difficulty (T1). Items for sociocultural adaptation difficulty were parceled using the item-to-construct balance approach (Little et al., 2013). The five-factor model showed acceptable fit, $\chi^2(263) = 451.58$, CFI = .92, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06, and all standardized loadings were significant, ranging from .45 to .97. The five-factor model also showed lower AIC and BIC values than alternative models that combined theoretically related constructs, supporting the distinctiveness of the constructs.

Longitudinal Measurement Invariance

Longitudinal measurement invariance across T1-T3 was tested for psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation difficulty, with the latter tested using item parcels. Scalar invariance was supported for psychological adaptation (CFI = .99 across configural, metric, and scalar models; RMSEA = .04; maximum $|\Delta CFI| = .00$; maximum $|\Delta RMSEA| = .01$) and sociocultural adaptation difficulty (CFI = .98-.99; RMSEA = .05-.06; maximum $|\Delta CFI| = .01$; maximum $|\Delta RMSEA| = .01$). These values met recommended criteria ($|\Delta CFI| \leq .010$, $|\Delta RMSEA| \leq .015$; Chen, 2007), supporting the meaningful interpretation of longitudinal change.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables. Consistent with expectations, PA was positively correlated with psychological adaptation and negatively correlated with sociocultural adaptation difficulty across T1-T3.

Changing Pattern of Psychological Adaptation and Sociocultural Adaptation Difficulty

As shown in Table 2, the linear growth model provided better fit for both outcomes than the baseline no-growth model. Yet the saturated freely estimated model did not significantly improve fit. Therefore, the linear growth model was retained.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Gender	-	-													
2. Age	21.33	2.37	.02												
3. Chinese proficiency	3.53	1.24	.04	-.14											
4. Months in China	1.50	2.17	.10	.05	.12										
5. Region	-	-	-.05	-.27**	.31**	-.09									
6. Positive affectivity	3.74	0.55	.01	.10	-.09	-.06	-.24**								
7. Socializing	3.07	0.95	-.05	-.16*	.16*	.01	.11	.17*							
8. Networking	3.10	1.08	-.01	-.11	-.02	.07	.03	.38**	.42**						
9. Psychological adaptation T1	4.85	1.28	-.05	.13	-.10	.02	-.22**	.31**	.13	.16*					
10. Psychological adaptation T2	4.97	1.15	-.10	.10	-.06	.10	-.17*	.29**	.22**	.17*	.65**				
11. Psychological adaptation T3	5.05	1.11	-.06	.13	-.04	.04	-.19*	.45**	.27**	.21*	.65**	.70**			
12. Sociocultural adaptation difficulty T1	2.03	0.58	.02	-.10	.05	-.11	.12	-.35**	.00	-.07	-.29**	-.18*	-.34**		
13. Sociocultural adaptation difficulty T2	1.98	0.59	.06	-.07	.03	.00	.06	-.40**	-.06	-.19*	-.27**	-.23**	-.34**	.75**	
14. Sociocultural adaptation difficulty T3	1.92	0.55	.06	-.10	.09	-.09	.23**	-.37**	-.10	-.17*	-.31**	-.33**	-.47**	.84**	.77**

Note. N = 168. Gender was coded 0 = female and 1 = male. Region was coded 0 = non-Asian and 1 = Asian. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

The mean of psychological adaptation increased from 4.85 at T1 to 5.05 at T3, whereas the mean of sociocultural adaptation difficulty decreased from 2.03 at T1 to 1.92 at T3. Thus, international undergraduate students showed linear increases in psychological adaptation and linear decreases in sociocultural adaptation difficulty in the first semester, supporting baseline Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Table 2: Model Fit and Model Comparisons in Univariate Latent Growth Models

Variable	χ^2	df	Model Comp.	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δ df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Psychological adaptation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model M1 (no-growth)	24.67	2	-	-	-	.86	.79	.26	.14
Model M2 (linear growth)	2.15	1	M1 vs. M2	22.52**	1	.99	.98	.08	.02
Model M3 (free growth)	0.00	0	M2 vs. M3	2.15	1	1.00	1.00	.00	.00
Sociocultural adaptation difficulty	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model M1 (no-growth)	24.78	2	-	-	-	.86	.79	.26	.14
Model M2 (linear growth)	2.17	1	M1 vs. M2	22.61**	1	.99	.98	.08	.02

Variable	χ^2	df	Model Comp.	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δ df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Model M3 (free growth)	0.00	0	M2 vs. M3	2.17	1	1.00	1.00	.00	.00

Note. N = 168. *p < .05; **p < .01.

Associations of Positive Affectivity With Adaptation Trajectories

The associations of PA with the intercepts and slopes of psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation difficulty were examined using the time-invariant covariate latent growth model. As shown in Table 3, in Model M1, PA had a significant positive association with the initial level of psychological adaptation (β = .30, p < .01) and its rate of change (β = .83, p < .01), supporting Hypotheses 3a and 3b. PA was also significantly negatively associated with the initial level (β = -.41, p < .01) and rate of change (β = -.83, p < .01) of sociocultural adaptation difficulty, supporting Hypotheses 4a and 4b. In Model M2, after general socializing and networking were included, PA remained significantly associated with the intercept of psychological adaptation (β = .28, p < .01) and the intercept of sociocultural adaptation difficulty (β = -.45, p < .01). However, its direct associations with the slope of psychological adaptation (β = .31, p = .368) and the slope of sociocultural adaptation difficulty (β = -.24, p = .482) became nonsignificant.

Table 3: Predictors of Psychological Adaptation and Sociocultural Adaptation Difficulty

Predictors	Psychological Adaptation				Sociocultural Adaptation Difficulty			
	Model M1		Model M2		Model M1		Model M2	
	Intercept	Slope	Intercept	Slope	Intercept	Slope	Intercept	Slope
Gender	-.09	-.24	-.09	-.17	.05	.17	.05	.11
Age	.06	.16	.10	.22	-.06	-.06	-.05	-.17
Chinese proficiency	-.05	.30	-.07	.15	.03	-.25	.03	-.19
Months in China	.07	.17	.07	.12	-.13	.15	-.14	.16
Region	-.17	.57	-.18	.38	-.03	.40	-.04	.43
Positive affectivity	.30**	.83**	.28**	.31	-.41**	-.83**	-.45**	-.24
Socializing	-	-	.16	.61**	-	-	.04	-.13
Networking	-	-	.04	.02	-	-	.06	-.70*
R^2	.17	.14	.20	.23	.17	.16	.20	.28

Note. N = 168. *p < .05; **p < .01. Standardized coefficients are reported. Model M1 includes positive affectivity and control variables. Model M2 additionally includes general socializing and networking.

In Model M1, the predictors explained 17% of the variance in the intercept of psychological adaptation, 14% of the variance in its slope, 17% of the variance in the intercept of sociocultural adaptation difficulty, and 16% of the variance in its slope. In Model M2, the explained variance increased to 20% for the intercept

and 23% for the slope of psychological adaptation, and to 20% for the intercept and 28% for the slope of sociocultural adaptation difficulty. Thus, adding relationship-building behaviors increased the explained variance in the slope of psychological adaptation by 9 percentage points and in the slope of sociocultural adaptation difficulty by 12 percentage points.

Relationship-Building Behaviors as Mediators

As the first step in testing mediation, PA was examined as a predictor of relationship-building behaviors and positively predicted both general socializing ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$) and networking ($\beta = .43$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypotheses 5a and 5b.

We then examined the associations between relationship-building behaviors and the intercepts and slopes of the two adaptation outcomes. As shown in Table 3, for psychological adaptation, general socializing was not significantly related to the intercept ($\beta = .16$, $p = .165$) but was positively related to the slope ($\beta = .61$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 6b but not Hypothesis 6a. Networking was not significantly related to either the intercept ($\beta = .04$, $p = .761$) or slope ($\beta = .02$, $p = .587$) of psychological adaptation; therefore, Hypotheses 6c and 6d were not supported. For sociocultural adaptation difficulty, general socializing was not significantly related to either the intercept ($\beta = .04$, $p = .479$) or slope ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .686$), so Hypotheses 7a and 7b were not supported. Networking was not significantly related to the intercept of sociocultural adaptation difficulty ($\beta = .06$, $p = .583$) but was negatively related to its slope ($\beta = -.70$, $p < .05$), supporting Hypothesis 7d but not Hypothesis 7c.

To test whether relationship-building behaviors mediated the effects of PA on adaptation trajectories, we conducted bias-corrected bootstrap analyses with 5,000 resamples. Because neither general socializing nor networking was significantly associated with the intercepts of either adaptation outcome, the corresponding intercept mediation hypotheses were not supported. Thus, Hypotheses 8a, 8c, 9a, and 9c were not supported. For the slope mediation paths, general socializing mediated the effect of PA on the slope of psychological adaptation (95% CI [.104, .389]), whereas networking mediated the effect of PA on the slope of sociocultural adaptation difficulty (95% CI [-.627, -.166]). By contrast, networking did not mediate the effect of PA on the slope of psychological adaptation (95% CI [-.215, .102]), and general socializing did not mediate the effect of PA on the slope of sociocultural adaptation difficulty (95% CI [-.145, .107]). Thus, Hypotheses 8b and 9d were supported, whereas Hypotheses 8d and 9b were not supported.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on integrative communication theory and broaden-and-build theory, this study examined cross-cultural adaptation among international undergraduate students in China. The findings showed that students higher in PA were more likely to proactively build relationships with schoolmates. Specifically, general

socializing was associated with faster increases in psychological adaptation, whereas networking was associated with faster decreases in sociocultural adaptation difficulty during the first semester. Nevertheless, neither relationship-building behavior significantly predicted the intercepts of psychological adaptation or sociocultural adaptation difficulty, and the corresponding intercept mediation paths were not supported. This pattern is plausible because the intercepts represented T1 adaptation, measured one month into the semester and at the same wave as relationship-building behaviors. At that stage, adaptation levels may have reflected pre-arrival dispositions, prior cross-cultural exposure, and early institutional conditions more strongly than newly formed peer ties. Relationship-building may therefore require repeated interactions and accumulated resources before shaping adaptation, which may explain why it predicted slopes rather than intercepts.

The finding that general socializing was associated only with the slope of psychological adaptation, whereas networking was associated only with the slope of sociocultural adaptation difficulty, was post hoc but noteworthy. This pattern suggests that socializing and networking may contribute to adaptation through partly different functions. General socializing may create enjoyable interactions and interpersonal rapport (Ashford & Black, 1996; Bender et al., 2019), which may support psychological well-being but provide less practical guidance for reducing sociocultural difficulties. By contrast, networking may help students build instrumental ties and obtain culturally relevant information and problem-solving support (Farh et al., 2010; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), helping students navigate daily cultural demands. This information-oriented function may be useful for sociocultural adaptation but may not necessarily generate the close emotional connection needed for psychological well-being. Because networking is often utilitarian, however, it may provide less emotional support for psychological adaptation (Wolff & Spurk, 2020). Future research should directly test these functional differences.

Once relationship-building behaviors were included, PA's direct effects on the slope factors became nonsignificant; the indirect effects remained significant. This pattern is consistent with full mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), suggesting that PA shaped adaptation change primarily through proactive relationship-building rather than through an additional direct pathway. Personality traits often operate through proximal behavioral and social processes (Hampson, 2012). In this study, relationship-building linked communication-driven adaptation with broaden-and-build logic by translating PA into adaptation-relevant communication, support ties, and resources over time (Farh et al., 2010; Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013; Li et al., 2019).

Implications

Our study has both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it first extends cross-cultural adaptation research by highlighting the comparatively understudied role of PA. The findings suggest that students higher in PA engage more in relationship-building, begin with more favorable adaptation, and show

more favorable adaptation trajectories over time. Second, the study responds to calls for a more proactive perspective by examining general socializing and networking as specific relationship-building behaviors. The findings suggest that proactive peer relationship-building may help international students accumulate adaptation-relevant resources. Third, the study contributes methodologically by using a four-wave latent growth model to examine intra-individual change in psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation difficulty.

Practically, the findings suggest that supporting international students requires more than general orientation services; it also requires structured opportunities for peer connection. Peer mentorship and intercultural engagement programs may enhance first-year international students' sociocultural adaptation and support daily life, academic transition, and social ties (Ma, 2026). Universities could therefore organize peer mentorship schemes, intercultural learning communities, or small-group activities that connect newly arrived international students with senior students who can provide cross-cultural support.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, although data were collected across four waves, adaptation was assessed only from T1 to T3. Accordingly, the latent growth models were estimated using three repeated assessments, and the intercept represents adaptation one month into the semester rather than adaptation upon arrival. This design constrained the complexity of growth trajectories that could be tested and limited our ability to capture the very earliest stage of cross-cultural transition. Second, the sample was drawn from a single university in China, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutional and cultural contexts. Third, the measures of general socializing and networking did not distinguish between relationships with host nationals and those with co-nationals. Distinguishing these ties may clarify the persistent impact of limited domestic friendships on international students' social engagement and well-being (Ivanova et al., 2025). Fourth, measuring relationship-building behaviors at only one time point prevented us from examining whether they changed over time.

Future research could extend this study in several ways. For example, other proactive tactics—such as positive framing—may also facilitate cross-cultural adjustment (Ashford & Black, 1996). Future work could also examine academic adaptation, which concerns students' responses to academic demands, including study motivation, skill use, goal setting, and satisfaction with the academic environment (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Finally, future research could distinguish between high-activation and low-activation forms of positive affectivity, as these forms may have different implications for cross-cultural adaptation (Russell, 2009; Seo et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, PA represents an important dispositional resource for international students' adaptation in China. By encouraging students to proactively build relationships with classmates, PA was associated with greater psychological adaptation and lower sociocultural adaptation difficulty across the first semester partly through students' proactive relationship-building with classmates. These findings underscore the importance of campus environments that help students initiate and maintain supportive peer relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors used ChatGPT-5.4 Pro (OpenAI) to assist with minor language editing during manuscript preparation. All interpretations, conclusions, and any remaining errors are the authors' own responsibility.

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