



## Mental State and Life Experience of Chinese Students in Germany: An Exploratory Study

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### Theoretical Study

#### Abstract

Chinese students in Germany suffer from various factors. They also have to adapt to the daily life. There is little known about these issues of Chinese students. Thus, an independent group of Chinese and German experts started an exploratory study on this situation. There were three general aims:

1- to get a better understanding of the situation

2- to create guidelines for the better support of the students

3- to better understand transcultural communication on the field of research

The present paper describes and comments on the architecture of the research. It also describes some typical issues of transcultural communication. Moreover, it tries to contribute to a better cooperation between the Chinese and German cultures.

**Keywords:** Chinese students; Germany; Exploratory study; Action research; Transcultural communication

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## Introduction

Experts in universities as well as the Chinese Embassy have reported that they have met many Chinese students with various psychological and mental problems in Germany. Yet, very little is known about the cause of this issue. Usually, Chinese students do not look for specific psychological support or psychotherapy in Germany. This is due to various aspects. Mostly, Chinese students try to solve problems by themselves. Moreover, they do not know where to seek support or psychotherapy in Germany, and more importantly, Chinese students cannot find specific support in their own mother tongue.

Therefore, we, a group of Chinese and German psychotherapists and researchers, decided to perform this specific exploratory study to obtain a better understanding of the mental state of Chinese students in Germany.

We present the specific design of the study for professional discourse because such a transcultural research connected with the Chinese culture is quite new in Germany, and it can be proofed as a possible role model. Thus, we decided to present the study in the form of a "learning history".

A "learning history" is a process and documentation to help become better aware of one's own development, learning, and change efforts. It presents one's experiences and understandings of one's own relation to a new field of experience. It includes reports of actions and results. It shows how my learning is an approach to becoming familiar with what I do, where I do it, and with whom I do it. It also illustrates how I achieved the results.

The "learning history" also includes descriptions of learning methods and techniques, intentions, tools, and the design of interventions. Finally, it includes descriptions of my underlying assumptions and reasoning, which help me perform psychobiographical analysis in an unfamiliar context. However, "learning history" goes beyond writing a history that documents the process of analysis. It serves as a critical element in developing my own architecture of research to support at the same time. This helps us create new opportunities, new approaches, new questions, and new hypotheses. The content creates a way to communicate with the readers and/or colleagues, referring to aspects which would not be seen and discussed otherwise. My leading questions were:

- How can I judge the success of my psychobiographical analysis as a change effort?
- How can readers and/or the analyzed celebrity benefit from this experience?
- What kinds of opportunities for success and/or potential for failure arise in this process?

Exploratory research has several functions. These are essentially:

- Chinese students in Germany:
- First focused research on the situation of Chinese students in Germany
- Definition of guidelines for offers of help and support
- Communication with DAAD, universities in China and Germany in this regard, the Chinese Embassy, etc.
- Medium-term development of concrete support offers, internet platform, etc.
- Transcultural communication and cooperation in the field of science between Germany and China
- Improvement of the exchange of experiences on the Sino-German science exchange program (What helps? What makes it difficult? What are the lessons learned?)

- Exemplary application of the different experiences with action research, qualitative studies, different understandings of transculturality, second-order observation, science discourse, etc.
- Identification of typical models of thinking, patterns of behavior, and fields of tension
- Outline of quintessence and central questions for future Sino-German projects.

Chinese students form the largest group of foreign students in Germany (from non-EU countries). They are more or less well prepared linguistically for their stay in Germany (DAAD, Statista). They are also well informed culturally. They make use of social and cultural offers, and yet, they often feel unfamiliar in Germany. It is not uncommon for them to feel lonely or homesick. One possible solution is therefore to find familiar protection and communication in Chinese groups. Another is to seek psychological help/support. However, these students rarely seek psychological support.

Chinese students are therefore in a very specific life situation, which is characterized by considerable pressure, such as:

- Pressure to perform, due to Chinese socialization
- Pressure from their families
- Pressure due to the foreignness of the language and culture as well as the living situation in Germany
- Pressure due to relative isolation, loneliness, problems meeting the demands of the culture, life, and studies as well as pressure to perform.

Even before the Corona crisis, many of the students complained of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, and some even had suicidal fantasies. Dropping out of studies and returning to China prematurely are not uncommon.

However, where can Chinese students find appropriate culturally-adequate and psychologically-professional help in Germany?

This issue has been further complicated by the Corona crisis.

### Content

The qualitative, exploratory project had two aims: The first was to promptly determine Chinese students' experiences of their living and study situation in Germany before the Corona crisis and now. What are their specific difficulties?

The second aim was to derive central guidelines as well as relevant and specific support and counseling services from the results. The aggregated results will be communicated to higher education institutions, DAAD, student counseling, the Chinese embassy, representatives of Chinese universities, etc.

### Methods used include:

- Online-questionnaire
- Exploratory, narrative interviews (online) with Chinese students (in Chinese and English)
- Reference to specific typical cultural patterns of behavior and impact
- Qualitative review (Aghamanoukjan, Buber & Meyer, 2009) of texts by students who report on their stay in Germany (more than 70 such texts are now available)
- Some in-depth interviews.

### How did the study come about?

My work in China, or an ethnologic voyage of discovery

From the beginning, it was important for me to meet the people in China with whom I relate professionally and privately in different ways, and to get to know them in their everyday life, in their individual living environment, insofar as the circumstances allowed. From the beginning, I have reported my experiences in a

journalistic way.

Similar to an ethnologist, I embark on a journey through the everyday life that I encounter during my on-site visits. For example, on my first visit to Beijing, I spent a whole week walking through Beijing. What was important to me was the sensual experience, namely seeing people, observing them, watching them, and letting myself be impressed by the impressions. During the ethnological walk, for example through the hutongs in Beijing, I also wanted to smell, hear, and feel, so that I was not just acquiring visual knowledge, but practicing "sensed-knowing", in the sense of "felt-sense"(Sollmann 2018).

For me, encounter meant, and still does today, venturing on a scenic journey of discovery together with the people I meet, getting involved in the adventure of the unknown in order to engage with them in a shared process of experiential learning entirely in the sense of a "p2p diplomacy" (people to people) (Sollmann 2021).

I distinguish such a transcultural process from intercultural and multicultural processes (Nazarkiewicz & Kramer, 2012; Frietsch & Rogge, 2014; Halbmayer, 2022). (Figure 1).

### 3 Approaches for Working with Cultures\*

Perspectives	Intercultural	Multicultural	Transcultural
Culture appears as...	Challenge for intercultural learning	Part-system, interference in the expectations	Undetected prerequisites for interaction and identity
Culture concept	Essentialist: Countries, nation states	Systemic: Game rules, patterns	Cohesive: Differences and diversity
Methods	Teaching, advising, training  ▶ Apply and adapt	Use of models for the reflection and detection of values  ▶ Reflect and test	Deconstruction of all preconceptions, images of normality and power asymmetries  ▶ Consider cultural and diversity factors on all levels of activity
Intercultural competence encompasses	Knowledge and techniques	Ability to reflect and flexibility	Competences and personality development
Advantages	Recognition of cultural factors	Multiple perspectives	Essentially difference and equality oriented
Role and particular competences of the expert	Promotes intercultural competence as cultural expert; trains and recommends	Broadens perspectives, choices and options for actions, provokes and intervenes	Assesses collaboratively which identity factors and boundaries are relevant
Challenges	Overestimation of cultural factors	Lack of (inter) cultural expertise	Limited reach of individual influence

\*Source: Nazarkiewicz/Krämer (2012): Handbuch Interkulturelles Coaching. V&R.

**Figure 1.** 3 approaches for working with culture (Nazarkiewicz & Kramer, 2012)

Compared to the acquisition of a language, intercultural communication is analogous to the acquisition of vocabulary and concepts (e.g., how to hand over a business card). Multicultural communication, analogous to the acquisition of a foreign language, is about the acquisition of grammar (rules of communication and relationship, cultural presence, etc.). Finally, transcultural communication is comparable to linguistic and non-linguistic exchange in the field and with people in their neighborhood and real life whom I do not know. It is precisely this kind of communication that is also about being open and awake to what is written between the lines or becomes audible through intermediate tones. Finally, it is above all about the emotional resonance in me as well as the possible emotional resonance in my counterpart (compare the concept of the transference relationship in psychoanalysis and also Devereux, 1976).

### Chinese students in Germany: first impressions

It is not surprising that in my work, on site in China, I was particularly attracted to topics such as personality development, education, experiential learning, and communicative exchange of cultures. Since I had contact with Chinese students here in Germany, I learned about the difficulties of many Chinese students in Germany long before my first trip to China. Later, in China, this experience was reinforced. This impression was confirmed by a tip from Professor Zhao Xudong and an employee of the Chinese Consulate in Düsseldorf. Both expressed their great concern about the mental health of Chinese students in Germany. They also expressed their even greater concern about the fact that as professionals they were still quite inexperienced in dealing with this specific situation. "So, what are we to do?", they asked. "How should the students' psychological distress be addressed? What could be done to support the Chinese students in Germany or to better prepare them in China?"

Through my interactions with Chinese students in Cologne as well as my communication through social media, I vividly learned about concrete examples and fates:

- A young student studied successfully, but felt increasingly lonely, even though she was well socially integrated in Cologne. Finally, homesick, she broke off her studies to fly back to Shanghai. Her parents had divorced in the meantime and she was therefore unsure whether she could return to her father or her mother. In any case, she was convinced to leave Germany and return to China. Even if she did not return to the "protective" family as before (her father and mother were living separately). What kind of distress must this young student have been in to take such a step?
- A young opera singer was studying in Cologne. His singing was excellent. His German professor therefore tried to teach the young Chinese the importance of personal expression in singing. In Germany and in Europe, one would perform oneself as a singer through personal expression. In the evening, the young student communicated with his mother, who unapologetically wanted to impose her own view, namely the Chinese cultural view, on him. This was not atypical for a Chinese mother, forceful, energetic, and with the necessary amount of pressure. He should work on his singing to perfect it, because that is what is wanted and required in China.

The young student was obviously in a deep dilemma for which he had not been prepared at all, in an almost unsolvable emotional, transcultural dilemma.

I also started communicating via social media with colleagues, former workshop participants, and people I did not know in China who contacted me by WeChat. The topics of our conversations were very different. With some of them, an email

friendship developed that has lasted for years now, involving the exchange of very personal, cultural, social, and political topics. Here is an example:

Triggered by a post, I was approached (circa 2015) by a group of young students who studied at a police academy. Over time, the young Chinese took the opportunity to discuss general topics of psychology with me, which increasingly led to very personal conversation with some of them. They told me about their attitude to life, their questions about the future, doubts, and wishes. They told me about difficulties in their relationships, about their puberty, about love and sexuality, and about the integration of love, marriage, career, but also divorce. Their joy at being Chinese always resonated.

You could say that these years of experience indirectly prepared me to a certain extent to deal with the situation of Chinese students in Germany in a targeted, specific, and differentiated way.

**General research approach (Kuhn, 1970; von Unger et al., 2007; Zizek & Genschow, 2014)**

Without intending to do so, I myself, and later in exchange with interested colleagues, had already begun an exchange process that, entirely in the sense of action research, would lead us to the topic. Long before the questionnaire went online, we were already in the middle of the action and acted as (co-)shapers. Understanding such a research design is rather unknown in China. If known, however, there are then clear uncertainties in role behavior. We experienced the discovery of topics together as an important part of the research process itself right from the beginning. We will go into this in more detail later in the final evaluation in 2022.

We therefore worked our way forward step by step, modifying, discarding, supplementing, and confirming the respective results of our exchange, in order to finally outline a rough structure for the procedure (project architecture):

- Life field analysis
- Content analysis
- Analysis of self-descriptions
- Virtual communication
- Exemplary situation analysis
- In-depth analysis

The transcultural communication of this action-research-project opened up important and relevant issues like:

- Difference between deductive and inductive approach (Gendlin 2012)
- Different understanding of action-research
- Self-reflection as an independent researcher
- Clarification of self-understanding, role, and function as researcher
- Different modes of “experience” (post-experience, pre-experience, and in-situ-experience)
- Handling of direct action and/or optional action

Thus, transcultural communication is like giving birth together and co-creating a relevant story.

#### **Basic questions in the process of research**

- How should the interplay of emotionality and professionalism be handled?
- How should tension for example between announcement of transparency and practical doing be handled?
- How should the different understandings of dialogue, debate, discourse, etc. be



dealt with?

- How can we stay focused on the topics of research and be open enough for the personal “well-being” of the team?
- How can the team be adapted to ambiguity so that they can stay open to juxtapositions?
- How can frictions / conflicts / ambivalences be used to support cohesion?
- Do I have to be Chinese in order to do this kind of study or not?
- How can I stay open enough to the process so that a possible cultural clash does not lead to the “either you or me” / “I am when you are not” mentality?
- How can I create a “Third Space” which offers professional and personal shelter/safety?

A basic conclusion was: This kind of research is like an endeavor made every day and every moment with everybody. This is the opportunity that this scientific approach provides because right away it puts you in touch with life as it is.

### Project team

The project idea, conception, and operative implementation turned out to be, one could almost say, a process of shared experience with colleagues of different provenance and cultural experiences (Germans and Chinese). On the one hand, this process led to a more differentiated view of the topic. On the other hand, this process itself acted as an independent, significant component of the planned exploratory, transcultural approach.

The interaction of the participants in the project was characterized by three aspects, which brought together the respective active participants in different weights:

- Interested persons enriched the project in the run-up to the start of the actual survey through providing examples, questions, opinions, additions, and views.
- The members of the more active core participated based on the situation or occasion, directly and concretely, but changed during the process.
- Other persons were available in the background for specific questions, suggestions, and criticism. Some of these people also promised active assistance in the future course of the project.

The group of people involved was thus not firmly defined and anchored. As a rule, there were also no fixed assignments and roles. One took on a task and gave it up again. In retrospect, it can be said that the process meandered until the end of the online questionnaire (May 2021), resembling a steady state. Such a procedure is very different from the way project work is usually done in Germany. As a rule, there are clear goals, tasks, roles, responsibilities, timelines, and so on right from the start.

### Resonance In the run-up to the survey

The exchange of information and the shaping of relationships, as a different kind of resonance in the run-up to the start of the survey, were interesting in many respects:

- Everyone with whom we exchanged information about the topic of the study was consistently interested and emphasized the importance and relevance of the study. The project team sees itself as an independent team, especially in this respect.
- As the study is carried out consciously pro bono as a non-profit study, we do not have any financial resources to rely on. However, financial resources are absolutely necessary, even if only in a small amount, to guarantee the technology, to perform the necessary translations, to cover possible travel costs, and so on. We therefore tried to obtain such resources through social crowdfunding. Since Chinese students are very internet and social media savvy, and the survey was also designed as an online survey, we launched a call for social crowdfunding on the internet. We

explained this in great detail, justifying the call for social crowdfunding as an effort for Chinese students to support each other. Indirectly, we appealed to individuals' sense of community, since they could have a good friend in the group of Chinese students who complained of psychological difficulties. We did not ask for financial support, but only for active support, i.e., willingness to translate some of the answers to the survey.

Unfortunately, this call did not receive much response, and had no success. Only one PhD student was willing to do some translations. We know that there are crowdfunding projects in China, but we are not sure with which tradition they are started and successfully finished, and how familiar the Chinese society, the virtual community, is with crowdfunding, especially in relation to a Sino-German project.

Another explanation for the silence may lie in a more culturally determined pattern of behavior. Our crowdfunding was related to a cause that was planned in the mid-term future (we had launched the appeal in March and hoped for support from June onwards). However, many Chinese are more likely to be attracted to an active (co-)impact that lies in the immediate present, in the here and now.

- Contrary to our fear, the search for translators turned out to be very easy. After all, the previous call for "social crowdfunding" came to nothing. There was mostly no response and the occasional apology plus rejection.

However, I found translators for all the questionnaire packets within a few days. After three days, one third of the translators responded with their translation. We were successful because:

- We related to the here and now
- We asked them for a timely response
- We linked to existing relationships
- We referred to the "give-take principle"
- We could communicate successfully because of trustful recommendation

Quite a few of those we approached expressed their keen interest and apologized for not being able to participate. In the correspondence regarding the request, there were therefore more reciprocal responses. Now, is this typical Chinese, typical for such a designed exploratory study, and/or an expression of "contemporary" virtual communication?

- At the end of April 2021, in one of the social media groups (WeChat), there turned out to be a spontaneous and surprisingly heated discussion about the architecture of the study, the procedure, the scientific attitude, and so on. The group/forum in question saw itself as a self-organized communication platform, primarily for Chinese students in Germany, aiming at cultural, social, psychological, and philosophical discussion. Of course, Chinese individuals living in China and interested Germans were also invited. The forum also offers special webinars, discussion groups, references to literature, and so on. In practical terms, the web group also fulfilled the function of a virtual home. In the first year (2020), there were various webinars on special topics such as gender, intercultural communication, tea making ceremony, and ecology. German experts were also regularly invited to these webinars (I myself was invited on topics such as transcultural communication, traumatization, gender, etc.). These webinars turned out to be an engaging and fruitful discussion circle in which representatives of the German and Chinese cultures could engage in professional as well as personal discourse. These intercultural webinars were discontinued at the beginning of 2021. Since then, there have only been Chinese-language events in various forms.



### In the transcultural wild water of Sino-German communication

Some typical areas of tension and questions that have emerged in the first two years are presented in this section. A specific description and evaluation will follow in a publication of the results of the study in 2022:

- How can the interplay of emotional enthusiasm and professional exchange be fertilized in such a way that possible conflicts remain workable?
- Scientific discourse in the context of an exploratory study requires a great deal of exchange, (self-)reflection, and reciprocal communication without immediately (and hastily) going into action. This requires a practiced experience in the tolerance of ambiguity. This requires sensitivity to other opinions, positions, or cultural patterns. This also requires a corresponding appreciation without interrupting or breaking off communication or cooperation in the case of a field of tension.
- How do you deal with the tension between an announcement, e.g., regarding transparency, and a different practice? When and how can this be discussed?
- How does one deal with different understandings of dialogue, debate, discourse, etc.? What cultural experience (familiarity) is there in this regard?
- How can sufficient cohesion be created to productively deal with the ambivalences and frictions that arise?
- Such cohesion promotes good interaction between the discussion of the subject matter and an interaction with each other that also creates sufficient satisfaction.
- A typical area of tension arose in this respect when two cultural patterns of experience and action clashed. When strong emotions arose in the cooperation, the Chinese side had the impulse to suddenly break off communication and cooperation. The German side often thought it had been "too long", believing that their Chinese colleagues would also think like them. The unconscious emotionality of this tension can be summarized in the sentence: "Either you or I" or "I am when you are not".
- In order to be able to deal with the experience of the situation of Chinese students in Germany, do you have to be Chinese or not? As a German, can one deal with the experience of Chinese students in such a study without having a broader, prior understanding of patterns of experience and behavior typical of China?
- When one can talk about such irritations in academic discourse and typical cultural patterns, a "third space" emerges (Bhabha, 2017). This can become an important space of experience, insight, and transcultural exchange if the following perspectives/concepts, among others, can be used:
  - o Projective identification
  - o Dealing with triangulation
  - o Second-order-observation
  - o Reciprocal communication
  - o Dealing with juxtaposition
  - o Tolerance of ambiguity

The more this can be incorporated into the exchange, the more likely it is that this "third space" will become a protective space, which nourishes and enriches transcultural scientific research.

### Outlook

Other results of the questionnaire will be published in spring 2022. The final results and guidelines for support will be published in autumn 2022.

## Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

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