

Cross-Border Careers in a Foreign Land: A Study of Highly Educated Chinese Talent Seeking Employment in Japan

Ying Wei¹, Pengxin Guo^{2*}

¹Faculty of Education, Yunnan Normal University, Kunming, China

²School of Law and Sociology, Yunnan Normal University, Kunming, China

**Corresponding Author. Email: 1192378568@qq.com*

Abstract. As globalization spreads and domestic job competition gets fiercer, working abroad has slowly become a choice for some well-educated Chinese people. This study uses a semi-structured deep interview method. It studies nine well-educated Chinese people working in Japan. It looks at their paths and experiences of fitting into Japanese workplaces. The results show that educational background in Japanese workplaces faces two main effects: being pushed aside and being re-understood. But language is the biggest problem for fitting into the local culture and society. Also, the special culture of Japanese workplaces keeps making interviewees face problems in career growth and worries about their identity. This makes them think hard about whether to stay in Japan or go back to China. This study finds that working abroad is a kind of social activity. When people meet a foreign culture, their life stories change in big ways. It also gives real examples to help understand how well-educated people move around the world.

Keywords: working abroad, well-educated people, fitting into a new culture, life story, building one's identity

1. Introduction

As globalization and information technology come together faster and faster, more and more people move between countries for work. Working abroad has slowly become a career choice for young Chinese workers. Especially as more people go to college and domestic job competition gets tougher, it is more common for well-educated people to look for jobs overseas. Unlike the old way of studying abroad first and then moving there permanently, modern working abroad is more flexible and has different goals. People may work for foreign companies, Chinese companies overseas, international groups, or local businesses. This big change in how people work around the world has led to talks about important social issues. These include national identity, fitting into local society, and finding jobs that match their skills.

Japan is a major economy and a popular place to study in East Asia. In recent years, it has become much more attractive to international students and skilled workers. As China and Japan work more closely together in economy, science, and education, Japan has slowly become one of the top places for well-educated Chinese people to work. According to numbers from the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), there were 336,708 international students in Japan on May 1, 2024.

This is a 20.6% increase from the year before and a new recent record [1]. Chinese students make up the largest group of these international students. Reports from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology show that about 123,485 Chinese students were in Japanese colleges and universities in the 2024 school year. This number has been going up every year, showing that more and more Chinese students are choosing to study in Japan [2]. For many years, the Japanese government has used international education as a way to deal with its aging population and worker shortages. New policies and market support have encouraged more international students to stay and work in Japan after graduation. ICEF Monitor and other research groups say that Japan is making faster policies to help international graduates get jobs. It also has a long-term goal of having 400,000 international students by 2033. These policies have made Japan even more attractive to well-educated international workers, including those from China [3]. Also, when we look at all foreign residents in Japan, Chinese people are still one of the largest groups. Official Japanese numbers show that Chinese nationals are among the biggest groups of long-term foreign residents. Many news reports and research studies also note that both the general Chinese population and the number of skilled Chinese workers in Japan have grown recently. This population trend makes it easier for Chinese students in Japan to find jobs or stay long-term after graduation [4]. But when these well-educated people, who grew up in China's education system and culture, start working in Japan, they face more than just whether their skills fit the job. They also have to learn to adapt to a completely different foreign culture. As everyone knows, Japanese workplace culture is very different. It is known for lifetime jobs, promotions based on how long you have worked there, and a strong focus on group success. It values following rules carefully, making decisions together, and a quiet way of communicating often called "reading the air" (*kuuki wo yomu*). All of these are very different from the fast-paced, results-focused workplace culture that many young Chinese workers are used to [5]. These cultural differences can cause many problems for well-educated Chinese employees in Japan. These include communication difficulties and conflicts in values. So, what are the actual work experiences of this group in Japan? How do they understand and deal with these cultural differences? The real difficulties and opportunities that these cross-border workers face are the main focus of this study.

As globalization continues to grow, we live in what many people call an "age of migration." No country can avoid the effects of people moving across borders [6]. Most existing studies on working abroad take a big-picture view. They look at trends in cross-border e-commerce jobs [7] and how to train workers [8]. Or they study cross-border worker movement through labor markets [9], immigration policies [10], and economic structures [11]. But most of these studies focus on low-skilled workers and economic cooperation. They pay much less attention to the actual work experiences and daily lives of well-educated people working abroad. In policy discussions, working abroad is often seen simply as an economic activity related to "talent movement" or "international cooperation." Not enough attention is paid to deeper issues like social reasons, cultural adaptation, personal choices, and changes in identity. Also, there are not many studies that use life-history methods to look at people's whole experiences from "education to moving abroad to working to fitting in." Against this background, this study uses ideas from the sociology of education. It focuses on well-educated Chinese professionals working in Japan. Using in-depth interviews and life stories, it explores how their education experiences shaped their reasons for working abroad, how they adapt, and how they rebuild their sense of identity. This will add more detailed real-life examples and better theoretical explanations to existing research.

2. Theoretical perspective: an interpretive framework centered on acculturation theory

Redfield, Linton and Herskovits first came up with the idea of cultural adaptation back in 1936. They wrote a research paper named *Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation*. In this paper, they explained that cultural adaptation refers to changes in people's cultural habits. These changes take place when different cultural groups meet and communicate with each other regularly [12]. As more and more people studied this idea, it grew into two clear and separate directions. The first direction studies this topic from the level of whole groups. It pays attention to how different cultures mix when groups keep in touch with each other for a long time. Studies that use this point of view usually examine entire cultural communities. They research how cultural habits influence each other and change in political, economic and social fields. The second direction studies the same topic from the level of single individuals. It pays attention to changes in people's thoughts and behaviors when they come into contact with a new culture. These changes include changes in their values, self-identity, attitudes and ways of communicating with others [13]. Later on, many other scholars developed this theory even more deeply. Nowadays, researchers who study this field usually focus on two main groups of people. The first group is immigrants and refugees who live in foreign countries for a very long time. The second group is people who only live in foreign countries for a short period of time. This group includes workers sent to other countries by their companies, international students and visiting scholars [14]. Sverre Lysgaard's U-curve theory describes cultural adaptation as a process that changes over time. It has three main stages: the honeymoon stage, the stage when the feeling of newness goes away, and the stage when people get used to the new culture better. This whole process follows a U-shaped path, and it is based on how satisfied the person feels with their life [15].

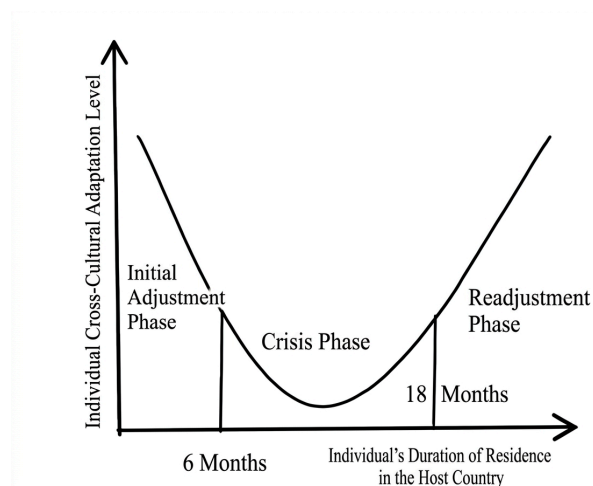


Figure 1. Lysgaard's "U-curve model"

Similarly, Oberg's culture shock theory says that people experience four emotional stages when they adapt to a new culture. These four stages are the honeymoon stage, the crisis stage, the recovery stage and the adjustment stage. The honeymoon stage is the time when people feel very excited about everything in the new culture. They believe that getting used to the new culture will be quite easy for them. During the crisis stage, people feel very uncomfortable because they meet a lot of different difficulties. Their emotional state becomes very bad and drops to the lowest point. They often feel very lonely and worried about their life in the new place. In the adjustment and integration

stage, people begin to get used to the new culture once again. They slowly learn how to fit into the new cultural environment well [16].

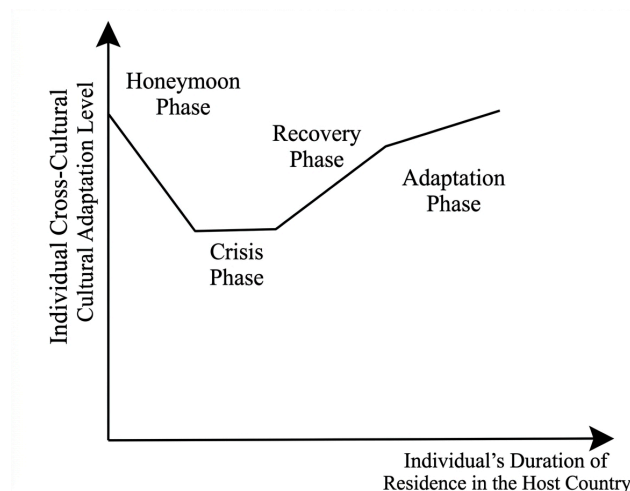


Figure 2. Oberg's "culture shock model"

From the individual point of view, Berry and his colleagues divided the results of cultural adaptation into two different parts. These two parts are psychological adaptation and social-cultural adaptation. The first part mainly talks about how stable a person's psychological state is and how happy they feel in daily life. It includes things such as how anxious they feel, their level of subjective happiness, and whether they often feel sad or upset. The second part means learning the practical life skills and social skills that people need to live in a new culture [17]. Among all the theories about cultural adaptation, the framework made by Ward and his colleagues is widely considered one of the most reliable ones. Ward points out that successful cultural adaptation should also include two important parts. The first part is the psychological part. It refers to a person's psychological health during the whole process of cultural change. It is built on theories that talk about stress, how people deal with problems and adaptation. The second part is the social-cultural part. It means learning the basic cultural survival skills and communication skills that people need to communicate well with local people. This part is based on the theory of cultural learning [18]. In the early steps of cross-cultural adaptation, people will face a lot of different challenges. These challenges include unclear information, psychological stress, and difficulties in their studies or work. They usually make changes in their feelings, daily behaviors and ways of thinking. They do all these things to achieve both psychological and social-cultural adaptation successfully [19]. From this point of view, cultural adaptation is not just about passively accepting another different culture. It is an active process in which people talk and make agreements and adjust themselves when they face cultural conflicts and interactions. In Chinese academic fields, researchers often use several similar words and expressions. These expressions include "cultural acculturation", "cultural integration" and "cross-cultural adaptation". Among these expressions, words like "cultural integration" pay more attention to changes in group cultural habits. But the word "acculturation" pays more attention to changes in individuals' thoughts and behaviors [20]. Cross-cultural adaptation is not a one-way process of getting used to a new culture. It is a never-ending process of interaction between two different cultural systems. During this whole interaction process, neither of the two cultures is completely in control. Instead, both cultures talk and reach agreements with each other in a larger intercultural network [21]. No matter which expression people choose to use, all these theories share the same basic logic. People keep adjusting themselves between their own original

culture and the new foreign culture. They do all these things to better adapt to the new living environment.

Using the theory of cultural adaptation to study well-educated Chinese people who work abroad is very useful. On one hand, working in foreign countries is not just an economic activity or a way of talent movement. It is also a social process that is shaped by people's education background, social relationships and cultural experiences. When well-educated Chinese professionals start to work in Japan, they will face many challenges in language and work rules. At the same time, they keep rebuilding their self-identity through the organizational culture and social interactions around them. On the other hand, using education stories and life history perspectives is also very useful for research. These research methods study a person's whole life experiences over a long period of time. They regard people's education background, personal choices and career paths as a connected whole story. These perspectives can clearly show the logic of changes that lies behind this whole process. They show how people experience psychological ups and downs, cultural conflicts and final adaptation along the path of "education-migration-employment-adaptation". The theory of cultural adaptation provides a good framework to explain how well-educated Chinese professionals in Japan adapt psychologically and socially. It goes beyond the explanations that only focus on economic or institutional factors. It clearly shows how people's education experiences deeply shape their reasons for working abroad and how they rebuild their self-identity.

3. Empirical research design

This study mainly uses semi-structured deep interviews as its research method. It looks at the reasons, paths, and identity changes of well-educated Chinese people working abroad. In Chinese, "xueli" means academic qualifications. These are official education certificates from regular schooling. They are certified by the Ministry of Education. They usually show a person's highest or final level of education [22]. Since the start of the 21st century, the number of well-educated migrants has grown very fast. This has made scholars study how they affect both host and home countries. Most existing studies look at big-picture topics like "brain drain," "brain gain," and "brain circulation" [23]. In this study, "well-educated" means people who have finished higher education. They must have at least a bachelor's degree [24]. This includes people with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. They are direct products of China's higher education system. They are also one of the main groups working abroad in recent years. By looking at individual experiences, this study tries to rebuild how social actions get their meaning. It also shows how structural conditions, personal choices, and identity building work together.

3.1. Research participants and sample selection

The research participants were university graduates with experience in cross-border employment or entrepreneurship. Sample selection followed the principle of balancing typicality and diversity, taking into account variations in gender, educational attainment, and academic background in order to present a multifaceted picture of the cross-border employment population. The study involved interviews with nine participants employed in Japan, with each interview lasting between one and three hours. Participants were recruited primarily through personal referrals, social media platforms, and alumni networks. The basic characteristics of the interviewees cited in this paper are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic information of the interviewees

ID	Age	Gender	Highest Degree	Major	Only Child	Annual Family Income	Parents' Occupations	Place of Employment	Position
J1	27	Female	Master's degree in Japan	Economics	No	Unknown	Self-employed	Japanese manufacturing company	Administrative staff
X2	27	Male	Master's degree in Japan	Sociology	Yes	RMB 500,000	Teacher	Japanese company	Regular employee
C3	26	Male	Master's degree in Japan	Economics	No	Around RMB 350,000	Retired civil servant	Japanese company	Technical position
W4	32	Male	Doctoral student in Japan	Optical Engineering	Yes	Over RMB 100,000	Worker	Japanese university	Teaching assistant
T5	27	Male	Master's degree in Japan	Civil and Environmental Engineering	Yes	Around RMB 200,000	Worker; Nurse	Japanese company	Technical position
C6	25	Female	Master's degree in Japan	Chinese Literature	No	Unknown	Business owner	Japanese home furnishings company	General position
Z7	25	Male	Master's degree in Japan	Geography	No	Unknown	Business owner	Japanese aerial surveying company	Technical position
M8	31	Male	Bachelor's degree in China	Software Engineering	Yes	Around RMB 300,000	Self-employed	Chinese company	Technical dispatch worker
Q9	25	Female	Bachelor's degree in China	History	Yes	Unknown	Civil servant; Teacher	Freelance	Manga artist

3.2. Interview instrument and interview guide design

This study's interview guide was made based on its theoretical framework and main research questions. It was clearly organized into six step-by-step parts. The guide focuses on the push and pull factors at the big-picture level. That is, the real limits of the domestic job market and the good

job and lifestyle opportunities in the destination country. It paid special attention to collecting information about how interviewees found their jobs abroad. It also looked at the role of immigration and work policies, and help from social groups and organizations. Also, the interviews considered personal factors. These include personal qualities, education background, and support from family. Using these topics, the interviews further looked at the participants' work situation and how well they adapted. This includes their career goals, how they adjusted mentally, and their experiences fitting into local society. Finally, it talked about deeper issues like their sense of national identity and where they belong culturally. During all interviews, open-ended questions were used to let participants tell their own stories. They could talk freely about why they chose to work abroad, their career paths, and how they felt about their experiences. The interviews especially focused on looking at how people form and change their sense of identity when moving between countries.

4. Life narratives of working in a foreign land

4.1. Educational background and adaptation to the cross-border workplace

Educational background serves as the starting point for highly educated Chinese individuals seeking employment in Japan and plays a multidimensional role in the process of cross-cultural adaptation. The narratives of the interviewees indicate that academic qualifications, professional training, language proficiency, and the cultural capital derived from educational experiences collectively shape their opportunities for entering the Japanese labor market. However, in actual workplace practice, the value of educational capital exerts multiple and often complex influences.

4.1.1. Language proficiency: the primary threshold for sociocultural adaptation

In the stories told by almost all the people we interviewed, they again and again said that good language ability is the "basic need" for getting a job in Japan. One person we interviewed said clearly: "The most basic requirement for working in Japan is being able to communicate in Japanese without difficulty. Japanese is the most important thing. As long as there are no communication barriers, everything else can be learned... Professional certificates are only an added advantage. When people are competing at the same level, those with certificates have a greater edge." (Participant C3) Another person we interviewed explained more details: "The most important thing for working in Japan is that you have to demonstrate a sufficient degree of obedience. This obedience includes how well you understand the company's culture and how good your Japanese is." (Participant X2) These words show that language is not just a tool for talking with others. It is also a kind of special social value that helps people get used to the culture and life of a foreign country. Being good at Japanese becomes a very important thing. It decides if a person can be accepted and respected by others in their workplace. In the acculturation theory, getting used to the society and culture means a process. In this process, people learn the rules of behavior and the skills to get along with others in a new place. Then they can become part of the new society [25]. So, language works as a kind of special social value in Japanese workplaces. These two uses of language create a special and difficult problem for well-educated Chinese workers with professional skills. Chinese colleges and universities help students develop the skills to think critically and the idea that everyone should be equal. But these skills and ideas may naturally conflict with the language and culture environment in Japan. This environment pays a lot of attention to following rules and doing what others do. So, learning Japanese is not just about learning a useful skill. It becomes a mental struggle

between "fitting into the new culture" and "keeping who you really are". This struggle is a main reason why people feel stressed when they try to get used to the new culture in their mind.

4.1.2. The dual effects of educational capital: a ticket of entry and an experience of devaluation

Past studies have found that most people who work in foreign countries have received high levels of education and have good academic degrees. With hard work and strong will, many of them have entered famous universities around the world. They have also worked in top research centers, international companies or big business groups. They have got a lot of professional experience and earned much money. Some of them have become famous experts, and others have become middle or top managers in their companies [26]. Similarly, almost all the people we interviewed in this study had master's degrees or higher. But many of them said that their academic degrees are not valued much in Japanese workplaces. One interviewee said: "Japan doesn't value academic qualifications as much as China does. They care more about your personality and character, so interviews are generally given greater importance here." (Participant J1) Another participant added: "Except for fields like finance or other high-end professions where graduating from a prestigious university really matters, most ordinary manufacturing jobs and many other occupations mainly require that your major matches the position. Even vocational high school graduates can do these jobs, and the income difference is not particularly large. People in Japan don't pursue prestigious universities as intensely, nor do they expect students to devote themselves entirely to studying. Once you know what you want to do in the future, you can develop in that direction. Not everyone has to fight through fierce competition, take the university entrance examination, and get into college. The overall social pressure of competition in Japan is not as intense as it is in China." (Participant Q9) These words show that academic degrees are a kind of cultural value when people look for jobs. But they do not always bring long-term advantages after people start working. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has a famous theory. He says that educational degrees are a kind of special social value. But how much this value can be changed into other advantages depends on the rules of a certain social area. The academic degrees our interviewees have are cultural value they got in China's education system. This kind of value is very important in China. But when they enter Japanese companies, the basic rules of this new area change completely. In this new environment, some social values are more important than personal cultural value. These important social values include working well with others, personal character and following the company's rules. This creates a difficult problem about changing their cultural value into useful advantages. In China's education system, this cultural value can easily bring people good fame and good chances. But it becomes very hard to use and change into advantages in Japanese workplaces. So people with high education feel confused and uncomfortable. They thought their degrees would be very valuable, but the companies judge them by different standards. This feeling of confusion is not just a loss of their cultural value. It also makes it harder for them to get used to working in the new place. They find that their educational value does not match the rules of the workplace. They need to learn new things again as part of getting used to the new culture.

4.1.3. The continuity between educational pathways and employment motivation

For some interviewees, educational experiences were closely connected with their motivations for seeking employment in Japan. One participant provided a representative example: "I majored in Japanese during my undergraduate studies, and I wanted to use Japanese in my career rather than abandon what I had learned. When I was an undergraduate, the companies recruiting from our

university in China were generally not very attractive, the salaries were low, and there were very few jobs related to my field of study. It's not that Japan itself had some special attraction for me. If there had been good opportunities in China, I would have been willing to work there. But I felt that a bachelor's degree alone was not particularly competitive, and Japanese companies provide training for new employees, so I thought coming to Japan would allow me to continue using my language skills." (Participant C6) Educational experiences provided this interviewee with both practical skills and a psychological justification for seeking employment in Japan. Educational background thus performs a continuous function in cross-border employment, serving not only as preparation in terms of skills but also as a source of identity support. However, the continuity between educational pathways and employment trajectories does not always correspond closely with workplace demands. On the one hand, some interviewees acknowledged that educational credentials still carry symbolic significance in the Japanese labor market: "Japan doesn't value academic qualifications as much as China does, but employers still look at them during recruitment. For example, Kansai University is quite well known in the Osaka area, so graduates have more job opportunities. Before someone actually joins a company, recruiters don't know what the applicant is capable of, so educational background is still considered at the initial stage." (Participant C3) In this sense, educational qualifications continue to function as a screening mechanism during recruitment and partly determine initial access to employment opportunities. On the other hand, some interviewees recognized the limitations of educational credentials, arguing that once individuals enter the workplace, adapting to organizational rules and cultural expectations becomes more important: "In Japan, apart from science and engineering positions, almost all jobs have little connection with one's academic background. Except for service-sector jobs, I think almost every position can eventually be replaced, either by machines or by AI. That's why Japanese employers hiring liberal arts graduates never require a specific major—any liberal arts graduate can apply. The essence is that the work itself has nothing to do with what students studied. Employers say they value your potential and how well you fit the company's culture, but at the core, what they are really looking at is whether you are willing to conform to the company's culture and system." (Participant X2) The gap between educational expectations and workplace realities constitutes a significant source of tension during the process of cultural adaptation. According to the psychological dimension of acculturation theory, such discrepancies may generate psychological stress, confusion over values and identity, and even occupational burnout.

4.1.4. The "reinterpretation" of educational experiences in the adaptation process

Although the direct value of educational qualifications may be limited, educational background continues to be "reinterpreted" throughout the adaptation process. In their narratives, interviewees generally viewed educational experiences as providing the legitimacy necessary for cross-border employment—that is, possessing appropriate qualifications creates opportunities to remain and work in Japan. One interviewee explained: "Basically, you need to come here for graduate studies to have a good chance of finding a job, unless you attended a Japanese school during your undergraduate years or participated in a joint program between China and Japan." (Participant C6) Another participant noted: "For example, Hiroshima University has a '3+1' program, where students spend the first three years studying in China and the fourth year at Hiroshima University. During that fourth year, they can participate in Japan's job-hunting process, which gives them a much better chance of finding work. But if someone completes all their studies in China and only then comes to Japan to look for a job, it can be much more difficult." (Participant Z7) However, after entering the workforce, many gradually realized that educational background could not automatically be

transformed into workplace advantages and that it needed to be combined with workplace socialization in order to become effective in the process of cultural adaptation. As one interviewee observed: "Japan as a whole is still a very exclusive country. The recognition given to educational qualifications and professional certificates from other countries is quite low. So, in Japan, I basically had to start over from scratch—learning Japanese cultural values and obtaining new qualifications to strengthen my résumé." (Participant T5) In other words, educational capital is not simply devalued in the cross-border workplace; rather, it is redefined through ongoing processes of cultural conflict and negotiation. A deeper level of reinterpretation is reflected in the interviewees' changing understanding of career advancement. Several participants observed that, unlike the relatively performance-oriented promotion systems common in China, Japanese companies generally follow the principle of seniority-based advancement (*nenko joretsu*). One interviewee stated: "Compared with someone who graduated with a bachelor's degree, after entering the same company and holding the same position, my monthly salary as a master's graduate was only about 500 RMB higher." (Participant T5) Another participant commented: "Salaries in Japan basically follow the typical seniority-based system. The longer you stay with a company, the higher your pay. Salary differences are determined by rank and position, but promotions are generally based not on ability or job performance, but on loyalty." (Participant X2) This suggests that within the Japanese employment system, the educational qualifications and individual capabilities regarded as core competitive advantages within China's educational framework carry less weight in long-term career development. Instead, years of service and organizational loyalty become more important. Consequently, the reinterpretation of educational capital ultimately involves individuals' understanding of and adaptation to a career development model fundamentally different from that of their culture of origin.

4.2. Adaptation trajectories and reflections from a life history perspective

The process of cultural adaptation in cross-border employment does not occur overnight. Rather, it is a dynamic process that unfolds over time through continuous adjustment and reflection. The interviewees' narratives reveal the cultural conflicts and psychological fluctuations they experienced after entering the Japanese workplace, as well as the ways in which their work experiences prompted them to rethink their identities and future plans.

4.2.1. The initial stage: cultural conflict and psychological discomfort

Many interviewees said they felt a big "gap" and "culture shock" when they first arrived in Japan. One participant remembered: "When I first arrived, both work and daily life felt awkward. Although I had passed the Japanese Language Proficiency Test N1, my practical Japanese was still at an elementary level because I had studied it for less than six months. I only knew what was in the textbooks and often couldn't understand workplace jargon. Even when I went to a convenience store and the cashier asked whether I wanted a plastic bag, I couldn't understand at first and had to rely on body language to communicate. The study-abroad agency in China had warned me about this, but I didn't realize how difficult it would be until I experienced it myself." (Participant J1) Problems understanding Japanese not only made daily communication hard but also made it harder for interviewees to express themselves and talk things through at work. This made them feel left out in team activities. Language is basically a kind of cultural advantage. But in a foreign country, not having this advantage puts people at a disadvantage in both formal and informal talks. This makes their cultural conflict worse. They also felt similar culture shock when it came to workplace culture.

Another interviewee said: "Japanese corporate culture places a particularly strong emphasis on collectivism. You can't casually express different opinions, otherwise you'll seem out of place." (Participant X2) This comment shows the cultural differences between China and Japan. These differences are not just in how people talk to each other, but also in workplace values and how companies work. Chinese workplaces usually focus more on efficiency and personal ability. But in Japanese workplaces, following set rules and keeping the group happy are seen as basic rules. This abstract cultural conflict becomes more real in daily work through the use of keigo (honorific language). For the interviewees, keigo is not just a language skill. It is also a source of tension between their personal values and the company's power structure. One participant gave a very detailed thought: "The ability to use honorific language is more important than any internship experience or personal skill because speaking honorific language is actually an indicator of obedience. The better you use it, the more it shows that you understand Japan's hierarchical culture. Someone like me simply can't do it because, deep down, I don't believe that my colleagues at work are people I should have to address in honorific language. So I rarely use it. But I also know that's probably not right, and it has definitely affected my adaptation to the Japanese workplace." (Participant X2) Looking at it this way, not being good at the language is not the main problem for cultural adaptation. Instead, conflicts in values are the real barrier. For this interviewee, the idea of equality that they learned in China's education system made it hard to accept using honorific language to show respect to superiors. So refusing to use keigo became a way for them to keep their personal dignity and values. This changes the challenge of cultural adaptation. It is no longer just learning the local social rules. It becomes the deeper problem of matching their inner values with what others expect of them. This is a struggle over identity. It happens when a person's core beliefs do not match the cultural rules of the foreign environment. As cultural adaptation theory says, people in the first stage of adaptation often feel uncomfortable mentally. This is because they cannot learn these unwritten rules right away. In a foreign culture, this discomfort shows up as confusion about language and how to act. In the end, it makes people feel like they have lost their sense of identity. People in this situation find that their usual ways of talking and thinking no longer work in a foreign workplace. This makes them feel very frustrated and alone. The interviewees' stories confirm that the "initial shock" described in cultural adaptation theory is common. The problems that cross-border workers face at this stage basically show that their education and language skills do not work as well in intercultural situations. It also shows that individuals are in a passive position when they are between two different identities and cultures.

4.2.2. The adjustment stage: learning rules and the process of socialization

As time passed, the interviewees began to adjust proactively, adapting to workplace culture through observation and imitation. One participant explained: "At first, I wasn't used to Japanese people going out for meals after work, but later I realized that this was an essential part of building relationships with colleagues, so I tried to participate whenever possible. The same applies at work. If you don't do what everyone else is doing, people will evaluate you negatively. Everyone will have opinions about you, but they won't say them directly to your face." (Participant C6) This gradual acceptance of Japan's after-hours socializing and overtime culture reflects the process of sociocultural adaptation. The professional skills acquired through education can only become effective forms of capital after individuals relearn the local rules of workplace interaction. Another interviewee commented: "I usually don't have meals with senior colleagues unless we've arranged a project dinner or a drinking gathering in advance. I normally have lunch with colleagues of the same rank—those who joined the company at the same time as I did and don't have a hierarchical

relationship with me. I have much better relationships with those colleagues, and we often eat together." (Participant C3) These "horizontal relationships" not only help newcomers integrate into the rhythm of workplace life but also serve as an important source of psychological support that eases the pressures of adaptation. The process of learning workplace rules is rarely neutral; it represents a form of institutional socialization. As individuals learn these implicit rules, they effectively internalize a particular organizational power structure and behavioral logic, often at the cost of suppressing certain personal habits and values. Significantly, several interviewees independently identified the peer relationships they formed with colleagues of equal status as an important social network. Outside the formal workplace hierarchy, these informal peer groups became relatively egalitarian emotional refuges. Such communities function not only as channels for exchanging information but also as mechanisms for buffering culture shock and relieving psychological stress, enabling cross-border workers to maintain psychological equilibrium within highly structured organizational systems. Another interviewee reflected on the need to repeatedly learn details and procedures before gradually accepting the "Japanese way" of working: "Japanese people really pay attention to details... They value precision much more and want everything to be perfect. At first, I wasn't used to it, but gradually I adapted to this working environment. I feel as though they want to improve every single day. There are hardly any people slacking off at work—they are constantly trying to make improvements." (Participant C3) This transformation from unfamiliarity to gradual acceptance exemplifies the process of sociocultural adaptation. The professional competencies acquired through education cannot be directly converted into workplace competitiveness; rather, they must be reconfigured through the learning of these implicit workplace norms.

4.2.3. The reconstruction stage: rethinking identity and future plans

As the people we interviewed slowly got used to Japanese culture, they also started to think more deeply about who they are and their future work plans. These thoughts are often caused by the big problems they face when trying to get better jobs in the company. One participant explained: "Although I feel that I've gradually integrated into the work environment, I still always feel like an outsider. Even one of my senior colleagues, who has been working here for four or five years and has completely adapted to the company's culture, still hasn't been promoted. That makes me feel uncertain about my own future because opportunities for real advancement are always limited." (Participant T5) This feeling of being an "outsider" shows that getting used to the new culture in mind has its limits. Their language skills and ways of doing things have become better and better. But it is still hard for them to fully accept and be accepted by the local society. In this situation, people who work in foreign countries have to ask themselves a question. Are they long-term members of the company, or just replaceable outsiders whose work is only needed for a short time? Their answers to this question have a direct influence on their future plans. On the one hand, seeing themselves as outsiders often makes them want to go back to China more strongly: "Ultimately, I still want to go back to China and contribute something to my own country, whether through research or in some other field. I also hope that when my parents and my partner's parents grow older, we can live closer to them and take care of them. But I still haven't decided when to return or what kind of platform would be suitable. At the very least, I want to make sure that going back won't create too much financial pressure for my family or reduce our quality of life." (Participant W4) On the other hand, practical economic reasons stop many people from going back right away. Past studies show that the starting pay of Japanese college graduates has kept going up in recent years. At the same time, the pay of regular workers stays almost the same [27]. Many of our interviewees felt

uncomfortable with the local culture and had few chances to get promoted. But the pay and job stability in Japanese workplaces are still better than those in China's highly competitive job market. In terms of money, they are okay with their current life. But in their minds, they still have trouble getting used to the new culture. This makes them feel unsure and conflicted about their future plans. This helps us understand why many interviewees choose to stay in Japan for now. They also keep looking for better opportunities in the future. One participant stated: "My decision to stay and work in Japan wasn't influenced by anyone else. Jobs of the same quality are easier to obtain here, and the quality of life is better. I also feel that life in Japan is freer. I can do what I want to do, and living here allows me to pursue many hobbies that interest me, so I've chosen to stay." (Participant C3) For many interviewees, getting used to the culture and getting better jobs are very hard. But the pay, job stability and good social welfare system in Japan are still more attractive than those in China's job market. Their wish for a stable and good life is also closely connected to the differences between the two countries' social security systems. Japan's social security system covers almost everyone and is very stable. It is based on the national health insurance and the workers' pension insurance system. It gives people clear and reliable medical care and retirement protection [28]. Japan has a big problem with its aging population. But its mature and compulsory welfare system still attracts young people who want a stable life [29]. In comparison, China's social security system has developed very fast. But there are still differences in how well it works in different areas and how much it protects workers [30]. Young workers also often face many uncertain problems. For example, some companies do not pay social insurance and housing funds regularly. It is also hard for people with flexible jobs to join the social insurance system [31]. So for some interviewees, staying in Japan is not just about making more money. It is also a way to lower their personal risks by getting stable social welfare benefits. So the big differences in social protection systems affect their choice between staying abroad and going back home. This helps explain why many people still stay in Japan even though they always feel uncomfortable with the local culture.

4.2.4. Adaptation and reflection in life history narratives

From a life history perspective, adaptation to a cross-border workplace unfolds through the interaction of educational background, workplace experience, and identity formation. Educational qualifications provide the starting point for cross-border employment and serve as a source of legitimacy for obtaining work opportunities. In Japan, there exists a deeply rooted social value that individuals should obtain stable employment immediately after graduation and remain with their first employer for a long period. More than 70 percent of young regular employees regard long-term continuous employment as their ideal career pattern [32]. One interviewee explained: "I completed my second degree in Japan, so if I want to find a job quickly, I need to rely on my supervisor's professional network. But those resources can't help me find work back in China. As a graduate of a Japanese university, I have no particular advantage if I return to China and would have to enter the labor market through social recruitment rather than campus recruitment. Staying in Japan allows me to use my supervisor's support to enter a company much more easily." (Participant T5) Subsequently, individuals achieve gradual progress in sociocultural adaptation through learning and imitation in the workplace. One participant described: "A lot of people gossip about colleagues behind their backs. They imitate them, talk about them, and eventually turn everything into jokes. Everyone responds enthusiastically, saying, 'Exactly, exactly,' and that brings them closer together. But I don't really want to participate. I understand what they're saying, but my reactions are always fairly restrained, so they probably think I'm unfriendly. I find this quite shocking. I would rather people tell me directly if they have a problem with me because open communication would improve

both work efficiency and cooperation. But for Japanese people, that's genuinely difficult, so the gossip can become quite harsh. At social gatherings, whoever isn't present usually becomes the main topic of conversation." (Participant C6) Finally, through long-term workplace experience, individuals continually reflect on their identities and future plans, seeking a new balance between psychological adaptation and identity formation. As one interviewee remarked: "For me, my current job in Japan is only a stage in my life... If I set aside other considerations, I would actually prefer to stay in Japan and move to a foreign-funded company here. I simply want to experience a different environment." (Participant J1) This process confirms the dual dimensions of "psychological adaptation" and "sociocultural adaptation" proposed by acculturation theory. It suggests that cross-border employment is not merely a career decision made in response to existing circumstances but also an ongoing process through which individuals construct and reconstruct their relationships with themselves and with the cultures they inhabit over the course of their lives.

5. Conclusion and discussion

By studying the life stories of nine well-educated Chinese professionals working in Japan, this study shows the complex and changing paths of their cultural adaptation in Japanese workplaces. A good educational background is the ticket to get a job in a foreign country. But in real workplaces, the value of this educational background is changed by the special cultural rules and value systems of Japanese companies. After going through the first culture shock and mental discomfort, people slowly get used to the local society and culture. They do this by learning the rules of the workplace, building their own social circles, and choosing to accept some parts of the new culture. But it takes much longer for them to form a clear sense of who they are and feel that they truly belong there. They face many problems when trying to get better jobs, always feel like outsiders, and still love their home culture deeply. These things make them keep thinking about whether to stay in Japan or go back to China. So their future plans are still very uncertain. These real and lively life stories tell us that in today's globalized world, working abroad for well-educated people is not just a decision about money. Instead, it is a long process. In this process, people have to keep balancing their own wishes and the limits of the society. They also have to weigh the good chances and the things they have to give up. The experiences of the people we interviewed give us clear and real examples of how the cultural adaptation theory works in modern society. They show us the real life of young Chinese professionals. These young people have to deal with the conflicts between their dreams and the real world, between their own ideas and the local culture. At the same time, they keep rethinking who they are as more and more people move around the world for work. Nowadays, countries and people are more and more connected with each other. So understanding and respecting the real experiences of people who work in foreign countries is very important and useful for today's world. This kind of understanding can help promote the exchange of skilled people between different countries. It can also help companies improve their management ways and help colleges and universities better train international talents.

Acknowledgment

Funding: This research was supported by the *National Natural Science Foundation of China* under the project "Risk Identification and Early Warning Mechanisms for Chinese University Students' Cross-Border Employment in Southeast Asia under the Belt and Road Initiative" (Project No. 72564038), and by the Yunnan Province Xingdian Talent Support Program, Cultural and Sports

Talent Special Project, "Improving the Quality of Higher Education Talent Cultivation in Ethnic Minority Regions from the Perspective of High-Quality Employment."

References

- [1] Japan Student Services Organization. (2025). Result of International Student Survey in Japan, 2024. Japan Student Services Organization. <https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/en/statistics/enrollment/data/2504301000.html>.
- [2] Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (2025). Announcement on "Status of Japanese Students Studying Abroad" and "Enrollment Status of International Students". Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20250430-mxt_kotokoku02-000027891_1.pdf.
- [3] ICEF Monitor. (2025). Foreign enrolment in Japan reached record levels in 2024. ICEF Monitor. <https://monitor.icef.com/2025/05/foreign-enrolment-in-japan-reached-record-levels-in-2024/>.
- [4] Immigration Services Agency of Japan. (2025). Number of foreign residents as of the end of 2024. Immigration Services Agency of Japan. https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/press/13_00052.html.
- [5] Hofstede Insights. (2025). Japan — Country Comparison. Hofstede Insights. <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/japan/>.
- [6] De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2019). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [7] Lu, Y., & Yu, Z. (2024). How to better stabilize employment in the digital economy era: Empirical evidence based on the spatial spillover effect of cross-border e-commerce. *Journal of Business Economics*, (9), 5-18.
- [8] Chen, Y., & Wu, W. (2021). Study on cross-border employment and entrepreneurship policies for Hong Kong and Macao youth: A comparative policy analysis based on Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai. *Youth Exploration*, (2), 89-101.
- [9] Zhou, S., & Song, J. (2022). From female graduates to female insurance agents: Educational mobility-guided cross-border employment migration from Chinese mainland to Hong Kong. *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies*, (3), 58-73.
- [10] Shen, C. (2022). Multidimensional sense of gain and national identity of transnational labor migrants: A case study of Chinese Korean workers in South Korea. *Overseas Chinese History Studies*, (4), 58-67.
- [11] Wang, X., Chen, Q., & Shen, Y. (2021). Global value chain embeddedness, trade barriers and employment implied by foreign demand: An empirical study based on cross-country and cross-industry panel data. *Journal of International Trade*, (6), 126-142.
- [12] Redfield, R., Linton, R., & Herskovits, M. J. (1936). Memorandum for the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist*, 38(1), 149-152.
- [13] Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5-34.
- [14] Zheng, A., & Li, J. (2017). The enlightenment of cross-cultural adaptation theory on the educational management of international students in colleges and universities. *World Education Information*, 30(17), 66-70.
- [15] Lysgaard, S. (1955). Adjustment in a foreign society: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States. *International Social Science Bulletin*, (7), 45-51.
- [16] Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, (4), 177-182.
- [17] Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697-712.
- [18] Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1999). The measurement of sociocultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 23(4), 659-677.
- [19] Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2020). *The psychology of culture shock*. Routledge.
- [20] Zhao, X. (2011). Research on cross-cultural adaptation in the field of education: Review and conception. *Education Exploration*, (9), 11-13.
- [21] Chen, G., & Yu, T. (2012). The construction of cross-cultural adaptation theory. *Academic Research*, (1), 130-138.
- [22] Wang, L., & Luo, S. (2008). On the reform of degree system based on the essence of degree. *Modern University Education*, (3), 97-103, 113.
- [23] Cao, C. (2009). China's "brain drain", "brain return" and "brain circulation". *Science and Culture Review*, 6(1), 13-32.
- [24] Yang, X., & Fan, M. (2019). Flow direction choice and influencing mechanism of the new generation highly educated floating population. *Population Journal*, 41(6), 64-77.
- [25] Sun, J. (2010). Research on acculturation: Theories and models in the West. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Sciences)*, (5), 45-52.

- [26] Li, Q. (2007). A review of studies on new Chinese immigrants. *Southeast Asian Studies*, (5), 58-63.
- [27] Xia, Y., & Zhang, J. (2017). Youth employment problems and policy countermeasures in Japan. *Contemporary Youth Research*, (1), 123-128.
- [28] Pension Bureau, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. (2024). Overview of the Employees' Pension Insurance and National Pension Services in FY2023 (Summary). Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/001359541.pdf>.
- [29] Cabinet Office. (2024). Annual Report on the Ageing Society 2024 (Summary). Cabinet Office. <https://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/english/annualreport/2024/pdf/2024.pdf>.
- [30] The State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2024). Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security holds a press conference to introduce the progress of human resources and social security work in 2023. The State Council of the People's Republic of China. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202402/content_6932261.htm.
- [31] China Association of Social Security. (2024). NPC law enforcement inspection: The heavy burden of social security contributions on some low-income groups leads to coverage suspension. China Association of Social Security. <https://caoss.org.cn/news/html?id=14930>.
- [32] Ishii, T. (2023). The current situation and problems of youth employment in Japan in the era of declining birthrate. *Journal of China Institute of Industrial Relations*, 37(1), 1-11, 32.