

# The analysis of intercultural adaption problems of university volunteer teachers in ethnic minority areas

**Kun Chen**

Institute of Marxism, China West Normal University,  
No. 1 Shi Da Road, Nanchong, 637009,  
Sichuan, China  
E-mail: [chenkuntjj@163.com](mailto:chenkuntjj@163.com)

*The research is financed by The role of the volunteer activities in the ideological and political education of college students ) (Project No.416108).*

## **Abstract**

*Due to the uniqueness of region culture, historical tradition, customs and habits and human communication of the minority areas in China, non-local university volunteer teachers are faced with some intercultural problems in their voluntary activities. The thesis is based on Redfield (1936) and other scholars' intercultural adaptation theories which have analyzed various influencing factors to university volunteer teachers' intercultural adaption problems, like their life changes, human communication, cultural distance and volunteer time. However, culture can be learnt and the culture is dynamic instead of static as well as human beings human beings have the initiative. Therefore, when faced with the change of the cultural environment, university volunteers should attach importance to understanding, interpreting and respecting the diversity of the culture, cultivate the sense of multicultural identity and adjust to minority cultures. Meanwhile, to promote volunteers' intercultural adaption in minority areas, competent authorities should draw up some voluntary teaching plans and dispatch volunteers scientifically and rationally.*

**Key words:** university volunteer teachers; ethnic minority areas; intercultural adaptation

## **1. Introduction**

In China, university volunteer teachers' group is the one that has the biggest population of all the volunteer groups. Voluntary teaching program is a meaningful way for university students to support the education in underprivileged regions as well as to renew their own values. such programs are generally divided into three types: long-term (a year or above); relay-way(half a year) and short-term (holidays or weekends). university students can apply for teaching through the NGO, such as China Teaching-Assistance, also can apply for a volunteer teacher by the government organization, such as the plan of university students ' volunteers to the west. Over the past years, thousands of Chinese university students have participated in these volunteer service activities which are normally carried out in such ethnic minority areas as Tibet, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Sichuan, Qinghai, Guizhou, and Guangxi. China is a nation with 56 ethnic groups. Han Chinese is the largest ethnic group accounting for 91.59% of the total population. The other 55 ethnic groups are called ethnic minorities. Because of the different national living area and the ecological environment, there are a lot of cultural differences between different ethnic groups. Due to the uniqueness of region culture, historical tradition, customs and habits and human communication of the minority areas in China, non-local university volunteer teachers are faced with some intercultural problems in their voluntary activities.

## **2. Definition of intercultural adaptation**

Due to the different geographical, historical, language, traditional and religious factors, human beings constitute their own culture based on the disagreements over beliefs, behaviors and customs. When human beings leave for different nations or areas from local cultures, intercultural adaption problems often take place. The definition of intercultural adaptation originated from America in early 20th and was raised by Redfield, Ralf Linton and Melville Herskovites. Redfield (1936) believes that intercultural adaptation happens between two communities who come from different culture and leads to the change of two cultural patterns. And another scholar Ward (1999) proposed that intercultural adaptation may be divided into two domains: psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. The former is related to psychological well-being, including a clear sense of personal and cultural identity, good mental health and personal satisfaction in the new environment; the latter refers to the ability to "fit in," to acquire culturally appropriate skills in order to negotiate interactions in the host culture, including their ability to deal with daily life, work and school. Although intercultural adaptation theory was at first applied to study the problems of immigration's cultural adaptation, it could be used to analysis the cultural adaptation problems from different nations or different regions. As it turns out, intercultural adaption problems often take place on a different level after university volunteer teachers arrived in ethnic minority areas.

## **3. Influence Factors on university volunteer teachers' intercultural adaptation**

Intercultural adaptation is a complex process, which is influenced by many factors. Researchers in different disciplines backgrounds have done some researches from different perspectives and here the thesis is concentrated on four factors, which are life changes, human communication, cultural distance and volunteer time.

### **3.1 Influence of life changes**

Furnham and Bochner's (1986) have mentioned that there are certain relations among life changes, physical health and mental health in their critical review. They also indicated that the average correlation coefficient between life changes and mental disorders was 0.35. That is to say, life changes caused by intercultural contacts will effect human beings' mental adaptation. In the long history of development, ethnic minorities formed their unique language, religious belief, diet custom and social etiquette which are quite different from the Han nationality. As new comers, university volunteer teachers may show the feeling of fresh when experiencing folk culture in ethnic minority areas. But at the same time, they may feel strange, pressured and conflicted with differences between their original culture and the folk culture. For instance, in aspect of language, language is an essential tool for human beings to communicate with others, especially in class, smooth communication exchange can help university volunteer teachers smoothly transfer knowledge to students, understand students' ideas and gain their recognition and support. In China's 55 ethnic minorities, 53 ethnic minorities have their own native spoken languages and 22 ethnic minorities are using 28 species native written languages except the Hui nationality and the Manchu nationality which both use the Chinese language and characters. Although the Chinese government made efforts to popularize Chinese language in ethnic minority areas, but there are still quite a number of frontier ethnic minority nationalities are using their own native spoken and written languages in elementary education and secondary education. Some ethnic minority nationalities adopt bilingual teaching methods, but their native mother tongue is still the main communication tool in local society. Because of this, university volunteer teachers can't understand local languages, which will lead to teaching barriers caused by language barriers. In aspect of dietary and religion, food culture of different nationalities contains a lot of contents of belief, custom, mentality, character and historic culture of different nationalities. For example, China has about ten ethnic minorities (the Hui nationality, the Uygur nationality, the Kazak nationality, etc.) that eat halal foods and in accordance with Islamic tradition. People in Tibet, Qinghai and other Tibetan areas mostly believe in Tibetan Buddhism and like to drink buttered tea. These differences in dietary and religion also increase volunteers' difficulties in adjusting themselves to the life in ethnic minority areas.

### **3.2 Influence of human communication**

Compared with the situations in rural schools, university volunteer teachers in ethnic minority areas are faced with a more complex human communication situation. This complexity derived from the conflict and communication of national culture, region culture and frontier culture, etc. in minority areas. And cultural diversity leads to the complexity of human communication. First of all, the differences in languages among different regions largely limits the range of university volunteer teachers' human communication, which not only affects the communication and exchange between volunteer teachers and students in the classroom, but also limits the daily life communication of the volunteer teachers. Secondly, the differences in communication patterns, communication attitudes and communication customs affect the communications between volunteer teachers. People in ethnic minority areas were raised to accept the native nation and local region culture and they had established feeling expression modes and cultural stereotype structures which correspond with the background of the native nation and local region culture. Meanwhile, those non-local university volunteer teachers have the same feeling expression modes and cultural stereotype structures as

the locals. Different communication patterns, communication attitudes and communication customs will certainly lead to barriers which even lead to cultural conflicts. Thirdly, the differences between religious beliefs and values will also lead to communication barriers. Moral values in different cultural system decide the differences of views on relationships between individual and society, between marriage and family, between religious beliefs and life caring, etc. For example, for a native Tibetan, Lamaism belief is almost all his life and life experience which is not only the pillar but also the goal of life. It is baffling and even ignorant to Han volunteers who have no religious tradition and religious experience. Similarly, a native Tibetan may feel absurd and even be disgusted with a Han volunteer's arrogant attitude. When non-local university volunteer teachers are exposed to ethnic minority areas, this kind of cultural conflicts and inadaptability may cause communication barriers.

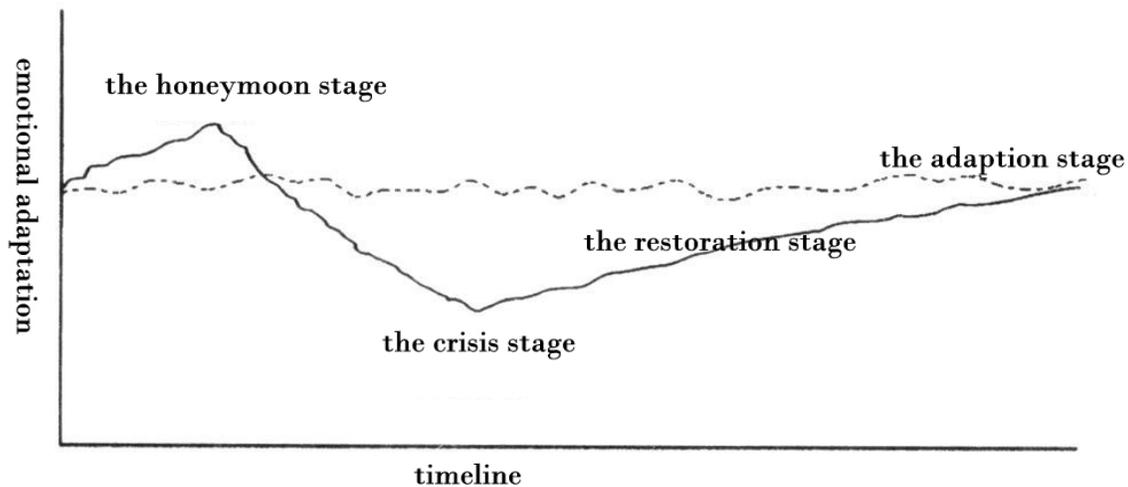
### ***3.3 Influence of cultural distance***

Babiker, Cox and Miller (1990) proposed the definition of culture distance. They argued that diversity between native culture and local culture plays a regulating role when life changes bring pressures to people in intercultural adaptation process. The experimental study shows that the smaller the cultural distance, the more readily they understand each other accurately, the greater the cultural distance, the more difficult it is to adapt. China has a vast territory and the minority nationalities live in the area of more than half of the nation's land area. Because of the historical development and the ecological environment and other factors, there are a lot of cultural differences between different nations. The greater the differences between cultures, the more difficult it is to adapt to the cultural adaptation. People always tend to observe and judge the culture of other nations with their own national culture. People generally praised the national customs which have the same values and norms of their own national culture. Most people can accept the national customs whose values and norms are similar to their own national culture but most people can't accept or praise the national customs whose values and norms are quite different from their own national culture. According to American scholar Huntington's view, this is the so-called "Cultural commonalities will promote cooperation and cohesion between people, while the cultural differences will intensify divisions and conflicts"(Huntington,1998).

### ***3.4 Influence of teaching time***

It has been confirmed by most studies that teaching time will influence the intercultural adaptation. American scholar Lysgard (1955) is the first one who studied the time factor. Through the investigations and studies, He proposed that intercultural adaptation is a U-shaped curve, the students from Scandinavian who live in USA for six to eighteen months feel harder to adapt than the the students who live under six months or above eighteen months. According to this mode, Oberg (1960) suggested that there are 4 stages of emotional adaptation as shown in the following graph. During the honeymoon stage, the initial stage of intoxication and mania are emphasized; During the crisis stage, people often feel inadequate, upset and anxious; During the restoration stage, people are concentrated on deal with the crises in new environment. During the adaptation stage, people are adjusting to the new environment., Chinese university volunteer teachers are usually divided into three types: long-term (a year or above); relay-way (half a year) and short-term (holidays or weekends). According to Oberg's four stages, Volunteers of long-term type may have

the strongest discomfort feelings while long-term type is just the most needed type. Short teaching time and frequent personnel change cause teaching instability which will increase the students' adaption difficulties. But most long-term volunteers stay about one year, exactly in Oberg's stages between the restoration stage and the adaption stage where they have slowly adapted life in ethnic minority areas. If volunteers left in this condition, then it cannot be regarded as a pity.



**Figure 1.** *U - shaped pattern of cultural adaptation process*

Data sources: Culture shock. Practical Anthropology, 1960(3)

#### **4. University volunteer teachers' intercultural adaption**

If volunteers cannot adapt to the life in the ethnic minority areas, it means the failure of the individual and state investment. How to help volunteers to better adapt to the life of the heterogeneous culture? Combined with the front analysis about the impact of university volunteer teachers, we can change from the following three aspects:

##### **4.1 Cultivating multicultural identity actively**

Culture is accompanied by the generation of human beings, through the screening and accumulation of history, formed different ethnic groups and regional cultures. All kinds of culture have their own differences from other cultures, resulting in the diversities and differences of culture. Multiple cultures are not isolated from each other. Since its birth, all kinds of civilizations have different forms of contacts and exchanges with life and economic activities as a link. In the era of globalization, the speed of this kind of communication is increasing rapidly, the level is increasing and the scale is bigger and bigger. All kinds of culture can learn from each other when they meet and communicate with each other. China is a unified multi-ethnic country and multi-national culture is a major feature of china. Chinese national culture not only includes the Chinese culture, but also includes the culture of the ethnic minority nations, which is an important part of the Chinese culture.

Cultural identity is not only the identity of the national culture, it should beyond its own culture, be extended to other cultures, emphasize the understanding, interpreting and respect to cultural diversity, and insist that national culture should have equal legal status and social status. Communicating and complementing only on the basis of equality and mutual respect can Chinese national cultural identity ensure each national culture's security coexistence and harmonious coexistence. University volunteer teachers should conform to the trend of historical development and actively develop and foster a sense of national culture. As Mr Fei Xiaotong said, people will acquire a sense of sensible feelings to embrace the value of human beings and to overcome cultural barriers to their survival threat only if they abandon the parochial position belongs to themselves.

#### ***4.2 Actively multi-channels adaption to the ethnic minority culture***

China is a multi-ethnic country. Many ethnic minorities are mixed together in ethnic minority areas and cultural diversity is more prominent. Therefore, as volunteer teachers in ethnic minority areas, No matter which kind of nations you belong to, as long you are working in ethnic minority areas, it should be in a good state of mind to face the interpersonal relationship of minority areas, such as folk culture including ethnic language, food, customs and beliefs, ethnic schools and relationships with local people. The relevant education departments should organize some targeted intercultural training for the new volunteers according to the types of the ethnic minorities. The training should be mainly including the local area of the main ethnic minorities, their own beliefs, as well as their dietary characteristics and language taboos, etc. Intercultural training aims to enhance intercultural awareness and intercultural communication skills, cultivate an understanding and respect attitude for cultural differences and eliminate the cultural differences in understanding, communication and conflict. Accept each other on the basis of adhering to yourself in the new cultural environment to promote the combinations of two cultures. In addition, we can build a communication system using the network system for different batches of volunteers. The former volunteers and the new volunteers can fully exchange and share teaching experience or suggestions which may reduce the volunteers' misunderstanding and conflict in the working process of the ethnic minority areas as much as possible.

#### ***4.3 Drawing up voluntary teaching plans scientifically and rationally.***

The local administrative department of education should do a very thorough research work before the voluntary teaching activities, persist in overall consideration and dispatch volunteer teachers scientifically and rationally. As before, intercultural adaptation is influenced by cultural distance. The smaller the cultural distance, the more readily they understand each other accurately, the greater the cultural distance, the more difficult it is to adapt. In order to reduce volunteers' sense of strange, pressured and inadaptation, we'd better dispatch volunteer teachers who were born in native province or the areas whose cultural distance is relatively small to ethnic minority areas so that in all aspects of life habits, language communications, religious beliefs and climate adaptations, etc. will be more adaptable; In the aspect of teaching, we may better understand the local students and communicate with each other better. In addition, the time is also the impact factor of intercultural adaptation. According to Oberg (1960) of the four stage theory, volunteer time is best for two or three years from the intercultural adaptation of this point of view. Through the initial stage

of intoxication and mania, the stage of frustration and anxiety, the restoration and adaptation stage, it requires a period of time. Therefore, the best voluntary time is more than two years, which can not only promote volunteers' adaption to the local culture, but also conducive to the stability of the local teaching.)

## 5. Conclusion

University volunteer teachers' intercultural adaptation problems in ethnic minority areas is a process that changes with time and is subject to the influences and restriction of various variables in social perspective. However, culture can be learnt and the culture is dynamic instead of static as well as human beings have the initiative. So the volunteers should adjust their mental status to the changes of cultural environment, actively cultivate the sense of multicultural identity, actively adapt to ethnic minority culture. Competent authorities should also draw up some voluntary teaching plans and dispatch volunteers scientifically and rationally to promote volunteers' intercultural adaption in ethnic minority areas.

## References

- Redfield, R., & Linton, R., & Herskovits, & M. J. Momorandum. (1936). on the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist*, 38, 149-152.
- Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (1999). The measurement of sociocultural adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 23, 659-677.
- Furnham ,A., & Bochner, S. (1986). *Culture shock: Psychological relations to unfamiliar environments*. London: Methuen.
- Babiker, I. E, & Cox, J. L, & Miller, P. (1980). The measurement of cultural distance and its relationship to medical consultations, symptomatology, and examination performance of overseas students at Edinburgh University. *Social Psychiatry*, 15(2), 109~116..
- Huntington·Samuel·P. (1998).*The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House
- Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7(3), 177~182