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## From “Study Abroad Fever” to “Returnee Tide” : Psychological and Behavioral Effects of Reverse Culture Shock Among Overseas Returnees

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### Abstract

Returnees who have lived abroad for a period of time and then return to their home country typically face readjustment challenges, the most prominent of which is reverse culture shock, which exerts significant effects on multiple domains such as individuals’ mental health and social adaptation. This paper reviews and critiques empirical research on the readaptation of returnee groups and the phenomenon of reverse culture shock, and from the theoretical perspective of cultural psychology, analyzes the underlying processes and influencing mechanisms that give rise to these psychological effects and behavioral consequences, with the aim of providing theoretical analysis and practical implications for the reverse cultural adaptation of returnees, and thereby offering empirical support and scientific reference for government agencies, think tanks, and higher education practitioners.

### Full Text

## From “Studying Abroad Fever” to “Returning Home Wave” : Psychological and Behavioral Effects of Returnees’ Reverse Culture Shock

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### Abstract

After living abroad for a period of time, returnees to their home country typically face readjustment challenges, most notably reverse culture shock, which

exerts significant influence on multiple domains including mental health and sociocultural adaptation. This paper systematically reviews and evaluates empirical research on the readjustment of returnee populations and the phenomenon of reverse culture shock. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from cultural psychology, we analyze the underlying psychological processes and mechanisms that generate these effects and behavioral consequences. Our aim is to provide theoretical analysis and practical insights for returnees' reverse cultural adaptation, thereby offering empirical support and scientific reference for government agencies, think tanks, and higher education professionals.

**Keywords:** Returnees, Reverse culture shock, Acculturation, Cultural identity, Coping strategies

According to data released by the Ministry of Education, in 2019, the total number of Chinese students and scholars returning from overseas reached 580,300, representing an 11.73% increase from 2018. Since 1978, China has sent 6.5606 million students abroad, with 86.28% choosing to return home after graduation. These figures demonstrate that China has a substantial and growing population of returnees. Compounded by the complex and shifting circumstances facing international students abroad since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, China may be witnessing a new wave of "returning home." The returnee population typically refers to individuals who leave their home country to work or study in a host country or region for a period before returning to their home country for long-term residence. Generally holding bachelor's degrees or higher, returnees possess not only strong language proficiency and professional skills but also international perspectives, making them mid- to high-level talent urgently needed as China's education sector (primarily universities and private institutions) and professional service industries continue to expand and internationalize.

At the theoretical level, returnees serve as carriers of multicultural experiences, and research on this population can deepen our understanding of multiculturalism, thereby promoting cross-cultural communication, understanding, and cooperation while exploring underlying mechanisms and impacts. At the practical level, the core concerns of this paper are how to help returnees successfully adapt to life and work environments in their home country, avoid and resolve negative psychological and social consequences resulting from reverse culture shock and maladjustment, promote harmonious relationships between returnees and local populations, guide and encourage returned students to become a new force in mass entrepreneurship and innovation, and provide academic support for the new era's policies on international education.

## 2. Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Models of Reverse Culture Shock

Reverse culture shock refers to the sociocultural maladjustment experienced by individuals returning to their home country after living abroad for a period, including emotional and psychological distress and stress (U.S. Department of

State, 2017). Extensive research indicates that reverse culture shock is an essential component of the repatriation process, with its severity closely related to the choice of adaptation strategies (Kranz & Goedderz, 2020) and cultural intelligence (Presbitero, 2016).

Howard (1974) found that due to expectation gaps, returnees might experience reverse culture shock manifested as reduced income, loss of prestige and status, inadequate or outdated qualifications, difficulty finding appropriate job placement, disappointment with domestic conditions, insufficient domestic business practices, and resentment toward peers. Chiang (2011) interviewed 25 young returnees to Taiwan, who reported experiencing reverse culture shock at certain moments, with most stating they would prefer to move back to the host country for further development rather than remain in Taiwan. Alkhalaf (2019) surveyed Saudi Arabian students who had studied in the United States and found that 75% of participants reported experiencing reverse culture shock after returning home, with the severity negatively correlated with psychological adaptation and positively correlated with negative affect. Women scored higher on reverse culture shock and reported lower satisfaction with quality of life compared to men.

Conversely, Kartoshkina (2015), in studying American adolescent returnees, found that repatriation does not only bring negative effects but also a “bittersweet” complex emotion, including reuniting with family and friends in the home country, sharing overseas experiences with other returnees, and developing a new perspective for viewing home culture. Wang (2016) supported this view, arguing that cultural differences not only cause psychological discomfort and culture shock but can also provide returnees with a psychological advantage of being “cultural in-betweenness” in the workplace.

Building upon Berry’ s four acculturation strategies, Laframboise et al. (1993) added a fifth strategy: the alternation model, where newcomers may wander unpredictably among several strategies when adapting to a new society and culture. Navas et al. (2005) similarly referenced Berry’ s model and added five key points, naming it the Relative Acculturation Extended Model (RAEM). First, drawing on Bourhis et al.’ s (1997) conclusions about mutual influence, the researchers incorporated the adaptation strategies of both immigrant and host groups into the computational model. Second, they distinguished between different ethnic types of immigrants for separate calculation. Third, based on Piontkowski and Florack (1995) and Bourhis et al. (1997), they added new psychological variables and behavioral criteria that could help the model better assess its predictive power and possible influencing factors. Fourth, RAEM distinguishes between reality and ideals, arguing that the preferred adaptation strategies of immigrant and host groups are less important than the strategies they actually choose. Finally, the researchers observed sociocultural realities and documented possible new adaptation strategies and attitudes. In the field of returnee psychology, the acculturation model combining Berry (1990) and Navas et al. (2005) has been widely accepted by scholars and introduced into

practical applications.

On the other hand, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) extended the U-curve model of cultural adaptation, calling it the W-curve model, which posits that individuals experience a second cultural shock after returning home. The U-curve model (Lysgaard, 1955) describes four stages of culture shock. First, in the euphoria stage, the excitement and curiosity experienced upon arriving in a new country make individuals particularly positive initially. However, as euphoria fades, negative experiences and even discrimination in the new environment cause culture shock. The third stage is adaptation, where individuals gradually adjust to the new environment. Finally, when individuals successfully adapt, they enter a stable period, concluding the culture shock process. The W-curve model of Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) extends this framework.

The fly in the ointment is that empirical research supporting the W-curve model is very limited. Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall (1992) noted that not all returnees experience the euphoria stage in the W-curve model of reverse culture shock, with up to 70% of respondents showing significant discomfort with repatriation. Some scholars argue that psychologically, the return process may be more difficult than the initial departure, so generalizations should not be made. Furukawa (1997) stated that returnees might experience significant emotional distress in the six months after repatriation, reaching clinical diagnostic levels. Sussman (2007) found that Hong Kong returnees showed no negative emotions regarding repatriation. Similarly, after studying Western-educated Taiwanese and Sri Lankan returnees, Pritchard (2011) did not find the repatriation trauma emphasized by other scholars but rather some sociopolitical cognitive dissonance. Therefore, scholars have not reached consistent conclusions about the W-curve model.

### 3.1 Psychological Challenges Faced by Returnee Groups

Globalization has prompted increasing numbers of groups—such as corporate expatriates, ethnic minority immigrants, and international students—to integrate two or more cultural elements into their cultural identity systems (Arnett, 2002), thereby triggering psychological and behavioral consequences of multicultural experiences (Hu, Han, Yu, & Peng, 2020). For returnees, short- or long-term sojourns abroad similarly expose them to multicultural shocks, forming a complex multicultural identity pattern. Sussman (1986) proposed that returnees face five main challenges: unpreparedness for repatriation difficulties; internal changes due to overseas experiences occurring without the individual's awareness; changes in home culture that the individual fails to recognize, or perceived changes that did not actually occur; friends, family, and colleagues expecting the returnee to behave “normally” or as before departure rather than showing new, different behaviors; and lack of strong interest from colleagues and friends in the overseas experience. These are often sources of disappointment and frustration for returnee groups.

Returning from the host country to one's hometown involves not only geographic relocation but also farewell and reconstruction of social networks and a process of re-recognizing and adapting to home culture, thus facing enormous psychological challenges. Some scholars believe that difficulties experienced when returning from abroad may be more challenging than the initial relocation phase (Adler, 1981). Uehara (1986) listed alienation, apathy, loss, confusion, and loneliness as potential psychological challenges, with the severity of these consequences reaching clinical levels (Sahin, 1990). Raschio (1987) found in interviews that some individuals experienced very mild emotional disorders, while others constantly struggled with feelings of isolation, alienation, and despair. Butcher (2002) considered readjustment a grieving process—a longing for belonging that can be cultural or specific. Many students discussed feelings of deprivation and psychological tension in post-return interviews (Allison, Davis-Berman, & Berman, 2012). Kartoshkina (2015) found that interviewees reported a “sense of loss” when describing negative feelings about repatriation, primarily resulting from bidding farewell to overseas life and companions. A recent longitudinal survey found that international students' mental health levels peaked in the first month after return, then began to decline, reaching their lowest point in the fourth month (Dykhous & Bikos, 2019). Therefore, poor readjustment can cause considerable psychological distress for returnees.

In terms of social adaptation, returnees also face challenges. Some participants reported that their overseas experiences fostered critical views of their home (American) culture (Kartoshkina, 2015; Dettweiler et al., 2015). Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) found that students studying abroad developed increased skepticism toward their home culture. When they acquired new values and beliefs different from their own country, they might experience anxiety and stress. After participating in a six-month expedition program in Greenland, British students commonly experienced inability to communicate with those around them, feeling misunderstood, inability to imitate others' behavior or integrate into the post-return environment, and missing the journey with friends. They also felt their experiences were so unique that they could not communicate with those without similar experiences and believed no one was interested in their stories (Allison, Davis-Berman, & Berman, 2012). Similarly, because family and friends lacked overseas experience, they could not understand returnees' stories, creating communication difficulties. Communication with friends appeared more difficult than with parents (Kartoshkina, 2015). On the other hand, relationship maintenance also poses problems: some returnees found family tension to be normal after repatriation, as the independence gained during study abroad conflicted with internal demands for filial piety, creating family tension and personal pressure due to large discrepancies between their worldview and their parents' . Friendships with friends without overseas experience were also more difficult to maintain (Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milner, 2002). A study of young returned teachers at Chinese universities found that Chinese academic returnees faced not only general adaptation problems but also issues adapting to unsupportive organizational culture, lack of knowledge-sharing atmosphere, low

salaries, heavy workloads, and organizational culture (Li, Croucher, & Wang, 2020). Individuals from both Eastern and Western cultural backgrounds seem to face sociocultural-level psychological challenges when returning, such as filial piety and lack of organizational support. However, whether these cultural discomforts are challenges specific to Eastern culture or shared processes across all cultures warrants further investigation.

### 3.2.1 Demographic Variables

The role of gender in individuals' readjustment process is a highly controversial topic. Early studies found that women reported family and daily life problems more frequently than men and were more attuned to changes in the social environment (Brabant, Palmer, & Gramling, 1990). Compared to men, female international students had weaker ability to handle anxiety, felt more depressed and had difficulty relaxing, and experienced tension when interacting with significant others (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). However, research also presents different findings: some studies found women reported higher repatriation satisfaction than men (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991). Other research discovered that men and women faced similar problems in readjustment, held similar views about these problems, and adopted similar strategies (Cox, 2004; Dettweiler et al., 2015; Sussman, 2001). Notably, most studies have not balanced gender ratios in their samples and have selected relatively homogeneous samples, which may be one reason for inconsistent findings.

Research indicates that age affects reverse cultural adaptation. The older the returnee, the less adaptation distress they experience. Age is not only related to social adaptation but also significantly negatively correlated with depression levels after returning home (Cox, 2004; Kartoshkina, 2015). However, Uehara (1986) found no significant correlation between age and readjustment. Additionally, marital status is another factor worth considering. Cox (2004) found that among returnees, single individuals reported more depressive emotions and less family cultural identification than married individuals, meaning single people experienced more cultural maladjustment after returning home.

### 3.2.2 Overseas Experience

Individuals' experiences during their time abroad affect their post-return readjustment, primarily involving the breadth and depth of contact with foreign culture and overall evaluation of their overseas study experience. Duration of study is an important predictor of readjustment difficulties. In a survey of 669 returned students, Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) found that those who studied abroad for three weeks or less scored significantly lower on reverse culture shock scales than those who studied for a semester or longer, indicating that readjustment problems are positively correlated with length of stay in the host country (Kranz & Goedderz, 2020). Positive or negative evaluations of one's own overseas experience are strongly correlated with readjustment difficulties,

and the relationship between positive evaluation of the overseas experience and adaptation difficulties is moderated by cultural distance (Gray & Savicki, 2015).

Cox (2004) surveyed 101 students who had returned from various countries and found that the frequency and satisfaction of communication with family while abroad affected post-return adaptation. Satisfaction with family communication while abroad was significantly negatively correlated with depression, meaning more frequent contact with family made post-return adaptation easier. However, friend relationships were not significantly correlated with readjustment. The medium of communication also affected adaptation: internet usage frequency was significantly positively correlated with depression. Similarly, when international students communicated more frequently with host country nationals while abroad, they faced greater adaptation difficulties after returning home (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991). Post-return social support is also important: Taiwanese and Sri Lankan students reported smooth adaptation processes because they received understanding from family and friends after returning (Pritchard, 2011).

### 3.2.3 Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is an important aspect affecting readjustment and can be divided into identification with the host country and identification with the home country. Based on different levels of identification with both, Sussman (2000) proposed a four-dimensional model of acculturation. Awareness of changes in one's own cultural identity may be a source of personal distress for those experiencing these changes. Individuals who reported weakened connections with their home country or strengthened connections with the host country, resulting in identity transformation, experienced more maladjustment upon return. Conversely, those who strengthened connections with their home country and enhanced cross-cultural worldviews experienced less maladjustment. Subsequent empirical research confirmed this model: analysis of 44 American managers who returned to the U.S. showed that those with the strongest host country cultural identification and least psychological preparation experienced the most psychological distress after returning, while returnees who favored their home culture encountered fewer psychological difficulties than those who assimilated into the host culture. More general self-identity changes due to overseas experience were also significantly correlated with individuals' psychological distress levels (Sussman, 2001).

Cox (2004) proposed four patterns of cross-cultural identity formation: home country preference, host country preference, integration, and diffusion. In empirical research, individuals classified as integrated or home country-preference had easier readjustment processes than those classified as diffused or host country-preference, as evidenced by lower depression scores and lower social difficulty scores in the integration and home-preference groups. Researchers consider the healthiest pattern to be returnees maintaining connections with their home culture while mastering the host country culture. Kranz and Goedderz (2020)

studied the relationship between readjustment problems and home country cultural commitment using Erikson's identity model. Results showed that at the variable-centered level, repatriation problems were negatively correlated with commitment to home culture, positively correlated with exploration, and most strongly correlated with reflection. Participants in moratorium status (low commitment, high exploration, high reflection) showed the most readjustment problems, while those in foreclosure status (the opposite pattern) faced the fewest readjustment problems. A recent longitudinal survey showed that subjectively reported sociocultural adaptation to the host country was an important predictor of mental health levels, the rate of decline, and subsequent speed of return to baseline. Although most returnees' mental health levels reached their lowest point 4 months after returning and returned to baseline after 12 months, those who adapted better to host country culture experienced more psychological difficulties after returning and required longer to return to baseline (Dykhous & Bikos, 2019).

Seiter and Waddell (1989) found a negative correlation between reverse culture shock and general interpersonal relationship satisfaction. When individuals or groups experience high levels of reverse culture shock, the likelihood of establishing identity and overall life satisfaction is low, as is the likelihood of coping well with daily social life stress (Presbitero, 2016). Gaw (2000) surveyed American students' reentry experiences and found that students experiencing high reverse culture shock were more likely to report personal adjustment problems than those with low reverse culture shock, including alienation, lack of belonging, loneliness, difficulty making friends, inferiority, depression, and general anxiety and shyness problems (including social shyness and speech anxiety). American students reporting higher adaptation difficulties also had more negative emotions, suggesting that maladapted students might undergo an emotional process of re-establishing attachment to their home culture (Gray & Savicki, 2015). A study of Japanese returnees found that those with poor adaptation felt more social rejection, while well-adapted individuals mentioned more accepting people in open-ended questions (Yoshida et al., 2009). Presbitero (2016) examined the effects of culture shock and reverse culture shock on individual adaptation and found that participants' reverse culture shock scores were significantly negatively correlated with both psychological and social adaptation. However, cultural intelligence—the ability of people to take effective measures to adapt to new cultures when dealing with different cultures (Gao & Li, 2009)—can serve as a moderating variable to reduce the negative impact of reverse culture shock on psychological and social adaptation.

### 3.3.2 Positive Effects

From a positive perspective, reverse culture shock does not only have negative impacts on individuals, suggesting we need to view this phenomenon dialectically. Research has found that reverse culture shock or cultural readjustment can become a pathway to enhance individuals' cognition of home culture and

self-awareness. Through overseas experiences and the readjustment process, students deepen their understanding of themselves and their own culture (Uehara, 1986). Simultaneously, sojourners receive comfort through contact with family and friends upon returning, thus becoming more grateful (Kartoshkina, 2015). Experiences of cultural adaptation and readjustment also enable returnees to view things more objectively and dialectically regarding both home and foreign cultures. In daily life, they can adopt positive and tolerant attitudes toward others (Kartoshkina, 2015; Li et al., 2020). The impact of overseas study experiences is multifaceted, including establishing more diverse perspectives, increasing life experience, broadening life horizons, improving critical thinking abilities, and accumulating social capital.

### 3.4 How to Reduce Reverse Culture Shock

In the first stage, regarding pre-departure preparation, research has found that adequate psychological preparation can reduce readjustment difficulties after returning home (Sussman, 2001). Therefore, pre-return training for returnees intending to come home is essential. Well-designed pre-departure and post-return programs help students develop adaptation skills and cross-cultural competence, partially determining the success of sojourners' overseas education (Thebodo & Marx, 2005). For students who have not yet gone abroad, conducting pre-departure training not only helps reduce the impact of culture shock but also helps reduce the impact of reverse culture shock.

In the second stage, during overseas study, individuals should use modern technology to strengthen connections with their home country, pay constant attention to changes occurring at home, and form objective cognition and realistic expectations of their hometown. They should also share their experiences in real time to enhance mutual understanding with family and friends. Individuals should actively explore how to integrate experiences from both home and host countries to generate new insights and intellectual resonance.

In the third stage, after returning home, individuals should correctly understand what has and has not changed in themselves and their home culture, accept existing problems with an objective and open attitude, and give themselves an adaptation and transition period. Simultaneously, they should adopt positive attitudes to face reality and solve problems, such as actively resolving conflicts, maintaining interpersonal relationships, seeking opportunities to share experiences, and participating in readjustment courses. Additionally, individuals should apply the adventurous enthusiasm from living abroad to building new interpersonal networks and exploring new life processes, aiming for lifelong personal growth.

## 4. Limitations and Future Directions

Previous literature has several limitations. First, measurement criteria for reverse culture shock are inconsistent. Inconsistent measurement tools prevent re-

searchers from clarifying conclusions, comparing results, aggregating evidence, and refining theoretical models. Second, research participants have different identities, including not only international students and corporate expatriates but also returning immigrants and their descendants, leading to divergent conclusions. Third, quantitative studies lack experimental evidence, making causal inferences and intervention research difficult. Finally, how to localize returnee research is a key issue.

Currently, research on returnee groups in psychology both domestically and internationally is still in its infancy, with most studies being descriptive and lacking theoretical analysis and empirical accumulation. Looking forward, many open research questions merit attention, such as how to define and measure reverse cultural adaptation in the context of Chinese culture, how traditional Chinese cultural concepts influence returnees' readjustment processes, what role the internet revolution plays in returnees' experiences, how the complex and changing international situation between Western societies and Chinese society under the COVID-19 pandemic affects returnees' readjustment, how to 挖掘 individuals' positive psychological resources to cope with reverse culture shock, and how government departments or relevant institutions can provide organizational-level guidance and support to help returnee groups improve reverse cultural adaptation. These are all questions worthy of further investigation in future research.

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