

The Role of Christianity in Promoting Cultural Exchange and Adaptation Among International Students: A Case Study of Hanyang International Church

Yiying Liao^{1*}

1Hanyang University, South Korea

*Corresponding author : Yiying Liao

Abstract

In the context of globalization, an increasing number of Chinese international students are pursuing higher education abroad, facing challenges such as language barriers, cultural clashes, and psychological isolation. Christian churches, with their unique social functions and cultural influence, have emerged as a key support for these students. This study focuses on Hanyang International Church in Ansan, which has been successful in helping Chinese international students adapt to a new culture and engage in cross-cultural exchanges. Through in-depth interviews with 10 Chinese international students involved in the church's activities, this research explores their initial contact with the church, motivations for continued participation, and the practical effects of these activities on their cultural adaptation. The findings aim to provide feasible strategies for international students and offer valuable insights for religious practices.

Keywords : Christianity , Cultural Adaptation , International Students , Cross-Cultural Exchange , Religious Support

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Introduction

In the context of globalization, an increasing number of Chinese international students are pursuing higher education abroad, facing challenges such as language barriers, cultural clashes, and psychological isolation. Christian churches, with their unique social functions and cultural influence, have emerged as a key support for these students. This study focuses on Hanyang International Church in Ansan, which has been successful in helping Chinese international students adapt to a new culture and engage in cross-cultural exchanges. Through in-depth interviews with 10 Chinese international students involved in the church's activities, this research explores their initial contact with the church, motivations for continued participation, and the practical effects of these activities on their cultural adaptation. The findings aim to provide feasible strategies for international students and offer valuable insights for religious practices.

Theoretical Background

1. Theoretical Background

1.1 Research Background and Objectives

The globalization of education has led to a surge in international students, who often struggle with the unfamiliar environment. Christian churches play a significant role in their social interactions and identity construction, providing spiritual comfort and practical assistance. Activities such as language training, prayer meetings, and Bible studies facilitate contact and understanding among individuals from different cultural backgrounds, alleviating loneliness and accelerating adaptation to a new life.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

1.2.1 Christianity and Cultural Exchange

From a cultural anthropology perspective, religion is not just a personal spiritual anchor but also an integral part of the cultural system with broad social functions. Christianity, in particular, has a notable role in cultural dissemination and exchange. Hanyang International Church's activities, such as Bible study sharing sessions and Korean language classes, enrich the daily lives of international students and enhance their understanding of Christian doctrines. The provision of Chinese Bibles and bilingual explanations helps students overcome language barriers and grasp the essence of Christianity. These practices demonstrate that religion, through language, symbols, and rituals, builds bridges for communication between different cultures.

1.2.2 International Students' Cultural Adaptation

Participation in religious rituals and procedures significantly enhances cultural identification, helping international students overcome the challenges of adapting to a new environment. Language barriers and differences in living habits often cause loneliness and confusion upon arrival in Korea. Language learning and community interactions not only deepen the understanding of Korean culture but also equip students with essential communication skills. Churches, through collective activities and religious ceremonies, effectively alleviate cultural conflicts and assist students in adapting to the pace of Korean society.

Research Methods

2.1 Research Subjects

This study selected 10 Chinese international students from Hanyang International Church in Ansan. These students, diverse in gender, academic background, and faith status, represent the broader group of Chinese international students in Korea. They include undergraduates and postgraduates who have been in Korea for 1 to 5 years. They participate in church activities due to cultural adaptation needs or interest. Most possess basic Korean communication skills and can actively engage in church activities. The church's pastors and their spouses have experience in missionary work in China and can communicate in Chinese, facilitating the research.

2.2 Research Tools

This study employed in-depth interviews and on-site surveys to collect data. A ten-question interview outline was designed based on literature on international students' adaptation to Korean cultural life, including theories of cross-cultural adaptation and the impact of religion on psychological adjustment. The aim was to understand the students' real experiences in church activities and their impact on cultural adaptation.

2.3 Research Process

The interviews were conducted from October 13 to November 21, 2024, after Sunday worship services. Each session involved three to five students, either by phone or face-to-face. The interviews were divided into a preliminary (about 10 minutes) and a formal part (about 30 minutes). The preliminary interview gathered basic information about the students, while the formal interview focused on their experiences and feelings regarding church activities. All interviews were recorded to ensure data integrity and confidentiality.

Research Results

3.1 Basic Information of Hanyang International Church

Hanyang International Church primarily serves Chinese international students at Hanyang University, providing faith support and a platform for cross-cultural exchange. Led by two pastors and their spouses, all experienced in missionary work in China and fluent in Chinese, the church

offers a range of activities including Sunday worship, group discussions, and Bible study courses. With about 50 members, mainly students from Hanyang University, the church also provides meals to foster a warm and supportive community atmosphere.

3.2 Summary of Results

Based on in-depth interviews and on-site surveys, the study identified four main categories: the motives of international students for contacting the church, the main activities and functions provided by Hanyang International Church, the students' feedback and experiences, and the impact of church activities. These categories were derived from repeated listening to recordings, semantic extraction, and classification of responses, considering the diversity of gender, academic background, and religious beliefs to ensure the comprehensiveness and reliability of the results.

3.2.1 Specific Information of Interviewees

No.	Gender	Education Level	Faith Status	Time in Korea	Korean Language Level	Major	Church Activity Participation
1	Male	Bachelor's	No Faith	3 years	Intermediate	Mechanical Engineering	Korean Language Class, Worship, Group Meals
2	Male	Bachelor's	No Faith	3 years	Intermediate	Civil Engineering	Korean Language Class, Worship, Group Meals
3	Female	Bachelor's	Confucianism	3 years	Advanced	Advertising	Cultural Activities, Bible Study, Group Meals
4	Male	Doctoral	No Faith	1 years	Advanced	Design	Worship, Korean Language Class, Group Meals
5	Female	Bachelor's	Christianity	3 years	Intermediate	Dance	Worship, Bible Study, Group Meals
6	Male	Doctoral	No Faith	5 years	Advanced	Physical Education	Worship, Group Meals
7	Female	Doctoral	Christianity	2 years	Advanced	Physical Education	Worship, Cultural Activities, Group Meals, Bible Study
8	Male	Bachelor's	No Faith	1 years	Intermediate	Mechanical Engineering	Worship, Group Meals
9	Male	Language School	Christianity	1 years	Beginner	Design (pre-admission)	Worship, Group Meals
10	Female	Master's	No Faith	1 years	Intermediate	Finance	Worship, Korean Language Class, Group Meals

3.2.2 Coding and Analysis of Interview Data

Stage	Description
Data Collection	Interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure data integrity.
Initial Coding	Keywords and phrases related to research questions were marked while reading the transcribed text.
Categorization Coding	Keywords and phrases were classified into themes and sub-themes.
Selective Coding	Core and main themes were identified, and relationships between themes were established.
Content Analysis	Frequency of each theme and sub-theme was analyzed, and their distribution among different samples was examined.
Comparative	Differences and similarities among students of different genders, academic backgrounds, and

Analysis	faith statuses were compared.
Result Presentation	Tables and specific cases were used to illustrate findings and support conclusions.

3.2.3 Reasons for International Students to Attend Church

Gender	Reason	Explanation
Male Students	Learn Korean	Improve language skills through Korean language classes offered by the church to enhance daily communication abilities.
Male Students	Make Friends, Alleviate Loneliness	Meet new friends and participate in group activities to reduce feelings of loneliness in a foreign country.
Male Students	Free or Affordable Meals	Solve daily expense pressures through free meals provided by the church, which for some was the first contact with the church.
Female Students	Cultural Exchange and Enrich Life Experiences	Participate in Sino-Korean cultural activities, such as festival celebrations (making dumplings, mooncakes), to enrich extracurricular life.
Female Students	Seek Psychological Support and Peace	Alleviate academic and life stress through religious activities (such as worship and prayer) to gain inner peace.

3.2.4 Main Activities and Functions Provided by Hanyang International Church

Activity Type	Specific Content	Functional Role
Language Learning	Korean Language Class, Bilingual Bible Explanation	Help international students improve language skills and adapt to daily life.
Cultural Exchange and Practice	Making Dumplings, Making Mooncakes, etc.	Promote interaction and understanding between international students and local culture.
Worship and Religious Activities	Bilingual Worship, Bible Study, Prayer	Provide spiritual support and help international students alleviate psychological pressure.
Community Activities and Social Interaction	Group Meals, Sharing Sessions, Music Groups	Make friends, expand social networks, and enhance a sense of belonging.
Practical Life Support	Providing Meals, Life Advice, Study Help	Alleviate the living pressure of international students and provide practical help.

3.2.5 Feedback and Experiences of International Students

No.	Feedback Content	Explanation
Undergraduate Student and Master's Student	Improved Language Skills	Enhanced Korean oral expression ability through Korean courses and communication practice.
Undergraduate Student and Master's Student	Psychological and Spiritual Peace	Gained emotional release in religious activities, enhanced confidence and positive attitude in facing difficulties.
Undergraduate Student and Master's Student	Enhanced Cultural Adaptation Ability	Gradually understood and accepted local living habits and cultural norms by participating in Korean culture-related activities.
Undergraduate Student and Master's Student	Expanded Social Network	Made friends through the church, forming a supportive social network that provides emotional and practical help.
Doctoral Student	Reduced Loneliness and Pressure	Made friends and alleviated loneliness and academic pressure through worship and group activities.

3.2.6 Impact After Participating in Church Activities

Faith Background	Impact Type	Specific Manifestation
Students Without Previous Faith	Academic and Language Ability Improvement	Improved Korean proficiency to better cope with academic and daily language needs.
Students Without Previous Faith	Psychological State Improvement	Worship and prayer activities alleviated stress, making individuals more positive and confident.
Students Without Previous Faith	Enhanced Social and Sense of Belonging	Expanded social circles through group activities, gaining a sense of belonging and friendship.
Students Without Previous Faith	Enhanced Cultural Understanding and Adaptability	Deepened understanding of Korean culture through cross-cultural activities, facilitating faster adaptation to local life.
Students Without Previous Faith	Improved Quality of Life	Alleviated economic pressure and enriched extracurricular life through free meals and life assistance.
Students With Previous Faith	Deepened Faith	Further deepened understanding and identification of Christianity through participation in religious activities and

		learning, making faith more steadfast.
Students With Previous Faith	Enhanced Self-awareness and Self-discipline	The teachings of the church helped students better understand themselves, establish more disciplined living habits, and promote personal growth and development.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the role of Christian churches in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Through interviews and on-site surveys of Chinese international students at Hanyang International Church, it reveals the motives for students to contact the church, the content and functions of church activities, the students' feedback and experiences, and the impact of participating in church activities. The findings show that the church provides a comprehensive platform for language learning, cultural exchange, social interaction, and psychological support, effectively helping students adapt to a foreign culture, alleviate psychological pressure, and significantly improve the quality of life.

The sample selection focuses on Chinese international students in Korea, especially those actively participating in the activities of Hanyang International Church. The sample size of 10 students aims to balance the richness of data with the depth of research. The research method uses qualitative approaches, conducting in-depth interviews with 10 student informants and combining on-site observations to collect data. Data analysis is carried out through data simplification, conceptualization, categorization, and description to ensure the reliability and validity of the results. Although convenience sampling is not as representative as random sampling, it is common and practical in qualitative research, especially for specific groups. The diversity of the sample is reflected in multiple dimensions: gender, academic background, faith status, time in Korea, Korean language proficiency, and participation in church activities. In addition, the students have a wide range of academic disciplines, including science, engineering, humanities, and business, to increase the diversity of research perspectives. At the same time, considering the differences in religious beliefs, the sample also includes students with Buddhist and Taoist backgrounds, as well as those without religious beliefs, to observe their different experiences and changes after participating in Christian activities.

Through interviews and analysis with Chinese international students at Hanyang International Church, it is concluded that the main reasons for students to come to the church cover five aspects: language learning, social needs, practical life support, cultural exchange experience, and psychological and emotional support. These reasons reflect the multi-level needs of students in a foreign cultural environment and also show the unique role of the church in meeting these needs. For male students, the Korean language classes provided by the church help them significantly improve their language abilities and enhance their confidence in daily communication. At the same time, church activities create opportunities for them to make friends and alleviate loneliness in a foreign country. In addition, the free or low-cost meals provided by the church alleviate the pressure of living costs to a certain extent and become an opportunity for some male students to first contact the church. In comparison, female students are more inclined to participate in cultural exchange activities through the church, such as Sino-Korean festival celebrations (making dumplings, mooncakes), to enrich their spare time; they also alleviate academic and life pressure through worship and prayer and obtain psychological support and inner peace. It is worth noting that these reasons are not limited to one gender but are mentioned by both male and female students. However, the focus of different genders is somewhat different. Male students often mention economic support, while female students pay more attention to cultural exchange and psychological support.

Hanyang International Church provides comprehensive support and help to international students through a variety of activities. In terms of language learning, Korean language classes and bilingual Bible explanations not only improve the language abilities of international students but also help them better understand Korean culture and religious doctrines. In terms of cultural exchange and practice, activities such as making dumplings and mooncakes promote interaction and

understanding between international students and local culture, enhancing their cultural adaptability. In terms of worship and religious activities, bilingual worship, Bible study, and prayer provide spiritual comfort to international students, helping them alleviate academic and life pressure and gain psychological peace and support. In terms of community activities and social interaction, activities such as group meals, sharing sessions, and music groups help international students make new friends, expand their social networks, and enhance their sense of belonging. In terms of practical life support, the free meals, life advice, and study help provided by the church effectively alleviate the economic and living pressure of international students.

The feedback from international students indicates that participating in church activities has had a positive impact on various aspects of their lives. In terms of language ability, their Korean oral expression ability has significantly improved through Korean courses and communication practice. In terms of psychology and spirit, religious activities have helped international students alleviate academic and life pressure, enhance their confidence and positive attitude in facing difficulties. In terms of cultural adaptation, participating in Korean culture-related activities has gradually helped international students understand and accept local living habits and cultural norms. In terms of social networks, the new friends made through the church have formed a supportive social network that provides emotional and practical help. In terms of quality of life, free meals and life assistance have alleviated economic pressure and enriched spare time.

Participating in church activities has had different impacts on international students with different religious faith backgrounds. For students who did not have faith before, there have been significant improvements in language ability, psychological state, social and sense of belonging, cultural understanding and adaptability, and quality of life. For students who had faith before, their faith has deepened, and their self-awareness and self-discipline have been enhanced, promoting personal growth and development. It is worth noting that the students who came to the church did not all have a Christian faith before; there were also students with Buddhist and Taoist backgrounds. Participating in church activities not only helped them better understand and integrate into Christian culture but also prompted them to have new understandings and thoughts about other religions. Some students showed a phenomenon of "selective belief" in the process of contacting Christianity. They did not completely accept the doctrines of a certain religion in terms of faith but drew theories and concepts from various religions. For example, one student's family were Buddhists, so he accepted the concept of reincarnation. Therefore, after learning Christianity, he did not accept the concept of going to heaven after death. However, he believed in the existence of God and regarded God as a kind of Buddha in Buddhism. Although he did not agree with the doctrine that there is only one God in the world, he still thought that worship activities had certain significance and functions, and his worship could be heard by God. This phenomenon reflects the flexibility and openness of students in religious faith. They have formed a personalized faith system in cross-religious exchanges, thereby better reconciling the differences between different religions and finding a path that conforms to their cognition and faith.

The cultural adaptation of international students can be seen as a two-way process, in which both international students and local society adopt new characteristics in interaction. As defined by Bloch, integration is the process by which individuals and immigrant groups are incorporated into various social domains and parts of the new host society (Bloch, 2002: 80–82). In the activities of Hanyang International Church, international students have not only improved their language abilities but also gradually adapted to the cultural and social norms of Korea through participating in worship, Korean language classes, and cultural activities. This two-way cultural adaptation process has not only helped international students alleviate psychological pressure but also enhanced their identification with the new culture.

In conclusion, this study highlights the unique role of Christian churches as a platform for cross-cultural exchange in the adaptation of international students to a foreign life, indicating that the emotional support, social interaction, and practical help provided by religious activities in the process of cultural adaptation are crucial. The research results provide valuable empirical data for

understanding the role of religious organizations in the cultural adaptation and social support of international students and offer references for related practices and policy-making. Future research can further explore the differential roles of different religious organizations in cross-cultural adaptation and the interactive mechanisms of religion and cultural exchange in a broader social context. This will help to better understand the role of religion in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students and provide more effective support and resources for them.

Appendix

Interview Content

1. Initial Contact with the Church:

How did you first learn about and come into contact with Hanyang International Church?
What was your initial impression of the church? What attracted you to continue participating in its activities?

2. Experience in Church Activities:

Which church activities have you participated in? Have these activities met your needs in terms of language, study, and daily life?
During your participation in church activities, have you felt a reduction in loneliness and anxiety? What support has the church provided to help you cope with these psychological pressures?
In your interactions with people of different cultural backgrounds in the church, have you encountered any cultural conflicts or particularly memorable communication experiences?

3. Language Learning:

Has the church helped with your Korean language learning? If so, in what specific ways?
How was your experience in the Korean language class? Did you find it practically helpful?

4. Religious Faith and Cultural Adaptation:

Have you been exposed to the content of the Christian faith through church activities? What impact has this content had on your life or values?
Have you made new friends or established new social relationships through the church? How have these relationships helped with your life adaptation?
Do you think church activities have helped you better understand and integrate into Korean culture? If so, please give specific examples of how they have been helpful.

5. Overall Evaluation and Suggestions:

How would you overall evaluate the church's help in your life adaptation and cultural integration?
In which aspects do you think the church activities still have room for improvement?

Conclusion

This study explores the role of Christian churches in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Through interviews and on-site surveys of Chinese international students at Hanyang International Church, it reveals the motives for students to contact the church, the content and functions of church activities, the students' feedback and experiences, and the impact of participating in church activities. The findings show that the church provides a comprehensive platform for language learning, cultural exchange, social interaction, and psychological support, effectively helping students adapt to a foreign culture, alleviate psychological pressure, and significantly improve the quality of life. Future research can further explore the differential roles of different religious organizations in cross-cultural adaptation and the interactive mechanisms of religion and cultural exchange in a broader social context.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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