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## **Pakistani Students as Sojourners in China: Navigating Adaptation Challenges and Coping Strategies**

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### **Abstract**

Annually, thousands of Pakistani students move to China to pursue higher education at Chinese universities. Despite the plethora of academic literature on China-Pakistan relations, it remains to examine what challenges these new entrants face in their process of cross-cultural adaptation. Taking the students of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) as sojourners, the study examines the cultural adaptation challenges these students encountered and the coping strategies employed to overcome them. Kim's integrative communication theory of cross-cultural adaptation is applied as a theoretical lens for this study. Thirteen international students of GB who studied in Chinese universities were recruited for in-depth interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted regarding the respondents' intercultural adaptation experiences in China and their coping strategies. The data were transcribed and thematically analysed. Three main themes were extracted from the transcribed data; the first theme focuses on preferences in choosing Chinese universities. The second theme focuses on socio-cultural and psychological barriers in the adaptation process. The final theme concentrates on supporting mechanisms and coping strategies available to overcome the challenges. The findings elaborate these major themes in detail with theoretical and practical implications and recommendations for further research.

**Key Words:** Cultural adaptation, International students support, Cultural adjustment, GB students as sojourners, China-Pakistan.

### **Introduction**

With the internationalization of education, the number of students seeking higher education from abroad is increasingly on the rise. All the developed and developing countries attract international students to their host institutions by providing scholarships and other incentives. This internationalization of education is important not only in improving cultural relations but also in improving the soft images of the host countries. The People's Republic of China is among the few of the top countries

that are increasingly internationalizing their higher education by attracting more and more international students through the provision of government-funded scholarships. These scholarships are given to international students through institutions such as the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSS) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Commerce (MOFCOM) among others (Hussain and Shen, 2019). China ranks third among the international students hosting countries with 489,200 international students (Asian Development Banks, 2012). According to the Ministry of Education China, the number of Pakistani students enrolled in Chinese universities increased from 1800 in 2016 to 28023 in 2019 (MOE, 2018). It is argued that with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China in 2016, the number of international students will increase manifold, particularly from Pakistan within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor flagship project of China's BRI.

Scholars have extensively studied the cross-cultural adaptation challenges that international students undergo after entering a new and unfamiliar host culture and the enabling and inhibiting factors in cross-cultural adaptation (Akhtar and Pratt, 2015; Berry, 1997; Faleel, Tam, and Lee, 2012; Kim, 2005; Lin, 2012; Zhang and Goodson, 2011, Liang and Tsang, 2010). In the context of Pakistani students in Chinese universities hitherto no scholarly studies have been conducted to understand their preferences for applying to higher education in China, the adjustment challenges they face in the cross-cultural adaptation and the coping strategies employed to overcome these challenges except the few studies that have been conducted to examine the acculturative challenges among the Pakistani university and secondary school students in Hong Kong (Karim, Hue and Ullah, 2021). The current study thus aims to add to the extant scholarship on cross-cultural adaptation by studying the students from Gilgit-Baltistan who pursued their higher education at Chinese universities as a case point. Specifically, it aims to explore:

- Question 1.** Why do GB international students prefer higher studies in Chinese academic institutions?
- Question 2.** What kind of challenges do GB students face during their academic years in China?
- Question 3.** What are the helping services or coping strategies that assist GB international students' socio-cultural, academic, and psychological adaptation?

The remaining part of the study proceeds as follows: a brief review of the relevant literature, theory, methodology, findings and analysis, discussion, and conclusions.

## **Literature and Theory**

### ***Cross-Cultural Adaptation***

Environmental adaptation is a basic human condition and a natural process just like other living organisms. When individuals move from a familiar national culture to an unfamiliar and strange culture, they undergo through the process of what is called cross-cultural adaptation. Students, professionals, refugees, and immigrants change homes every year looking for an advanced life far away from their known home grounds with an expectation of a superior life. These short-term movers are called 'sojourners' by cultural scholars (Kim, 2017). The cross-cultural adaptation concept

includes numerous preventive concepts, like integration, assimilation, psychological adjustment, and acculturation (Giesbers, 2002). Short-term sojourners (foreign students) are often oriented to attain temporary educational objectives (Cai, 2016). But they go through an adjustment and acculturation phase. Acculturation alludes to the difficult procedure of organizing transformation while moving to a novel cultural milieu (Berry, 1997). The adjustment includes various things including social, cultural and psychological. Psychological adjustment refers to the sojourner's emotional "feeling" or well-being including pessimistic feelings such as uneasiness or frustration, discomfort, and fear. This adaptation process for the newcomers is all-time high as compared to the students of the host culture.

Global students may face a variety of life transitions as a consequence of being in an unfamiliar culture. As it is usually documented in the literature, the intercultural adaptation of foreign students in a multifaceted discipline often includes three main dimensions: socio-cultural; personal psychological adjustment; and academic adjustment (Ramsay, 1999; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Besides changes related to academic concerns and language barriers, foreign students were frequently confronted with the requirement to adjust to a diversity of social and cultural changes as well (Parr *et al.*, 1992). Numerous scholars found that several foreign students practiced considerable issues in social integration, family stress, financial crisis, and isolation. Even though global students were seen to be a resilient group, loneliness and homesickness were prevalent, and sadness is ordinary (Parr *et al.*, 1992).

**Academic adjustment** is a composite procedure that impacts all college students (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999). Academic adaptation refers to how well students align with their educational environment, including understanding the curriculum, building relationships with peers and faculty, and managing workloads. Effective adaptation supports a foundation for successful learning (Boekaerts, 1993). In Ramsay's (1999), studies the results demonstrate negative or positive experiences impacting the educational adaptation of foreign students. Negative experiences were frequently associated with lecturers or lectures. Ramsay argues the obstacles in the lecturer's understanding that may be a consequence of the lecturer's poor communication competency or the student's language skills.

**Psychological adjustment:** International students' psychological adjustment has gained wider scholarly attention for several years (Yusoff, 2012). Adjustment is a psychological /subjective condition and it alludes to transitions that people passively accept or enthusiastically engender to maintain or pursue reasonable states inside themselves (Torbiorn, 1982).

A study by Ward and colleagues has revealed that psychological adaptation, described in respect of more mood disturbance or global depression, is influenced by factors of personality, social support, and life changes. Both extraversion and locus of control have been associated with the sojourner's psychological well-being; even though, whereas an interior locus of control has been constantly referred to as psychological adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1992) As projected, a low occurrence of life transitions that assists psychological adaptation, and satisfactory social support is necessary for psychological well-being (Searle & Ward, 1990).

## **Socio-cultural adjustment**

Academic literature suggest that the sojourners face numerous socio-cultural challenges in the adaption process. Thus, in the present study socio-cultural adaptation is the capability of the Pakistani international students to communicate efficiently and adjust effectively, culturally and socially with the host culture in China. Socio-cultural aspects are the components that are associated with obtaining the interactions of cultural and social practices. Few of these elements include religious conservatism, social taboos, gender roles, etc. Successful acculturation can make contributions toward the global students' standard of academic accomplishment, productiveness, and standard of life. Because of the individual differences, global students' level of adaptation to a new location varies. Some can adjust effortlessly while others might find it hard to adapt to the situations (Faleel *et al.*, 2012). Church's (1982) study reports that companionship with host citizens is inclined to enhance life satisfaction and reduce sentiments of homesickness amongst international students. Researchers have also focused on how close contact with host nationals, social support, involvement in extracurricular activities, and good language skills can facilitate socio-cultural adjustment (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The expanding literature on the international student's acculturation process points to problems in adjustment such as the stress and other issues which they experience in an unfamiliar culture (Akhtar, Pratt & Bo, 2015). Adjusting to life in the People's Republic of China might be difficult because of cultural disparities like socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, sojourners have to negotiate and manage affection, fulfilment in conjunction with uncertainty, and bonds, stereotypes, power differentials, anxiety, and identity clashes while living overseas (Zhang & Giles, 2017). Furthermore, the results of Akhtar, Pratt, and Bo's (2015) studies showed that the over-expectation of students about China and natural aspects, especially China's climate as an obstacle to adaptation, had negative relations with their environmental adaptation and overall satisfaction. A wide friend's network, preceding cultural differences knowledge, previous intercultural experience had positive relations with adaptation and satisfaction.

### **Theory: Integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation**

Kim's integrative theory of cross-cultural communication provides the theoretical background for this study. This theory describes that cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic method through which people, upon moving to new, unexpected, or modified cultural environments, establish or re-establish and maintain quite strong, reciprocal, and practical relationships with those environments (Kim, 2001). The integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation also highlights that when a sojourner/immigrant inhabit a diverse culture, they will face a cross-cultural adaptation process. In this context, adjustment alludes to 'the totality of the transformational process a person experiences in respect to a novel and unknown environment' (Kim, 2005: 379). Likewise, Gudykunst and Kim (2003) defined adjustment as 'The process of adjustment to an unfamiliar and novel culture that is fundamentally a journey of an individual change in which a person who is socialized in a culture (enculturation) adapt and adjust into another culture' (p. 373). Castro (2003) stated that adjustment is the tag for those capabilities through which an immigrant cooperates with a host culture effortlessly and is aware of its taboos and values. It has been recommended that when people are socially and culturally trained, they can attain their objectives and aims in a host culture (LaFromboise et

al., 1993), resulting in wellbeing benefits for the people (Castro, 2003). A more commonly studied opinion on adaptation recommends that adjustment can be generally divided into two groups: socio-cultural and psychological (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Ward (2001) recommends that psychological adjustment is well understood from tension and how to manage it, while socio-cultural adaptation takes place in the cultural learning framework. She furthermore figures out that socio-cultural and psychological adaptations are affected by diverse variable sets. Psychological adjustment is established on individual characteristics, managing strategies, social circle, and social support, while the socio-cultural adjustment is based on a sojourner's period in a host society, his language competency, and cultural understanding in the host culture (Ward, 1996). There is a plethora of literature on international students and their cross-cultural adaptation challenges. However, there is a scarcity of academic literature to examine the cross-cultural adaptation of Pakistani students who have pursued higher education from Chinese universities. This study is first of its kind and provides a baseline for further studies in the realms of higher education from South Asian context and cross-cultural adaptation perspective.

### **Methodology: Qualitative approach**

This research is qualitative in nature designed to seek deeper insights into the individual experiences, permitting the investigator to inspect the individual experience and lives in China. The study utilizes qualitative approach for data collection and data analysis which is widely used methods in social sciences research and includes various techniques from one-on-one interview to observation by the researcher. Tracy (2020) notes that:

The phrase qualitative method is such an umbrella term that encloses interviews (one-on-one or group), observation of participants (online or in-person), and (electronic or paper) textual analysis. Such techniques can consist of focus group discussions, field research, a classroom, or an office (P. 3).

For the analysis of the qualitative data thematic analysis approach was used. Thematic analysis is an approach for categorizing, evaluating, and reporting themes within data. It modestly arranges and explains your data set in detail. However, it also frequently goes beyond this and interprets a variety of phases of the research subject matter (Boyatzis, 1998). In data collection, Interviews are the fundamental method, as they reveal the invariant structure and essence of the meaning of experience (Merriam, 2002).

### ***Sampling and Data Analysis Approaches***

Initially fifteen participants were chosen for the semi-structured interview using the technique of snowball sampling. All were hailing from Gilgit-Baltistan. Informed consent was sought and the participation was voluntary. Two participants refused to record the interview. Thus thirteen respondents who have studied higher education in China were finally selected. All interviews were recorded with prior permission of the respondents and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In this study, the initial participant who was known to the researchers was approached for interview and was asked for the reference of other probable respondents. We contacted the respondents

in person and through phone calls and took appointments for interviews. Permission was taken from the participants for recording the verbatim and they were ensured of their privacy and anonymity. The data were thematically analyzed using the thematic analysis approach using the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) with familiarly/acquaintance of data, generation of primary codes, searching for themes, theme evaluation, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

### **Findings and Analysis**

The thematic analysis of data revealed three master themes namely preferences to choose Chinese universities which includes three sub-themes namely, financial support, easy access and technical advancement in the host country. The second master theme focuses on socio-cultural and psychological adaptation barriers, consisting of eight candidate themes, which are the language barrier, food divergence, uncertainty, assuming similarities or differences, time-zone difference, punctuality, and monochromic culture. The main factor that prevents the adjustment to the host country is the lack of pre-departure preparedness. The final theme was concentrates on supporting mechanisms and coping strategies. It consists of four candidate themes: namely academic support, social and psychological support, intercultural communication experience, and friendly bilateral relationships with the host country. The academic support is subdivided into five candidate themes (accommodation, Chinese language course, English taught programs, health insurance, and recreational activities). Socio-Psychological supports have two subcategories, the first one is social support, and another one is the understanding, helping, and welcoming behaviour of Chinese people. Moreover, because of the acculturation process two most prominent traits were adapted by GB international students during their stay in China, drinking hot water, which is usually used by Chinese people, and punctuality. These master themes and sub-themes are briefly discussed below. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents, their real names are not disclosed, rather the initials are mentioned.

#### **Preferences to choose Chinese universities.**

All the selected participants have spent considerable time in China in pursuing higher education from Chinese universities. On average 3-4 years have been spent by all the participants of the study. Sharing their views on preference to China for higher education, the participants revealed three-sub themes to conceptualize the preference of Chinese universities for higher education namely, financial support, easy access, and technological advancement. First the financial support given by China to the international students attracts global students to pursue their higher education from Chinese higher education institutions. The second reason stated by the participants is the easy access and enrolment to Chinese higher education institutions which is not offered by most of the western universities. Third, the technological advancement by China and Chinese universities is the third stated major reason for preference to Chinese universities including well-equipped labs with latest technology and globalized higher education. These findings are in congruent with earlier studies on international students and internationalization of education in China (Lin, 2012).

### ***Financial support***

In pursuing higher education from abroad, a major concern for all international students is finance and financial support. Universities all over the world in major countries attract foreign students by offering them scholarships and other financial benefits to achieve their higher education. All the respondents of the current study who had been to China stated that financial support extended by Chinese government and Chinese universities was a major attraction for them to get enrolled in the Chinese universities. This financial support that was extended to them was a great help without which it was impossible for them to get enrolled in foreign countries like China. Since most of these respondents from Gilgit-Baltistan are financially not sound to get higher education on self-finance, the scholarship offered to them by Chinese government was a great attraction to them. These views were expressed by many students as stated below:

*I didn't choose Pakistan for higher studies because I belong to a family that is not financially sound and can't support me financially (Participant 05)*

*China offered a full scholarship for Ph.D. which is why I preferred China. (Participant 03)*

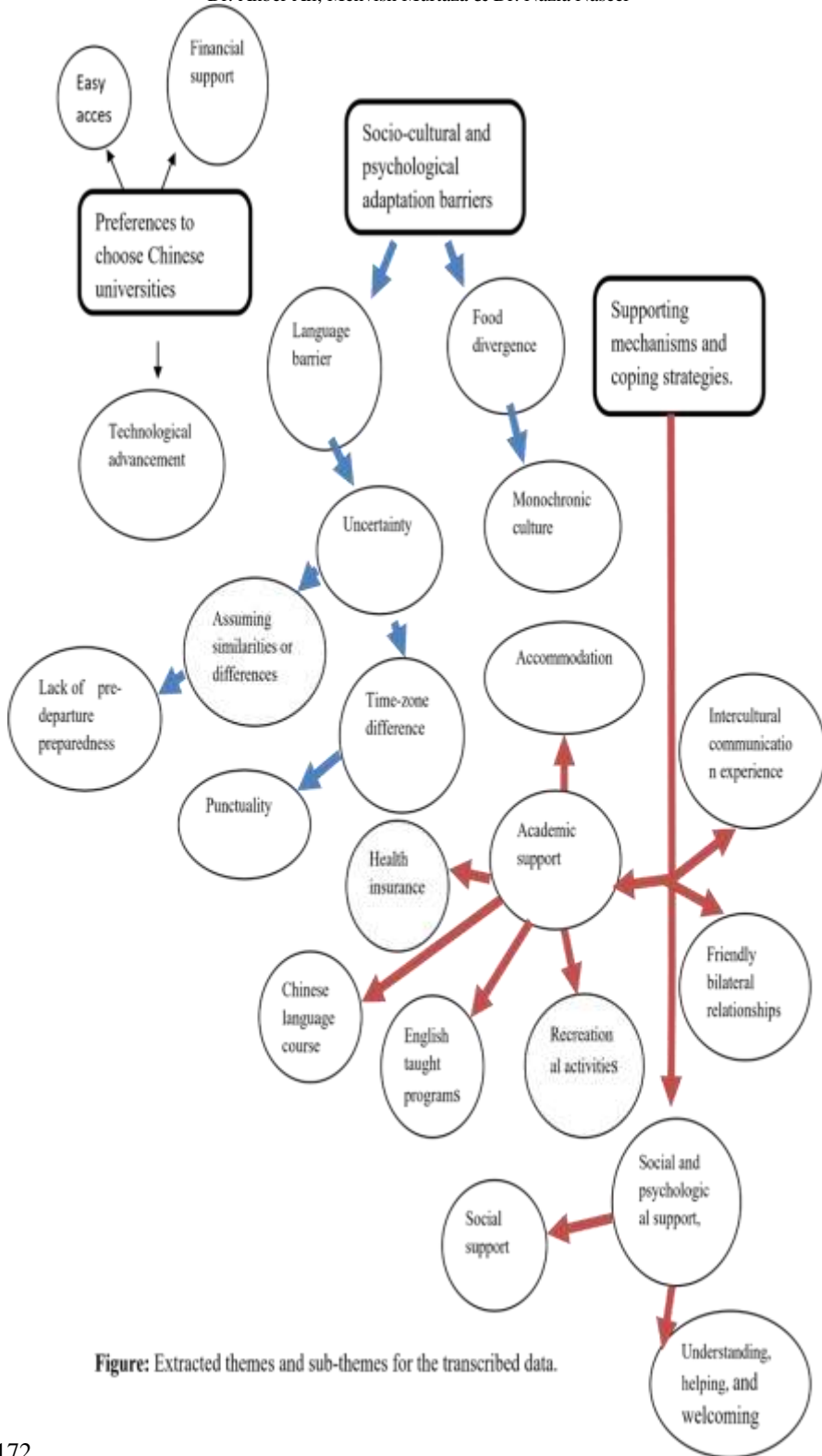
*In terms of scholarship, it was the best opportunity to go China. (Participant 10)*

All thirteen respondents considered that China supported them financially, which created an opportunity for GB students to pursue their higher education in well-known international universities of China. Another rationale for selecting China is easy access and easy process in applying for admissions. Chinese universities do not require IELTS or GRE in most of its universities contrary to many western universities. This was an edge for these students to apply for admission in Chinese universities. As elaborated:

*The procedure to apply for China is not very difficult. There is no such requirement of IELTS, GRE, or TOFEL. Admission was easy to get. Even though I had applied for the USA. But there was an issue that they require GRE. (Participant 02).*

*Their scholarships are not as difficult to avail. It is easy and there is no hard and fast rule for it. I pursued the opportunity because it was easy to access for me because they recently inaugurated the CPEC scholarship at that time. My priority was to avail myself of such an opportunity that would be in my range and easy access to avail. (Participant 11).*

Seven respondents reacted to this aspect of preferring Chinese academia for higher studies. Their responses show that the easy access in terms of getting admission and scholarship convinces international students toward China.



**Figure:** Extracted themes and sub-themes for the transcribed data.



### ***Technological advancement***

Most of international students preferred to pursue higher studies abroad because of the technological advancement and quality education offered in Chinese universities. China is a technologically advanced country, and it offers quality education with well-equipped labs that grab the attention of international students. The extracts of interviews also depict this factor that convinces GB students to enter China for higher education institutions. These views were expressed as below:

*My field required labs and sophisticated equipment for research which was not available in Pakistan. I chose China for some reasons firstly because China is technologically advanced. (Participant 03).*

*If you need equipment that is not available in that research lab, and if it is compulsory for your research when you demand it then within weeks the component is installed in the lab. (Participant 01).*

Similar views were expressed by almost all those participants who majored in the disciplines of natural sciences requiring labs and advanced technological instruments. As elaborated:

*If you need any instrumentation, you just have to demand and the next day the demanded thing is there. Everything is among you and your supervisor. (Participant07).*

### **Adjustment Challenges**

Moving to a foreign and unfamiliar cultural milieu is not without challenges for international students. Despite the scholarship and other financial incentives offered to international students in Chinese universities, these sojourners face myriad adjustment challenges. This master theme is further divided into three sub-themes namely socio-cultural, academic, and psychological adjustment challenges. These sub-themes are briefly discussed below.

#### ***Socio-cultural challenges***

The participants of the study who went to China belonged to a different culture than that of the culture of China. Consequently, they experienced a cultural shock due to varied belief systems, values, and social structures. International students encounter some apparent troubles in the host state for instance living management, social, linguistic, academic, cultural, and many more issues in an unfamiliar, new environment during studies (Mohamed, 2020). While entering a novel culture, they have to face and deal with varied communication patterns, living standards, interpersonal relationship patterns, natural differences like time, social contacts and language differences. For instances, speaking to the difficulty of language one participant expressed:

*When we go to china the biggest issue for us is the language barrier. When I reached there was no water in the room. I did not understand where the water was coming from. So, I bought mineral water from the shop below for two days. I asked them for payment and how much it costs. They didn't respond. So, I hand over my purse to them to take the money how much it costs. (Participant 01).*

Many other participants shared similar feelings on language as a barrier to socio-cultural adjustment as below:

*There were so many cultural shocks but the communication barrier was on the top of the list. Because of this, I faced a tough time in the beginning. (Participant 02).*

*Language barrier is the biggest issue over there. When you move to a cross-culture and people are not speaking English. Then you can only use sign language. We were using the internet like typing in English and then showing them the Chinese translation that I am asking this. (Participant 05).*

Lee (2017) labels the linguistic barrier as the main problem that international students are facing by representing that, 'among others, for international students, the academic confrontations are related with communication barriers that can negatively affect their sentiments. Pakistan and China have distinct languages and most of the laymen in China are unable to communicate in any other language than that of their own. Even the highly qualified professors and other academic staff are unable to convey their message properly in English. So, International students face difficulty communicating with the Chinese to buy necessities of life and deal with academic matters.

### ***Academic challenges***

In addition to the social adjustment challenges, international students also face academic challenges mainly for not understanding the academic cultures, expectation by the teachers about the students, the culture of respect and honour for teachers in the class and beyond. Moreover, the language barrier in understanding the class lectures further multiplied the academic challenges of these students in the Chinese universities. As expressed in the following lines:

*The most prominent barrier was language, especially during the learning process there is a language barrier ineffective teaching while communicating with a supervisor. This created problem in understanding the class room teaching and badly affected my learning and academic performance. (Participant 08).*

*They prefer to teach and learn in their (Chinese) language which affected our learning in the class room. Even in the library I faced problems to get the English books (Participant 09).*

Some participants were of the view that though they (Chinese) know English but they feel shy to speak it and thus preferred to speak in Chinese language. As one participant stated:

*Even like many qualified teachers, their English is not very fluent. They got hung up during the lecture, then we asked the teacher if he wanted to say this; they nodded their heads in agreement. (Participant 11).*

### ***Psychological challenges***

The sojourners move to a new country and culture with their own norms, values, belief, word views and orientations. They encounter new values and belief systems which are different and not easy to understand for the new comers. While initially, these differences are viewed as uniqueness of the new culture, gradually the sense of alienation, displacement and identity issues arise that may result to psychological challenges. These challenges among the sojourners are highly invisible for the

members of the host culture but deeply affect the new comers mentally and thus create distress and uncertainty at psychological level. This sense of distress and uncertainty affects the new comers both physically, academically and in their overall wellbeing. Many participants expressed this challenge as below:

*Without knowing the values, and beliefs I felt a sense of isolation. Further, because of the language barriers I felt alone and did not know what to do. This created a lot of distress and alienation in me (Participant 10).*

*In the beginning due to language and other differences, they avoided to talk to me and befriend. I did not know what to talk and how to talk due to many differences (Participant09).*

Many of the participants revealed that before entering the new culture they had very assumptions of similarity over differences. Many of them were of the opinion that China and Pakistan share very similarities in culture and is a good friend of Pakistan thus they would not face any adjustment issues in the host culture. However, despite the friendly relations, the new comers had to face many challenges out of assuming similarity over difference. These assumptions both about similarity and differences can lead to psychological issues (Keles, 2013). Assumptions can lead to misunderstandings and become a hurdle in a way to adjust because it creates a stereotypical view of sojourners regarding host cultures. Many participants express these assumptions of similarity in both cultures as noted in the following lines:

*We belong to a place nearer to the China border known as Misgar. That's why my thought was that I will not face many difficulties but I faced a lot of hurdles. (Participant 06).*

*I assumed that their education will be as cheap quality as their products used in Pakistan are. But we faced a tough time and our mind-set changed. (Participant 08).*

Assumptions are a hurdle to adjustment and lead to the procrastination of sojourners in adaptation to a new environment. These may be the stereotypical views of a sojourner or an immigrant regarding the host culture that people are having because of being unfamiliar with the host society. So, better to assume nothing, nor similarity, nor difference, instead of researching the host culture is the best way to adjust to a new cultural milieu rapidly. The most common assumptions are ambiguity about the quality of education, and unfamiliarity with Chinese society. These assumptions of sojourners about the host culture led to the adjustment challenges at the psychological level.

Many of the participants expressed their lack of pre-departure preparedness about the new culture and its realities. This lack of pre-departure preparedness led to many social and psychological challenges for these sojourners. Exemplars of this lack of pre-departure preparedness is expressed below:

I was blank. There was nothing like cultural preparation. (Participant 01).

I haven't done any preparation for language. (Participant 02).

Eleven out of thirteen participants told during interview that they did not have any kind of pre-departure preparation neither about language and nor even an understanding

of their culture before they leave Pakistan for China of language. This lack of pre-departure preparedness led them to assumptions and stereotypical views about the host culture. This finding is in consonant with earlier findings stating that pre-departure preparedness leads to adjustment challenges among the sojourners (Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, 2020).

### **Supporting Mechanism and Coping Strategies**

Despite the plethora of adjustment challenges aforementioned, there were social and institutional support mechanism and coping strategies that helped these international students to overcome the numerous adaptation challenges. Academic literature suggests that institutional support and communication competence and standing of the new comers in the host culture are the enabling factors in the cross-cultural adaptation of the sojourners (Kim, 2001). Chinese universities are trying to facilitate International students in every possible way, from providing a friendly environment to financial support. Not only universities are responsible for the adjustment of sojourners but also the Chinese government is assisting international students. Due to space constraints below only three supporting mechanism or enabling factors would be discussed that enabled the cross-cultural adaptation of these new comers to Chinese universities.

#### ***Scholarship and institutional support***

Chinese universities attract the international student by funding from the Chinese government. Most of these scholarships are provided by the Chinese government through the higher education institutions of China. Majority of the students revealed that they could not afford to pursue higher education from oversea by self-support. The scholarship provided by the Chinese universities was a great support for the students to get adjusted in the new milieu. Further the free accommodation, health insurance and free of cost education for the international students were all enabling factors in their adaptability to the new and unfamiliar host culture. In addition to Chinese government scholarship provide to these students, the institutional support by the international students' affairs office, the staff, faculty and mentors were also really helpful for these sojourners in their adaptation to the new culture. As expressed below:

*The CSC (Chinese Government Scholarship) was extremely helpful for me not only to me but also to support my family back home. (Participant 07).*

Similar feelings were expressed by majority of the participants.

*They are facilitating a lot. They have well-furnished dormitories for International students. (Participant 05)*

#### ***Re-creational activities***

Chinese universities organize recreational activities for international students such as organizing free trips, and annual cultural exhibitions day where these international students not only projected their cultures but also mingled up with students from other cultures. These kinds of activities aimed to create harmony and familiarity with each other's culture was extremely useful in bringing closer students from diverse cultural and national backgrounds. This also helped them to establish social networking and acted as an enabling factor in the adaption to the new environment as expressed below:

*There were international cultural festivals. In which we used to portray our culture we presented Pakistan's culture differently. It also helped us to make friends with other culture students. (Participant 02).*

*We were going for a trip on weekends and our supervisor was arranging a lunch per month. (Participant 05).*

### ***Bilateral relations with the host country***

In the cross-cultural adaptation process, the bilateral relations between the host country and the home country of the sojourners' play significant role in the adaption process adjustment of sojourners to the host culture. Since Pakistan and China enjoy friendly bilateral relations, this provided the psychological support for the participants to get adjusted to the new reality. Pakistanis are the highest recipients of Chinese government scholarships. For instance, one participant narrated:

*They are supporting more specially supporting more Pakistanis by saying they are our friends. (Participant 01).*

Similar feelings were expressed by many other participants:

*Regarding Gilgit-Baltistan, their concept is that we have a friendship with Pakistan and we have a blood relationship with Gilgit-Baltistan. So, they respect a lot. (Participant 03).*

Scholars of intercultural communication argue that the national positioning and standing of the new comers in the host country is very important factor in enabling or inhibiting the cross-cultural adaptation of the new comers. While positive and friendly images of the sojourners' country acts as an enabling factor in the cross-cultural adaptation process, negative images could inhibit the adjustment of the new comers (Kim, 2001)

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Annually thousands of Pakistani students enter China as 'sojourners' in pursuit of higher education. Despite a plethora of academic research on ties between China and Pakistan, there remains a consistent scarcity of research on the cultural challenges these sojourners face and the coping strategies to overcome the challenges in the new and unfamiliar cultural milieu. This quality study was aimed at understanding the cross-cultural adaptation challenges of Pakistani students in Chinese universities and the rationale behind the selection of Chinese universities for higher education. To that end thirteen participants from Gilgit-Baltistan were selected using convenient sampling techniques for understanding and making a deeper sense of the adjustment challenges they encountered and the coping strategies used during the process of cross-cultural adaptation while seeking their higher education from Chinese universities. Kim's integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation was used as theoretical framework for this study. The thematic analysis of the transcribed data led to three master themes; preferences for choosing China for higher education; the second theme was socio-cultural and psychological challenges in the adaption process. The final theme was about the coping strategies employed the adaptation challenges. The findings suggest that GB students

preferred to choose Chinese universities for easy access to China, easiness in the getting admission and scholarship and the technological advancements China has made. Regarding the adaptation challenges, these students faced socio-cultural, academic and psychological challenges in their cross-cultural adaptation process including language, food, lack of pre-departure preparedness and their perceived assumptions of similarity over differences. The language incompetency and pre-departure preparedness as the findings of this study are similar to the findings in the existing academic literature (Hussain and Shen, 2019).

The language barriers and assumptions of similarity over differences in cultures by the sojourners is also in consonant with earlier findings (Keles, 2013). The coping strategies employed by and the support mechanism available for these students to overcome these challenges were institutional support both from the international student's affairs office and the mentors of the respective student. The scholarship offered, recreational activities and the friendly bilateral relations between China and Pakistan were all important enabling factors for these sojourners to overcome their cross-cultural adaptation challenges. Many of the participants were of the view that because of the friendly bilateral relations between Pakistan and China, the Pakistani students were treated more friendly. This host receptivity (Kim, 2001) is considered an important enabling factors for strangers in the host environment when the host culture has friendly attitude toward the new comers.

These findings of the current study have implications both theoretical and practically. Theoretically it adds to the existing scholarship on cross-cultural adaption process in the realms of internationalization of higher education as aforementioned. At practical level, the findings can be useful for educational administrators, policymakers, consultants, and faculty of host country's higher education by arranging more pre-departure preparedness sessions and on campus orientation sessions to address the social, academic and psychological challenges the new comers face in the process of cross-cultural adaptation. The study has some limitations. It focussed only on GB students who pursued their higher education from Chinese universities. Future studies can be conducted by taking a more representative data from other areas of Pakistan and studying the cross-cultural adaptation challenges of the currently enrolled Pakistani students in Chinese higher education institutions.

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